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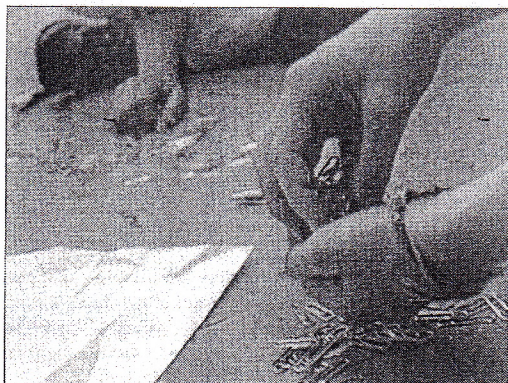
arts & entertainment
film

Fathoming the unfathomable: lessons from the Holocaust

By David Harris

Paper Clips

In the ongoing search for humanity and meaning forged from the ashes of the Holocaust, a group of students and dedicated teachers from a small town in rural Tennessee developed a pretty good lesson plan.



It's a plan that required perseverance and...paper clips. Six million paper clips, collected by the students and pondered as symbols of the many innocent lives lost at the hands of the Nazis. Paper clips were chosen as students discovered that in Norway—where the paper clip was invented—citizens subversively expressed their opposition to the Nazis by wearing paper clips on their lapels.

Paper Clips—shot over four years and released with the help of Miramax—is a moving, visceral documentary about tolerance and understanding. It's also an examination of unique lives crushed and now rediscovered by the predominately white, Christian children of Whitwell Middle School. Winner of a the Best Overall Film at the Rome International Film Festival

and a 2004 Jewish Image Award, it's a story that follows the students' efforts to fathom the unfathomable.

"What you're seeing is really honest kids being raised up by adults who feel that they have a responsibility of preparing them for life," explains writer and co-director Joe Fab. "You see them act on what they learn with their hearts as well as their brains."

The paper clip collecting begins modestly, as the film tracks the many twists and turns of such an ambitious project. Along the way, the audience hears firsthand accounts from Jewish American soldiers and survivors, arguably the most profound part of the film.

When two German journalists, a dedicated husband and wife team who remind the kids that all Germans aren't monsters, visit Whitwell, the subsequent media buzz—including a *Washington Post* feature that caught the eyes of Fab and producers Ari Daniel Pinchot and Robert Johnson—enable the students to continue. Collecting paper clips from around the world, the school received thousands of thank-you letters, stories and lost memories from survivors, not to mention more than 25 million paper clips.

When camp survivors visit Whitwell to recount their harrowing experiences, the town's real-life characters take the project in a bold new direction. Led by Linda Hooper, the no-nonsense school principal, the teachers build a memorial to the 11 million

victims of Hitler's genocide machine. An old rail car, once used to transfer Jews to Auschwitz, is shipped to the school. It will now serve as a resting place for the paper clips and, perhaps, the souls of the victims.

Reminding a new generation of the dangerous implications of hatred and anti-Semitism became something that brought a small town and a film crew together.

"When you follow people going through the kind of changes that they were going through in the film, you can't help but go on that journey yourself," says co-director Elliot Berlin. "Just feeling that I was connected to these people who are supposedly different than me was a very profound experience."

Originally intended as a modest PBS project, the film, like the paper clip collecting, took on a life of its own. "We thought only be down there for a few months," says Fab. "Who knew we'd end up there for a few years?"

Fab's unexpected surprise might also echo the astonishment of the audience upon finding a small town in rural Tennessee that would build a stirring monument for a group of people it had once known nothing about.

Hiding and Seeking

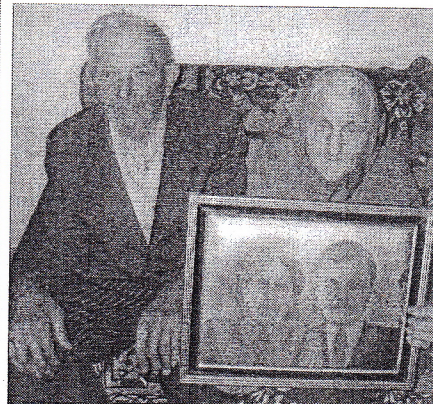
Another important documentary about the lessons of tolerance after World War II is Menachem Daum's and Oren Rudavsky's *Hiding and Seeking*. Winner of the Grand Prix Award at the 2004 Warsaw International Film Festival, and also a recipient at the 2004 Jewish Image Awards, the film, shot primarily over the course of two trips to Poland, is an exhaustive and emotional testament to the power of

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goodness. It follows Daum's search for a couple that hid his father-in-law during the German occupation.

"I feel this is both a post-Holocaust and post-9/11 film in many ways," says Daum.

Alarmed by the violent aftershocks of religious extremism, including his own adult Orthodox sons' increasing mistrust of the non-Jewish world—and the religiously "nar-



row" manner in which his grandchildren were being brought up—Daum started a search for people who risked their lives for Jews. Along the way, his own mistrust of Polish people and their complicity with the Nazis was something he had to overcome.

"Poles were the ultimate others," says Daum. "My parents really felt betrayed by the majority of the Poles during the occupation, and I grew up with stories of how the Poles were collaborators with the Nazis. But we went to Poland and found some very decent people."

Those people included a family of farmers who had risked their lives to hide Daum's father-in-law.

When one of his sons tells Daum his trip to Poland is "completely ridiculous, like the film," the enormity of Daum's quest comes full circle. It is emblematic of the Jews' struggle to retain "faith and tolerance" in the wake of incomprehensible evil, and among a divided family. And it is often a universal quest.

Mentored by the late Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, Daum attributes much of the genesis of his inspiration to the philosophy of Carlebach—an Orthodox leader known for his humanity in reaching out to people of all faiths. "He taught me about the great potential for goodness in all humans," says Daum.

Daum sees a connection between this film and his previous work *A Life Apart: Hasidism in America*. "If the first film was an attempt to humanize the ultra-Orthodox community to the outside world, this film was an attempt to humanize the world to my ultra-Orthodox sons."