

JEWISH BULLETIN

Volume 107, Number 2B

www.jewishsf.com

18 Tammuz, 5763 / July 18, 2003 • 75 cents

Jews in Ireland? Film transforms speculation into truth

JOE ESKENAZI
Bulletin Staff

They look just like your elderly Jewish relatives. They bake challah just like your elderly Jewish relatives. But, *me boy-o*, they sure do not talk like any of your relatives.

Beyond the fact that there is such a thing as the Irish Jewish community, the most striking element for viewers of Valerie Lapin

Of course, they never stumbled across the Irish Jewish Museum as Ganley and her Irish American husband did on a visit to Dublin. Within the museum, the couple discovered treasures such as a brit milah blade, a Hebrew-labeled bottle of Guinness made for export to Israel and, of course, the tour guide, Joe Morrison.

The feisty Jewish octogenarian and Irish tenor is prominently featured in Ganley's film, which has its U.S. premiere Wednesday as part of the S.F. Jewish Film Festival.

Morrison, a homespun raconteur who maxes out Irish and Jewish storytelling skills, recounts an experience that perhaps sums up the oddly benign existence of Ireland's few Jews.

As a wee lad during the Irish civil war, the young Morrison was apprehended by a feared Black and Tan British irregular soldier, who asked him the incredibly pointed question, "Are you a Republican or a Free Stater?" Confused, he replied, "No, I'm a Jew."

The bemused soldier returned the young Irish Jew to his home, unharmed.

While an Irish Jew is a rarer find than a four-leaf clover, the nation's "chosen" few have had a big hand in both Irish and world history. When Robert Briscoe became Dublin's first lord mayor, Yogi Berra was rumored to have muttered "Only in America."

But Briscoe is good for more than just

trivia (along with his son, Ben, he is also half of the only father-son duo to have been elected lord mayor of Dublin). He was a major player in Israeli history as well.

As a younger man, the rebellious Briscoe, who was fluent in German, ran guns to the Irish Republican Army from Germany, working as Michael Collins' right-hand man. Later, during the civil war period, he was a wanted man, going underground with Eamon De Valera.

With a fortune on his head, Briscoe was captured — yet, as a mysterious rebel, no one really knew what he looked like.

As his son, Joe, recalls in the film, he was once released because his captors said, "This is just a Jew, man." They couldn't imagine a Jewish revolutionary putting his life on the line for Ireland.

Yet other Jewish revolutionaries had their eyes on Ireland and the IRA's guerilla-style warfare. One was the New Zionists leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky. The militant made his way to Ireland to learn intelligence-gathering and guerilla warfare techniques from the IRA's finest and put the Irishmen's strategies to work against the British in Palestine.

Late both Briscoe and Jabotinsky flouted British law and smuggled massive amounts of Jews into Palestine.

But the Irish-Israeli connection doesn't end there. Before he was Israel's initial chief rabbi, Isaac Herzog occupied the same position in Ireland, where he was also one of De Valera's most trusted advisers. Like Briscoe,

Herzog shepherded countless refugees to Israel. A generation later, his son, Chaim, became Israel's first Irish-born president.

"Shalom Ireland" is not all good times, however. The film records the tearful deconsecration of a century-old temple no longer needed to serve Ireland's shrinking Jewish community.

Happily, in the short amount of time since Ganley finished the documentary, the

nation's Jewish population has swelled from 1,200 to around 1,800 thanks, in part, to an influx of South Africans and Israelis.

Prior to making the film, Ganley was shocked to discover her own Irish-Jewish heritage — her great-grandparents were the first Jews married in Waterford. Now that she's married to a "proud Irish-American," creating the documentary brought together the best of all worlds.

"I love being around Irish people; that's a fun club to be in," she said with a laugh. "With Irish Jews, here are some people in that Irish club, but they're Jewish, and so am I."

And, to answer the question you've all been asking, yes, Guinness is kosher.

"A rabbi comes into the Guinness factory every year, looks around, has a few pints and says, 'OK, this is kosher.'"

"Shalom Ireland" plays at 1:30 p.m. Wednesday at the Castro Theatre; 3 p.m. Tuesday, July 29 at CineArts in Palo Alto; 3:30 p.m. Thursday, July 31 at Wheeler Auditorium in Berkeley; and noon Sunday, Aug. 3 at Rafael Film Center in San Rafael.



Robert Briscoe, Dublin's first Jewish lord mayor, visits New York City in "Shalom Ireland," directed by Valerie Lapin Ganley.

Ganley's film "Shalom Ireland" are cotton-topped bubbes and zaydes opening their mouths to speak in Irish brogues thicker than a peat bog.

"Two women came running out to greet us, and they reminded me of my own Jewish grandmother walking down Fairfax Boulevard in Los Angeles," recalled the Pacifica documentarian of her first trip to the Emerald Isles.

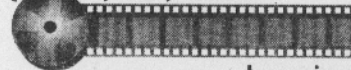
"But as soon as they spoke there was that thick Irish brogue."

If you've never heard of an Irish Jew, don't feel so bad. Neither have many Irish. While the vast majority of the nation's 1,800-odd Jews reside in Dublin, friends of Ganley's who lived just around the corner from Ireland's largest synagogue never knew of its existence.



Valerie Lapin Ganley

Jewish Film Festival



INTERVIEW