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Alan Rosenthal

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Alan Rosenthal

In 1968 I was invited to Jerusalem for a year to help set up Israel television. For ages there had been talk of the coming of television—now there was to be action—and I had a chance to come in as a founding father, so to speak. The whole idea intrigued me, and I accepted with speed. In the end I stayed 12 years in Israel, and the experience shaped most of my patterns of thinking and acting as a filmmaker.

Israel was very late in coming onto the television scene and only decided to establish a one-channel national television after the Six-Day War. A small educational television station had, in fact, been set up in Tel Aviv by the Rothschild Foundation in the early sixties. In 1968 it was still broadcasting, but to a limited audience of a few thousand people. There had been talk of a national television for years, but it had been opposed by Prime Minister Ben-Gurion and by the conservative and religious elements in the country.

The 1967 war, however, broke down all the resistance. The showing of the war on the neighboring Arabic screens had demonstrated the propaganda value of television, and now the government wanted it as fast as possible. They did this by appointing an American professor of communications, Elihu Katz, long resident in Israel, to head the fledgling Israel TV and to recruit a team of experts. Eventually Professor Katz's Odyssean wanderings brought him to London in search of a crew. We met, talked, and a few weeks later I was asked to climb aboard.

Prior to the invitation I had been working as a filmmaker and lawyer in England and the States, and had established a fairly good reputation in documentary. I had also filmed a few times in Israel. In 1961 I spent 5 months working on televising the Eichmann Trial, and in 1964 I had done a film on the kibbutzim under fire. I guess the two things added together had occasioned the invitation, and I was looking forward to a third visit. But this time there was some trepidation. I knew that working in Israel on a long-term basis would present a completely new set of challenges, both on the practical side and in terms of cultural understanding.

The cable that arrived for me in April 1968 simply said: "Please join our team in two weeks. One-year contract." In a sense the cable typified what Israel television was to be like for a few years—long on demands for immediate action, short on explanation and

understanding. What was clear, though, was that things were happening fast.

Equipment had been ordered from America. CBS experts were arriving in Brooks Brothers suits waving organizational charts. Would-be filmmakers were being corralled, mainly from radio and the press, and 18 experts including myself were wandering around in a daze getting ready to teach the splendid art of television and film production. Everything was at fever pitch and slightly crazy, so I didn't turn a hair when I was told that we had to be broadcasting within 4 months, starting from scratch.

Although my main function was to help set up the documentary department, I was also heavily involved in teaching film production, both to the general television trainees and to the would-be documentarists. The teaching was great fun, terribly chaotic, badly organized, and complicated by the fact that half the Israelis were unteachable. They came as students, but told us they had all been professors of film at UCLA, had worked with Eisenstein in the thirties, or had won the McNamara award for television excellence at a 2-week TV course at Glasgow University—so what had they to learn from a few American or British network hacks.

Half of this was amusing nonsense but half of it was true. So we trod warily. I didn't mind for myself, but it was hard on world experts such as Stuart Hood, former head of BBC news, to have his advice continually ignored. Stuart took all this with a sense of humor and imparted marvelous advice to those who had the sense to listen.

Altogether it was a world where very little of what one knew before counted, or made sense. But it was a stimulating world where talent was high and technique was low, where almost anything could be tried a first time, and where nobody paid the slightest attention to anybody else. It was a world where the production car was unavailable for shooting because someone's wife had borrowed it to go shopping, where editing services were halted for evening prayers, and where students studying directing on Monday set up their own school for production techniques on Tuesday.

## The Documentary Unit

After working a few months with the basic trainees, my job narrowed down to setting up the documentary department with Herbert Krosney. Herb was a very talented producer-director who'd worked with the *NET Journal* in New York and like myself was very enthusiastic about what could be done with documentary in Israel. We had 20 trainees in the fledgling department and reckoned that half of them would become excel-

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*Alan Rosenthal has made more than 30 films in the United States, Canada, and Israel. He is the author of The Documentary Conscience, is currently filming part of the series Civilization and the Jews for WNET, and is a member of the Communications Institute of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem.*

lent filmmakers, given the chance. So everything was set to go.

At that stage in Israel the areas of both feature filming and documentary filming were relatively unexplored. Each year a few features were made either at the Geva or Herzliya studios, but these were mostly comedies of the crudest kind. As to the documentaries, they were few in number, and when produced were mostly propaganda shorts financed by the Jewish Agency or entertainment newsreels having little to do with news but a great deal to do with fashion and bathing beauties. Occasionally a foreign documentary on Israel such as Chris Marker's *Portrait of a Struggle* or Meyer Levin's *The Illegals* would be shown, but they would be few and far between. This, then, was the extent of Israeli documentary coverage when we arrived.

The problem, which both Herb and I grasped very quickly, was that until we came the country had never really seen itself on the screen except in a humorous or propaganda way. Now the task was to consider and think through what we considered were the proper functions and implications of documentary. What we had to do was define a path and a goal for a new kind of documentary that would go further and dig deeper than the sugar-coated travelogues of the past. We saw Israel as being in a state of flux and transition, and thought that the perceptive social and analytical documentary could help establish a climate for logical and humane decision making.

This was all very well in theory, but first of all both Herb and I had personal matters to contend with. When we came to Israel in 1968, we were both seen as foreigners. My having spent 6 months in the country previously counted for nothing. Nor the fact that I spoke Hebrew. "You're a bloody Englishman and you don't know our ways. You haven't been in a youth movement and you haven't been in the army." This was said to me by my television students. They *knew* because of their birthright—Herb and I didn't. To my chagrin they were largely correct. The only thing I could do was look, learn, listen, and talk, and hope that time would bring insight.

The first problem was to understand the audience. This posed an immense number of ramifications. We were going to make films for a population of over 3 million, the majority being Jews, but a large minority Moslem Arabs. While the Arabs were fairly homogeneous, the Jewish population was divided every way under the sun. There were the sophisticated Berliners who had arrived in the thirties. The Yemenites from Saana who came in 1949. The North Africans from Morocco and the semi-Bedouin Jews from the Atlas Mountains who came in the fifties. And the Russians from Georgia, Moscow, and Leningrad who came flocking in the seventies.

Besides the population, one could also get overwhelmed by the fantastic diversity of Israel. One stumbled on Christian groups going over Crusader castles; Moslems celebrating Ramadan; blue-shirted Jewish youngsters visiting the site of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Geographically, historically, and religiously it presented a painting of a thousand different colors.

For the documentary filmmaker all this diversity of material was a godsend, if one could just remove the panache and the flamboyance and see what the society was really about. To do this we instituted seminars for our group where everything was discussed, from documentary methods to Israeli politics. A little bit was formal, but the really serious discussions were always informal, done at the many television parties or on the way to a picnic in the desert.

The flow of ideas was marvelous, but theory took a while to translate into reality. This was because there was a push for "product," to get something on the air, no matter what, to show that Israel TV had arrived. Our theories about television documentary and society change had to wait, we were told. What was wanted was film *now*.

Somehow the word had gotten around that our documentary department worked fast and was producing good learning exercises. Immediately some one came to view the exercises, deemed them great, and we were told to produce as many as we could as fast as we could for actual broadcast. In retrospect that wasn't a bad thing. Thus the first two films ever to appear on Israel TV came from our department, as unannounced experimental broadcasts on an August morning scarcely 4 months after the founding of Israel TV.

The first film was a 15-minute short made by Herb and Adir Zig on the Jordan Valley. The second, 20 minutes long, was a film I did with Yossie Goddard called *Bedouin Resettlement*, in which we filmed Bedouin in their tents in the Negev Desert. We then explored the pluses and minuses of their lives and looked at the results of the government policy of resettling the Bedouin in certain urban environments. Both films were made very fast and were screened as workprints, without the benefit of negative cutting.

Though we didn't realize it at the time, both films typified the duality of filming in Israel. On the one hand, there was the appeal of the romantic and the picturesque—and both the Jordan Valley and the Bedouin tents supplied all this. On the other, there was a desire to show the changing reality that was seen in the urban resettlement, which would never have been shown on the usual travelogue.

These films were counted a success and the department was soon in hectic business. Thus films poured out about artists, exhibitions, Arab life, architecture, kibbutzim, the army, musicians, and Jewish converts. There were films on religious ceremonies,

Bedouin festivals, road building, health. Speed and product were of the essence, and we were given a freedom of action and subject choice that was soon to be curtailed. But these were the early days when budgets were loose, manpower was available, there were few schedules and little department rivalry, and proposals did not have to shuffle for months through a bureaucratic maze of decision making.

Few of the films were brilliant, but most were more than competent allowing for the fact that the filmmakers were still learning their craft. Nearly all the films were under 15 minutes, were shot in black-and-white (there was then no color television in Israel), and were shot on a ratio of six to one. Usually they were made in Hebrew, but occasionally in Arabic, and they had to be edited in 3 to 4 days.

I would like to think that these films went deeper than the former newsreels. They certainly had a populist element, but they roamed wider and were more socially and politically sensitive than the theatrical newsreels. They put the city Israeli on the screen as much as the romanticized kibbutz. In a small way they dealt with contemporary problems from urban renewal to education and health. And they used interview and *vérité* techniques rather than the old voice-of-God narration plus saccharine music. It was a small revolution, but a revolution nevertheless.

For someone like me, used to filming in the United States and England, the whole atmosphere sometimes seemed surrealistic, bizarre, and funny. You had to allow twice the time when filming Arabic subjects because so much time would be spent drinking numerous cups of coffee and tea. You had to watch out for religious films because your crew would stand idle for half an hour while the subject rabbi gave an impromptu lesson on the Talmud. Politicians were also difficult because they were just beginning to learn the value of unpaid media publicity.

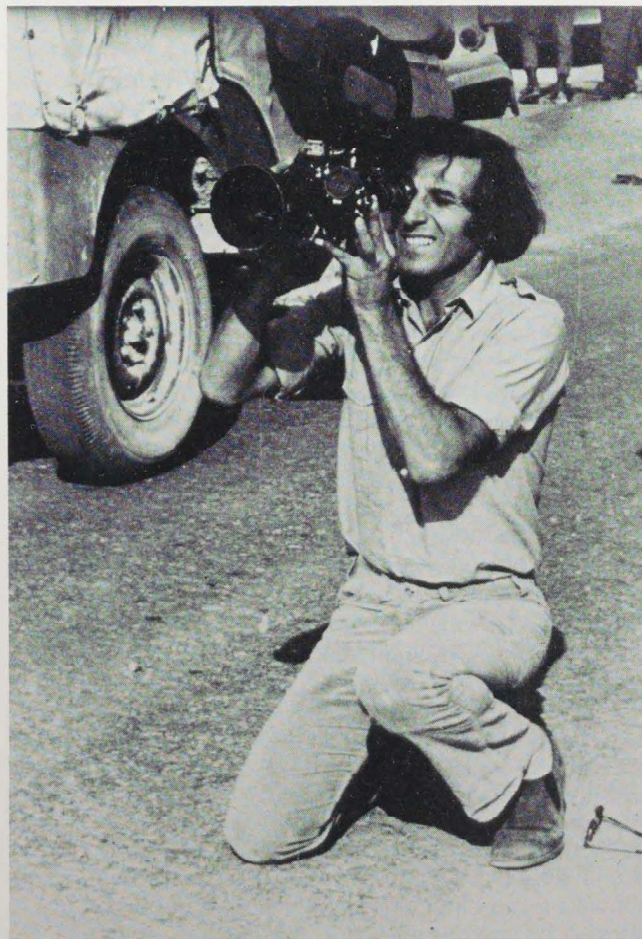
Then, to add another touch of craziness to all this, one had to put up with the foibles of the crew. Normally we had Saturdays off, as this was the Jewish sabbath. But Ahmed, our assistant cameraperson, was a Moslem, so needed Friday off, while Peter, our electrician and a Catholic, wanted Sundays off for confession. Then there was the day my sound person turned out to be a *Cohen*, a priest under Jewish law, and thus couldn't go into the graveyard where we were filming. And finally that memorable evening when my Orthodox editor refused to cut the film I was doing on Israeli restaurants because "maybe the food they were eating in the film isn't *kosher*."

These were the lighter moments, but there were also the deeper problems a filmmaker had to consider, such as censorship and security. Here one had to tread very carefully, and the possible impact of your films could never be dropped from your mind for a moment.

Until recently Israel was surrounded on all sides by countries with whom she was in a state of war. Except for Egypt, this is still the case. Yet because of proximity, nearly all Israeli broadcasts can be seen in parts of Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. Thus the impact of one's broadcasts on the enemy, though not central to one's filmmaking, is always somewhere there in the background. The impact of one's films on Israel's own Arab population was also a subject which warranted serious thought.

Then there was official censorship, which came up mainly in the context of films dealing with the border situation, terrorism, and the army. In nearly all these cases permission had to be sought for filming and the films cleared before broadcast. This meant going through the army bureaucracy, working with their spokesmen while filming, and going through a battery of army censors at the editing stage. Generally I found the army censors sympathetic, but have dealt with this subject in another paper (Rosenthal 1981).

Alan Rosenthal, covering the Yom Kippur War in 1973.





*Pillar of Fire*: Yigal Lossin (wearing glasses) and Steve Edwards, one of the directors.

### Changes and Shifts

Slowly our films got longer, and after a year or so we reckoned we'd racked up some notable successes. The department had made major films on the Holocaust, the war-wounded, the frontier kibbutzim, and numerous social problems. Herb had also found time to make a couple of films, while I had done a series on Israeli athletes, a half-hour film on Professor Yadin's archaeological explorations at Hazor, and another major film on road accidents. All of us were feeling pleased with ourselves, and there was a terrific feeling of élan within the department.

Gradually, however, we found ourselves confronting two problems. The first was autonomy. We wanted a strong documentary unit, with its own staff and its own air time once or twice a week. But things were pushing us in another direction entirely. This was the pressure, subtle and not so subtle, from the news department, which wanted documentaries to become a subsection of their own division. Both Herb and I thought this was totally wrong and started fighting this pressure as best as we could. This was difficult because till then many of our shorts had been slotted into the news magazine. Once the battle was on, a number of our films were simply shunted aside or had to wait ages to find a broadcast spot.

The second problem was the very nature of documentary. This had not been an issue the first year because everything had been so loose. However, when in the second year we started pressing for more investigation-type films or consumer-oriented films, we were told to slow things down. The time wasn't quite right. Israel wasn't ready. We would rock the boat too much. This has been discussed elsewhere (*ibid.*: 9–12), but two examples suffice to show what was happening at the time.

Early in 1969 I made a 15-minute film about the village of Ein Karim near Jerusalem. It was my own suggestion, and with Herb's backing I went ahead. The film is what we would now call an urban protest. It showed a beautiful village being ruined and destroyed by both neglect and the actions of a large

building company. It named names, it pointed fingers, and it took an attitude that said this doesn't have to happen. The only place it could fit in was on the news magazine, but after a number of viewings the film was pronounced "too provocative" and set aside for a few months.<sup>1</sup> Finally it was broadcast as an emergency fill item when a newsclip failed to arrive one evening.

The other example of rising censorship concerned a friend of mine, Ram Levi. One of the first major films that Rami did for the department was about two families—one Jewish, one Arab—both of whom had lost sons in the 1967 war. The film was finished in 1969 but then reviewed by committee after committee. I'd see them meeting in the editing room next to me and pontificating as to whether this mild, gentle film would cause riots in the Galil or cause Arabs in the Old City to rise in revolt. Eventually it was shown, in 1972 or 1973—a mere 3 years late.

The fate of those two films was symptomatic of what was happening in 1969—a feeling that the good times were coming to an end. At that point there was a general upheaval within Israel TV. A number of senior personnel resigned, including Professor Katz, who on the whole had been in favor of the investigating documentary, and for a while television was rudderless and drifting. Later a new television head was appointed, more familiar with radio than television, and a more cautionary mood gradually permeated the Israel TV building. Meanwhile Herb resigned to set up his own independent production company, and I took off for 2 years to Canada. Because of this move I lost touch with Israel TV until 1971, when I came back to Jerusalem to work as an independent producer for Israel TV rather than on staff.

During my 2-year absence the fog had cleared, but I found the situation of documentary had deteriorated. The emphasis now was on entertainment, singing programs, and imported American detective serials. The news department had established its own powerful empire and was thriving, but of documentary there was almost no word. In practice it had been relegated to a position of the least importance in Israel TV, a poor sister begging for her family's handouts.

As I've said, Herb and I had wanted an autonomous department, fully staffed, with its own adequate budget and guaranteed air time. What I found on return was that the department had been broken up and our trainees sent to work elsewhere. As a sop to our original plan, there was still a Head of Documentaries, though there was no one to serve under him or her. In short there was a title without much power, a department without a spirit, and it is no wonder that there were subsequently six changes of Documentary Head within 9 years.

What happened after 1971 was that documentary in Israel TV turned into a free-for-all. Generally there were three areas of television that could use such programs—a religious series called *morashah* (inheritance), the Arabic department's weekly documentary series, and the Hebrew department's occasional documentaries. These programs were fed to the departments concerned in two ways, from inside Israel television and from without.

Both the religious series and the Arabic department took the major proportion of their documentaries from outside independent producers. This was the biggest change for me, as there had been hardly any independents on the scene when I had left in 1969. The less frequent and far more prestigious Hebrew program documentaries, however, drew their creative power from both within the TV building and without. And it was in the selection of both filmmaker and subject that the Head of Documentaries could wield a little of the vanishing power of the department.

Unfortunately there seemed to me to be little rhyme or reason in the selection of the mainstream documentaries; the choice was haphazard. Sometimes good films appeared, sometimes bad, and overall there seemed to be a lack of direction. This wasn't surprising because in reality there was no policy, philosophy, or movement toward a particular goal—everything was arbitrary; at least this is how it looked to an outside observer.

Within the Israel TV building control was meaningless. One did not have to be a documentarist to make documentaries. One could be a drama director, a light-entertainment specialist, or what have you. All that was needed was a strong desire to cover a certain subject, a sufficient seniority, and an expertise to guarantee bringing in the picture sometime. Providing the picture was not too far out, the seal of approval of the Head of Documentaries was almost automatic. In practice, though the system was open to abuse, it also gave unsupervised space to some of the best talents around.

Outside the TV building the situation of the independent producers was complex. They needed to bring in a steady stream of documentaries, because that was their business, and subject choice or documentary passion was the least of their concerns. In the main the independents worked for the religious programs or the Arabic department because documentaries in those two areas were easy to obtain and were rarely critical. But the prestige documentaries were the hour-long general Hebrew documentaries, and these were hard for the independents to come by. There were few of these going, and one might go through weeks of meetings to get a proposal accepted only to have it shot down by an internal TV budgetary committee. Because the process was long and the outcome uncertain there was a tendency for

the independent producers to go for the noncontroversial subjects, the subjects that would give offense to neither man nor beast nor committee member.

As a result most of the films of the seventies stay in my mind as safe films following a pattern of self-imposed censorship. There seem to have been endless films on venerated poetesses and esteemed artists. All the historic kibbutzim got their day as did border towns and famous streets. Occasionally we would have a day in the life of a policeman, a rabbi, a doctor, or a farmer, and then to add color there would be three harmless films about army life or two films about the Bedouin. Which is where we came in.

Few of these films were bad. Generally they were well directed and edited, and taken singly were quite interesting. Their problem was one of predictability and conservatism. They usually affirmed the status quo and stood as a record to some remarkable person, place, or event. What they failed to do was investigate the subsurface mood of Israel in the seventies, where vital social and ethnic changes were taking place.

Some directors did go against the safe trend. Sometimes this was done in drama documentaries such as *Kobi and Mali*, which looked at juvenile delinquency, or Ram Levi's *Chirbat Chiza*, which examined the evacuation of an Arab village in 1948. Another documentarist, Eli Cohen, did two brilliant films on the Yom Kippur War, *Walk on Two Feet* and *Plugah Bet*, which looked at the war-wounded and at the mood in a reserve army unit. Meanwhile other directors such as Yossie Goddard, Yigael Burstein, Micha Shagrir, Zvi Dorner (later to be Executive Producer of WGBH's *Enterprise* series), and Ester Dar were turning their sights on prostitution, the changes in the kibbutzim, Russian refugees, ethnic antagonisms, and the low state of morale in the border towns.

But these films and these efforts were few and far between. The only place where caution as a whole was thrown to the wind was in the news department. I've mentioned that this was the strongest department in Israel Television, and using its power it occasionally ventured into documentary. Generally these were descriptive documentaries such as *Jewish Life in America*, or *The Making of a News Broadcast*, but occasionally they penetrated deeper, such as Chaim Yavin's analysis of the Israeli elections. Once a week the department also put out an hour-long news magazine that presented the kind of social and political analysis that we'd been arguing for for years. But these items were too short—a mere 8 to 10 minutes long—to have the impact of a full-scale documentary.

## Documentary and History

During this period I myself was making two to three documentaries a year. They covered everything from underwater archaeology and desert research to musical profiles, social analyses, and Arab problems. However, the films that most fascinated me were three I did on the Holocaust and on Israel in the fifties. All three used archive material and dealt extensively with Israel's past, and all three echoed in my head long after the films were finished. It took some time for me to realize why.

For years a number of friends and myself had felt a certain malaise about Israel documentary beyond everything listed above, but had never bothered to articulate it. Gradually we realized this had to do with the failure of Israel television to explain the past in any meaningful way. The series I'd worked on had dealt with Israel after 1948, but what of the energy, history, controversies, and pulse of the times before that?

One could put the problem another way. We were scratching the surface of the present in our films, but what emerged didn't make that much sense because, although we were dealing with a country that was changing with tremendous speed, we were totally ignoring the past, the roots, and the whole basis of the society.

While we were mulling over this fact, an Israeli journalist, Amos Eilon, published a critique of Zionist history called *Fathers and Sons* in which he examined changes in attitudes and values over four generations of Israeli society. One question he asked was "Has the dream failed . . . and what can be done to renew it?" and that question immediately conjured up another: "What in fact was the dream and why do our children know so little of the past?"

Amos Eilon's musings and our own general questioning overlapped, and thus there was quite a stir (at least among filmmakers) when Israel TV suddenly announced that Yigal Lossin, former Head of Documentaries, was about to embark on a television series about the history of Zionism. This was 1976. The series finally appeared in 1981 under the title *Pillar of Fire*, and was subtitled *Chapters in the History of Zionism*.

The series started in obscurity and finished in controversy. As it is now generally considered the most important group of films ever to have appeared on Israel TV and to have changed the face of documentary there, I will use the rest of this article to discuss three points about it in detail: (1) how it was made, (2) how it compares with other television histories of Israel and Palestine, and (3) audience receptivity.

## "Pillar of Fire"

*Pillar of Fire*, with some films only half finished, began weekly broadcasts on January 5, 1981, and ran to 19 1-hour films. Although the series deals with the years 1896 to 1948, the time span splits up informally into three main periods. The first starts with the Dreyfus affair and the rise of political Zionism and culminates in the early thirties. The period includes Russian and Polish pogroms and the early immigration waves to Palestine, providing as well a picture of the early Turkish rule and the start of the British Mandatory government. Also prominently featured in this period are the history of the Jewish pioneers and the reclamation of the land and the rise of Arab nationalism.

The second group of films starts in 1933 and ends in 1945. They deal with the further waves of immigration and the Arab riots and opposition but slowly begin to spread wider and show European and world events in great detail. We see the ascendancy of Hit-

*Pillar of Fire*: Naomi Kaplanski, associate producer.





*Pillar of Fire*: members of the Palmach, the Haganah commandos.



ler and watch the inexorable expansion of Nazi Germany into Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland until the world is engulfed in war. The British Mandate policy is covered extensively, with emphasis on the restriction of Jewish immigration. And once more we see the ghastly and obscene events of the Holocaust on the screen, the period closing with the victory of the Allies.

The last group of films deals with the conclusion of the Mandate and the founding of the State of Israel in 1948. Here the events are closer and more familiar to the average viewer. It is a period of chaos. The Jews are trying to break the British policy of restrictive immigration, while the Arabs are pushing at the British from the other side. A weak British government vacillates, and pleases no one. Both Jewish and Arab terrorism are rife. It is a time of UNSCOP meetings and the final momentous decision of the UN in favor of a State. It is a time that sees the murders at the Arab village of Deir Yassin and the ambush and killings of Jewish medical personnel on their way to the Hadasah Mount Scopus hospital. Finally it is a period that sees the departure of the British, the declaration of the State, and the creation of 700,000 Arab refugees.

*Pillar of Fire* was the brainchild of Yigal Lossin, a permanent staff director at Israel TV and also a passionate historian and amateur archaeologist. Lossin started as television's U.S. correspondent in the sixties. In the early seventies he returned to Jerusalem to become, for a brief while, Head of Documentaries. After his departure from that job he continued making documentaries but gradually devoted his energy to his Zionist series idea.

When he proposed the series at the beginning of 1975, it was obvious he was taking on an immense task. Israeli history is riddled with controversies, not just between Arabs, Israelis, and the British but also rife with tensions and the bitterest arguments among Israelis themselves. It is the continuing intensity of these controversies which so thoroughly distinguishes *Pillar of Fire* from such other television documentary histories as *The World at War* or *The Churchill Years*.

Both these latter series contain disputes, but they are arguments on which the dust has long since settled except among professional historians. By way of contrast the Israeli historic controversies still raise whirlwinds everywhere. Hence the reluctance of Israeli documentarists to tackle the subject and infuriate the powers that be before Lossin came on the scene to take the bull by the horns.

But why did Israel TV approve the series? Possibly because of the debate on Zionism within the country after the Yom Kippur War and because of Lossin's status and regard within Israel TV. It was also a subject that presented in the right way could not possibly be rejected in a country so proud of its past. Everyone realized the series might mean opening Pandora's box, but at some time or other this had to be faced. In the end Lossin was proposing the right program at the right time, and it was virtually impossible for Israel Television to say no.

In practice the approval of Israel TV meant far less than in many other countries. No departments, manpower, or massive funds were suddenly put at Lossin's disposal. Everything had to be fought for. Basically the attitude was "Hustle around. If you can find some people and raise some money, good luck to you. Meanwhile you'll just have to make do with our blessing." In the end the \$1 million budget was raised, after years of hassle, mostly from Israel Television's own revenues plus a small grant from the Israel Foreign Office. To cover the immense creative and organizational problems of the series Lossin set up what was, in effect, a tripartite responsibility. Lossin himself stood at the apex of the triangle as executive producer, series writer, and overall man in control. Allied with him, in major supporting roles, came Naomi Kaplansky and Yitzhak Eisenmann, both senior staff members at Israel TV. Kaplansky, who had already made her name as one of the founder members of Israel TV, was assigned the tasks of associate producer, key researcher, and main interviewer. Eisenmann, a cinematographer of note, was made general producer and given the onerous job of overall project coordination.

In the early months of planning few people were involved outside of Lossin, Kaplansky, and Eisenmann. Later, as the project expanded, staff was recruited from two directions. In general the production assistants, secretaries, and research assistants were taken from the ranks of the permanent TV staff. The directors and editors, however, except in one or two cases, were chosen from among free-lance filmmakers. Finally, five Israeli University professors, experts in general history, Zionist history and politics, were coordinated to provide a panel of advisers on the content, balance, and historical accuracy of the films and texts. It is worthwhile comparing for a moment the creative structure of *Pillar of Fire* and *The World at War*. In the latter series money was available from the start to the Executive Producer, Jeremy Isaacs. What was most notable about Isaacs was that, though he maintained a firm overall grip on the series, he allowed a tremendous amount of creative freedom to his writers and directors. As a result the films that finally emerged varied a great deal in style and approach. David Elstein's film on the dropping of the atom bomb, for example, is very rational, intellectual, and argumentative. John Pett's episodes, however, on Burma and the Pacific fighting are more subjective and mood-oriented films, intent on portraying the feelings of the ordinary soldier caught up in the maelstrom.

All these films were made by what I would loosely call the "singular-group" process. By contrast, *Pillar of Fire* was made more laterally by what I would call

the "interfusion" process, with Lossin as the kingpin dictating a unified style. In a sense there was little else Lossin could do once he had decided on a central approach.

In *World at War* the starting point for Isaacs had been when he sketched out 25 or 26 topics central to the Second World War that would provide the basis for the series. Although there is continuity, it would also have been possible for many of the films to have stood alone as individual essays. This was particularly true of the episodes relating to the British home front, Dunkirk, the Holocaust, and Burma. In Israel, however, Lossin's starting point was *time-oriented* rather than *topic-oriented*. Although the series would commence with the famous Dreyfus case, this episode would be just one part of a historic overview that would run from 1896 to the creation of Israel in 1948.

Even before the formal go-ahead was given, Lossin had started the immense task of scanning world film archives and libraries. In Israel this meant days spent at the Rad, Axelrod, Yad Vashem, and Zionist archives just as a beginning. Abroad the search ran from Germany and Europe, through the British Imperial War Museum, to Yivo, the Sherman Grinburg, and other American archives. Lossin himself did two general archive searches to get the program on its feet. Later Kaplansky did a third archive search to find specific material to aid or supplement material already at hand. This search was more off the beaten path than Lossin's, a search into the byways of many private collections that yielded undreamed-of material such as photos of a Ukrainian pogrom in 1919.

The first scripts were written by Lossin in September 1977. At that time only three 1-hour films were envisaged. As the material poured in and increased funding looked feasible, the scope was enlarged to nine films and then thirteen. Finally the grand total came to nineteen, a figure that had certainly not been in Lossin's head in the beginning.

By mid-1978 a great deal of the footage had been assembled and interviews conducted. The draft scripts had been revised in the light of the experts' advice and materials at hand, and the time had come to choose directors and editors. I use the word "director," but what was covered was a function more akin to director-of-editing.

Once appointed, the editor was given the script to his or her film and told what footage and interviews were available. Often the director would suggest a reshaping of the film or an alteration of the text because of the strength or availability of footage "A" over footage "B." Sometimes the director would call for more visual material or initiate a specific archive hunt. Or they would suggest a new interview to illustrate a point and have Kaplansky do it or do it themselves.

### Archival Problems

What were the difficulties of the series apart from organization and finance? Obviously there is the nature of the television medium itself, which implies boundaries that affect the ultimate worth of any serious series. These limitations are so obvious—the diversity of the audience, limited attention span, inability to linger or deal in depth—as to hardly merit discussion. One problem, however, needs to be discussed in more detail and that is the subject of archival footage.

The boundaries of almost any television historical series tend by necessity to be defined by the available archival footage. One is dealing with a visual medium and the pictorial record is the main source, yet for a dozen reasons these records can be woefully inadequate. If they are, then they will affect the worth of the program. Thus the nature of the archival footage on Palestine was of serious consequence to *Pillar of Fire*.

Filming in Palestine has a long history going back to Lumière's cameraman at work in Jerusalem in 1896. In 1917 the Edison company shot *The Holy Land* to show the land of the Bible to Americans. A little while later cameramen accompanied General Allenby and the British Army on their triumphant campaigns and entry into the capital. Throughout the twenties and thirties Jewish and Zionist filmmakers like Nathan Axelrod were making Zionist propaganda films for showing in Europe and the United States. Later Palestine became the venue for all manner of foreign stringers capturing the trials and tribulations of Jew, Arab, and Britisher caught up in the almost unresolvable political turmoil.

So there has been a mass of filming, but its worth is restricted. For instance, much footage is repetitive, as the local newsreels of the time tend to capture the smooth surface events such as flower shows, industry, beach parties, and agricultural developments. This paucity of material has to affect the filmmaker. Thus *Pillar of Fire* tends to show a preponderance of marches, parades, maneuvers, kids at play, and group events, not necessarily because of their importance but because that was the *only* film available to illustrate a certain time period.

Another problem facing makers of television history is the tendency of producers and camera people to shoot the overtly *dramatic* action-packed event rather than the less flamboyant *significant* event. Taylor Downing, a British filmmaker who worked on the Thames TV *Palestine* series, put this very well when he wrote, "this imbalance . . . is the inevitable case with all film records because of the nature of the medium, which can illustrate the symptoms and aftermath of violence without really covering the causes."<sup>2</sup>

All these are problems confronting most makers of historic series, but there was one extra element facing Lossin and his group—the dearth of film from Arabic sources and covering Arabic life. Most of the available pre-1940s material was shot by Jewish cameramen sympathetic to the Zionist dream and concentrating on Jewish action. Where Arabic scenes were shot, they were photographed for their worth as biblical illustrations, peasant color, or rural romanticism. Rarely was Arab life portrayed in any meaningful manner, nor was the Arab view sought on film at any deep or significant level. Today the scene has swung very much the other way, but the absence of such Arabic source material makes the task of portraying history fairly just that much harder.

Given the above limitations, the amount of significant and important footage found and used in *Pillar of Fire* is a tribute to tremendous efforts. Much of the material is new to the television screen and adds immensely to our perception of the past. Here I would include the amazing footage of the Ukranian pogroms of 1919, found by Kaplansky in New York, and the rescue of the Jews of Iraq in 1947. What is also of note is the way the filmmakers have discarded standard documentary depiction scenes that have become cliché over the years to find something more meaningful. This is particularly true of the three or four films in the series touching on the rise and development of Hitler's Germany.

What is of particular interest in *Pillar of Fire* and contributes to the feeling of credibility is the constant *particularization* of scenes. This is contrary to the way a lot of filmmakers work. In many historic documentaries, for example, color material is found and is then used to express a generality. Thus the narrator says, "It was a happy time in Germany," and we see crowds laughing; or "The mood was somber after the Czech crisis," and we see unidentified people gathering on undefined street corners. This is a legitimate use of film but one often wishes for more. Unfortunately an overuse of background color has been all too prevalent in documentaries on Palestine.

*Pillar of Fire* is often forced into the use of mere color but wherever possible tries to identify and be specific about material we have all used, myself included, in a generalized way in the past. Thus a wedding is no longer just "a typical wedding of the twenties" but becomes the special wedding of Lord Samuel's son, which explains the Bedouin guests. Or again, we do not merely see a kibbutz and watchtower being erected but are told this is Chanita or Mishmar Haemek being built for a particular reason at a particular date. All this helps to concretize the historical discussion.

Besides the whole question of archive material, another difficulty facing the filmmaker is the selection of interviewees to flesh out the facts, to recall, to com-



*Pillar of Fire*: members of the Haganah defense force.

ment, and to bear witness. In *Pillar of Fire* an outstanding job was done in finding interviewees around the world who presented diverse viewpoints. The people selected fall into two types. First, there are those interviewed because they witnessed a particular incident, or remembered an incident that illustrated a generality. Second, we have interviewees—British, American, Jewish, European, and Arab—who comment from their experiences on the diplomatic and political significance of certain events both as seen at the time and as viewed in later years.<sup>3</sup> The number of memorable witnesses was so large that they cannot be listed, but a few stick very much in my mind. For example, there is the old Arab who saw the Hebron massacres, the middle-aged woman who fought in the Warsaw ghetto, and the driver who tried to bring a food convoy to besieged Jerusalem. There are also memorable interviews with the captain of the British destroyer that took the *Exodus* refugees back to Germany and with the British officer who stood by with his troops while members of a Jewish hospital convoy were killed by the Arabs before his eyes.

Among the political witnesses are all the big Israeli names from Golda Meir to Shimon Peres, and Americans such as Dean Rusk. Little new is really added from the Israeli side, but some of the interviewed British diplomats are amazingly frank. Thus the author of the 1939 British White Paper restricting Jewish immigration admits the totally cold and brutal expediency practiced at the time. Then another British diplomat adds (and I quote from memory): "We knew whatever we did in the Second World War the Jews would still help us, and we needed Arab oil. So we could afford to be extra friendly to one side and blunt the hopes of the other."

### Whose History?

Given the shortcomings of the archives, given the death of the principals, and given the evasions and covering-up in which we all indulge, how *is* the series as history? How does it fare as a series dealing with political events and with controversies and issues that still burn and scorch? Is it merely a partisan series of programs limited to Israeli and Jewish audiences, or is it balanced enough to be seen by all viewers?

First to the obvious. This is history as seen by Israel TV in 1981. It is not indifferent! It is a series which is sympathetic to Zionism and the Zionist ideal, supported by Israel TV, made by members of a Jewish State when Israel itself is under political attack around the world and its aims, ideals, and *raison d'être* being questioned by the UN. I mention the obvious because filmmakers, too, have their sympathies and beliefs, and whatever the guise, no one is unbiased and neutral. But given all this, what is quite remarkable and outstanding is the high objectivity of the series and its openness of approach. It is unmoralizing, nondogmatic, and extremely willing to examine events from all points of view—including those of the Arabs on most points of contention.

The representation of the Arab view is done mostly by using interviews with witnesses, showing dupe material of Arab statesmen of the past or by using the comments throughout the series of Anwar Nusseibeh, an Arab politician and former Defense Minister of Jordan, who very strongly and forcibly defends the traditional Arab position and attacks Jewish usurpation. In particular, extensive coverage is given to films and speeches of Arab politicians of the thirties. During the forties we are treated to many of the Arab arguments made to various international investigating bodies such as UNSCOP, and we are given extensive ex-

tracts from the Saudi Ambassador's speech to the UN in 1947 roundly condemning Jewish immigration, the alienation of the land, and the possible creation of a State. These arguments are strong, bitter, and well reasoned and are set out at length.

While the Arab point of view is, if anything, overstressed, that of the British is understressed, and British policy comes in for a lot of criticism. This is partially understandable since so many British television series in the past have whitewashed British military and political actions in Palestine. Given the deluge of British series on Palestine such as *Roads to Conflict* (BBC), *Palestine* (Thames), and *Struggle for Israel* (Yorkshire TV), and given the fact that *Pillar of Fire* covers so much of the same material, we suddenly have a marvelous opportunity to see how different filmmakers and countries see the same events. The differences are quite astonishing and possibly warrant a separate examination of the questions "Whose history are we following on the TV?" and "What is the meaning of *authority* in regard to the TV documentary?"

We all select, and the British selection in this matter is quite interesting. I have already mentioned the matter of British expediency shaping events. This is usually ignored or kept well subdued in British programming. Another issue is that of terrorism, which is treated in a highly selective manner by the British. Thus *Palestine* and *Struggle*—both very well-known series—fail in essence to distinguish between the Haganah (a widely supported Jewish *defense* organization) and the small Irgun and Stern gangs, the minority groups that believed in terrorism. Both *Palestine* and *Struggle* give very extensive coverage to Jewish terrorist actions such as the blowing up of the King David Hotel and Deir Yassin but fail to mention or gloss over the often brutal actions of the British-controlled Palestine Police, the British terrorist action in blowing up Ben Yehudah Street, and the yielding of territory straight into the hands of Arab groups at the outbreak of hostilities.

History is often contentious, and clearly the reason for the Arab exodus is a case in point. When the facts are not in dispute, then emphasis and balance may become the issue. To me, *Pillar of Fire* does seem relatively balanced in contrast to the two cited British series. The latter maintain a facade of balance, but this often fades at crucial junctures. One incident in particular, cited in *Pillar of Fire*, *Palestine*, and *Struggle*, illustrates the subtle but persuasive anti-Israel bias of the British programs and illuminates generally the question of editorial emphasis. The facts are simple and agreed on by all.

In 1947 three members of the Irgun underground group were hung by the British for helping Jewish political prisoners to stage a mass escape from Acre jail. The British were previously warned that if they carried out this death sentence there would be strong Jewish retaliation. In spite of the warning the British proceeded with the execution, and a few days later two British army sergeants were caught and hung by the Irgun.

In *Struggle for Israel* the sentencing and hanging of the Jews is given a cold, factual rendering in about 10 seconds of air time, while about 1 minute and 20 seconds is devoted, in highly emotional terms, to the hanging of the British sergeants. Thus, over pictures of the sergeants and angry British soldiers a voice is heard saying, "The bestialities practiced by the Nazis could go no further." In Richard Broad's *Palestine* the hanging of the sergeants is again shown against a British Movietone news quote that says this hanging "is the sort of cruelty once commonly indulged in by the Nazis."<sup>4</sup> This time Broad, a very well known and highly regarded producer, does not even bother to mention that the hanging of the British sergeants was a specific retaliation for the hanging of the three Irgun members a few days before.

And what of the Israeli version? In *Pillar of Fire* the death of the three Irgun fighters is given extensive coverage, the implication being that they went to a hero's death. Immediately after we are shown the British hangings. Prime Minister Begin then speaks for about a minute concerning the warnings that were given the British. The section ends with a long comment on the disgust felt by the majority of the Jewish community of Palestine for the Irgun action.

The problem of "Whose history are we seeing?" arises strangely enough in its acutest form among the Israelis themselves. Although the series was highly praised and critically acclaimed and became compulsive viewing for most of Jewish Israel, it also gave rise to interminable arguments, dissensions, rows, and even court actions.

The first matter, very widely discussed and hotly debated in a postseries round-table television debate, dealt with Lossin's emphasis and point of view on Zionism. Lossin had pinned his first program to the Dreyfus case, which had been such a focus for anti-Semitism in France and which inspired Herzl's Zionist awakening. For a number of people this was quite the wrong emphasis and the wrong beginning. For them the programs should have begun early in the nineteenth century with the pre-Herzl thinkers and philosophers. To tie the rise of Zionism to French and European anti-Semitism seemed to them to be too simplistic and, what is worse, a denial of *centuries* of dreaming and yearning.

Another line of criticism was to berate Lossin for devoting so much time to the Arab point of view. This group of critics in particular argued that more time should have been devoted to historic personages and speeches and that the films should have been far more propagandistic, not merely commenting on the Zionist dream but passionately advocating its renewal on the screen.

Probably the bitterest opposition to the series came from a group of Sefardim. Historically the name applies to the Jews of Spain, but currently it is applied to the Jews of North Africa, Yemen, Iraq, and Persia. Most of this group came to Israel *after* the founding of the State, and they make up about 60 percent of the population. The contention of the Sefardim was that the series was *Ashkenazi* history, a history extolling the efforts of the Jews of *European* origin which totally ignored the contributions of the Sefardim in building the State.

What is interesting is that most of these declarations were based on rumor, with bitter letters reaching the papers *before* the series had ever been aired. In practice the series did stress Sefardic actions and history wherever possible, but this failed to stop the attacks. Later, when I questioned one of the program advisers—a historian of some note—he told me that if anything the Sefardic element in the series was overdone and out of proportion to their contributions to pre-State history.

Finally, there were the semipolitical controversies, such as which political group contributed more to the Zionist dream, Jabotinsky Revisionist or Ben-Gurion Socialist, and why was one being given more emphasis than the other. All this came to a head when Meir Pa'il, a reserve general and member of the *Knesset* (Parliament), threatened to bring a court injunction to stop the broadcasts. The claim in this case, again made prior to viewing, was that the role of the Irgun and the Revisionists was overemphasized while little time was devoted to the achievements of the Haganah, the main Jewish defense organization, which had truly built the dream.<sup>5</sup> The injunction was never granted and the programs sailed on smoothly. However, after the close of the series Pa'il continued to make the same allegations, even though the last two or three programs had concentrated very fully on the exploits of the Haganah.

### Aftermath

The Israeli reasons for making *Pillar of Fire* have been discussed; but what purpose does the series serve outside Israel besides giving us the history in depth? What does this mean more specifically? Well, to start with, one very important point is that the series allows us to correct certain stereotypes of the Israelis and Arabs.

In the past our image of Israelis and Arabs has very much been formed through such films as *The Juggler*, *Cast a Giant Shadow*, *Judith*, and *Exodus*. These films tend to portray the Arab as ignorant peasant and the Israeli as superman or superwoman, both images totally at odds with the reality of the country. At the other end of the spectrum documentaries such as Susan Sontag's *Promised Lands* have been equally guilty in promoting stereotypes, with the Arab seen as eternal romantic nomad and the Jew as Chassidic rabbi, blustering soldier, or product-grabbing housewife. *Pillar of Fire* breaks through the stereotypes and allows us to see the Israelis and Arabs as three-dimensional, real human beings rather than poster prototypes.

Another important result of *Pillar of Fire* is that it allows us to regain the reality and meaning of the Holocaust. In the last few years the Holocaust has been debunked, debased, and dismissed. *Pillar of Fire* makes us aware of what the Holocaust really means, and it makes us see why its darkness and uniqueness is one of the central events in the evolution of the twentieth century. And by resurrecting the forgotten it also puts the lie to the grotesque tendency of certain modern historians to deny there ever was a Holocaust.

We can rationalize about the effects of *Pillar of Fire*, but there is one aspect where the reaction is almost unfathomable, and difficult to articulate. We watch the facts of the twenties and thirties and suddenly realize the enormous and amazing achievements of Israel, of the dream turned real. We realize we are watching the creation of myth. So the dream is staggering, the achievement immense, but in the light of today's politics this has been forgotten.

But the dream and the accomplishments have had a price, and it is to the credit of *Pillar of Fire* that it lets us think in a deeper way about the plight of the Arab refugees. We see the yearning of the Jews for a homeland and cannot but make the jump to the Arab masses in the refugee camps of Lebanon and Jordan. The program makers know this but are also aware they are giving us a context to understand the complexities of the past and the present.

Finally, the lasting contribution of *Pillar of Fire* is that it is not judgmental. Like the British series on Ireland—*The Troubles* (Thames TV) and *Ireland: A History* (BBC)—we are presented with a highly intelligent

use of television that really helps us to fathom and penetrate the shadows and mysteries of this century. We are given the facts, we are given room to breathe, to understand in depth, and to make up our own minds. Altogether, one cannot ask for more. With *Pillar of Fire*, documentary on Israel TV has finally come into its own.

### Notes

- 1 This timid policy has now changed and the news magazine offers some of the most critical and analytical programs seen on Israel TV.
- 2 Taylor Downing, introduction to the script of "Palestine."
- 3 This identification of witnesses seems to me infinitely preferable to the anonymous comments and quotes, such as "a soldier wrote home," which appeared in so many documentaries.
- 4 I accept the fact that the producers may be using these quotes to show the mood of England at the time and that these are British programs made for an English audience. However, the mood comments become synonymous with an editorial point of view when so little is given from the other side.
- 5 A lot of this argument is relevant to the point discussed previously: TV history is often tied to available footage. What seems to have happened is that the publicity-seeking marches of the Revisionists were widely photographed, while the Haganah, which was an underground secret defense force, was of necessity camera-shy.

### Reference

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1981 A Personal Memoir of an Israeli Freelance Director. *Journal of the University Film Association* xxxiii(4).



*Pillar of Fire*: an immigrant boat arrives in Palestine just before World War II.