

## Conversation with... Nancy Spielberg & Roberta Grossman

By Judie Jacobson

**NANCY SPEILBERG**

*"I also want the world to look at Israel again with a fresh eye."*

In 1948, just three years after the liberation of the Nazi death camps, a group of Jewish American pilots answered a call for help. In secret and at great personal risk, they smuggled planes out of the U.S., and flew for Israel in its War of Independence. As members of Machal – "volunteers from abroad" – this ragtag band of brothers not only turned the tide of the war; they also embarked on personal journeys of discovery and renewed Jewish pride.

Now, filmmaker Nancy Spielberg tells their story in "Above and Beyond: The Birth of the Israeli Air Force," a new documentary that will be presented at the Mandell JCC Hartford Jewish Film Festival on Sunday, March 22 at Beth El Temple in West Hartford. Spielberg, the film's producer, and director Roberta Grossman will be on hand to discuss the film following the screening (see p. 21 for details).

An accomplished businesswoman, fundraiser and philanthropist, Nancy Spielberg has in recent years turned her energy and talents to producing documentary films. She served as consultant on the Oscar-winning documentary *Chernobyl Heart*, and is executive producer of *Elusive Justice: The Search for Nazi War Criminals*, which aired nationally on PBS, and the forthcoming documentary *Mimi and Dona*. She is also executive producing *Who Will Write Our History*, with director Roberta Grossman (an interview with Grossman follows). Before creating and producing *Above and Beyond*, Spielberg produced a project for the Israeli government, *Celebrities Salute Israel's 60th*, which was featured in Times Square on the NASDAQ screens.

Spielberg grew up surrounded by the film industry, where she worked on her brother Steven's early films. She attended Arizona State University and UCLA and, after moving to New York, studied film at Sarah Lawrence College and the New School in New York. She is founder and co-founder of several charities including "A Bid for Charity," "Children of Chernobyl," "Project Sunshine" and the American branch of The Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance.

The Ledger spoke with Spielberg from her home in New York.

**Q: This is not a well-known story, to say the least – how did you learn about these men and why did you decide to turn their story into a film?**

A: I had completed production of "elusive Justice: The Search for Nazi War Criminals," which aired on PBS in prime time and had a really wonderful reception. Following that, somebody sent me the obituary for Al Schwimmer, and it was titled something like "Father of Israeli Air Force Dies at 94."

It went on to describe how this American was responsible for starting the Israeli air force, and he smuggled planes into Israel and was later indicted [in the U.S. for violating the U.S. Neutrality Acts]. It was just an incredible story. You know, I think of myself as pretty knowledgeable, but I never knew that Americans were involved in laying the ground work for the Israeli Air Force, and for being in the first fighter jets and flying and teaching Israelis how to fly. We consider Israel's air force to be one of the most powerful and top air forces in the world – with all its sophisticated technology – and it is highly respected by the U.S. So the idea that the Israeli Air Force had its beginnings like this, I thought was pretty incredible. Why did I take it on as a project? It just had my name all over it.

**Q: It's been so many years since this happened. Did you have trouble locating these men?**

A: Well, the first thing I did was I started to read everything I could get my hands on. And one of the books I read was called *No Margin for Error: The Making of the Israeli Air Force*, written by Ehud Yonay. And somehow I found him and started to correspond with him. I then went to Israel at the end of 2011 and one of our dear friends and our lawyer in Israel is friends with Shimon Peres. He asked me if I wanted to meet Peres, who was involved in all those operations. Of course, I said "Yes!" So, I sat with Shimon Peres and he told me the most incredible stories. The 45-minute time slot I had been given turned into an hour and a half. His next appointments were standing outside waiting to meet with him. During our talk, he was clearly transported back to that time. He had a little twinkle in his eye.

Somebody also lead me to a man named Smoky Simon. He was a South African volunteer during that time who happens to be head of the World Machal organization today. He was an incredible resource. He'll be 95 next week and he's so sharp. He gave me phone numbers and names. From there, we started to call the guys. We would call one pilot and he would start telling a story; he'd tell you about his buddies and then he'd say 'did you speak to so-and-so?' And so, we would use that contact. There were not a lot of guys left who could tell the story.



Roberta Grossman (left) & Nancy Spielberg

**Q: Besides telling the story of Machal, you've said that the film is also about passing down the story to future generations. What is it that you hope young people will take away from this film?**

A: There is a universal theme to this film that I think future generations from all walks of life can learn from. It's about going to great lengths to help somebody who needs helps. That's the bottom line. It even speaks to the American spirit because Americans run to help others. We run to help when there's a Katrina; we run when there's a tsunami, we run to do relief work. There's a very important message about volunteerism that engulfs this film.

I also want to preserve the history; I want the film to inspire Jewish kids to be connected to their roots. I also want the world to look at Israel again with a fresh eye; let's not forget that Israel accepted the two-state solution and the Arabs vowed to fight and Israel needed to defend itself. That to me is something people really do forget today, as they try to discredit Israel's existence.

Of course, I'm not really making a political film. I made a film about these men because we need to hold on to our history; we need to preserve the words of that generation – the Holocaust survivors, our World War II veterans – because they'll be gone and if it's not captured visually, which is the best way to reach kids, it will be lost.

**Q: That's a good point. Have you considered getting the 'testimonies' of those who played a role in the creation of the state of Israel on film? It seems like it would be a natural follow-up to the work of the Shoah Foundation (the creation of someone else named Spielberg).**

A: You know, I was thinking about it. I was thinking first of all of how I wish I had done this 10 years earlier. Because, even now, by the time I made this film a lot of men were gone. I had also wanted to be able to cover the volunteers other than the pilots. A lot of the guys who volunteered on the ground felt a little short-changed because the fliers get all the glory because they're the cool dudes! So, I felt bad! But, I actually have other interviews that we will add as extras later on.

As for recording the testimonies of all those involved in the creation of the state of Israel, truthfully, I don't think I realistically will be able to do it. I wish I could do it; I would love to do it. But by the time I could raise money...and I'm in the throes of launching this film...I just don't know if I could do it.

**Q: What's next?**

A: I want to make a feature film out of "Above and Beyond." I've had several big producers contact me about it; so it's getting interest. But if you go the big-producer-big-studio route you have an issue. I don't think any big studio wants to do a film about Israel. And that is so sad. The bottom line is they're looking at box office; it's not about this as a wonderful story. Yes, it has to be a wonderful story; but it's a marketing decision first. So it could be that I need to find an independent producer. This is new for me; I'm not in the Hollywood scene – as much as everyone thinks I am. On the other hand, I do sort of know some people there. One thing I learned in this process is that you should speak with experts, and you should listen and be open-minded. I probably need a few months to put "Above and Beyond" out there – I've got screening coming up all around the country – and then see where I go from there.

I'm also helping Roberta [Grossman] on her new project, "Who Will Write Our Story?" It's her baby and right now I'm executive producer. I may get more involved, but it will depend on what happens with "Above and Beyond."

**ROBERTA GROSSMAN**

Up next for "Above and Beyond" director is a documentary based on a book by Connecticut's Sam Kassow

Roberta Grossman, director of "Above and Beyond," is an award-winning filmmaker with a passion for history and social justice. She has written and produced more than forty hours of documentary film and television. Her 2012 film, *Hava Nagila (The Movie)* was the opening or closing night film at 46 of the 80 film festivals where it screened, had a theatrical release in 2013 and is now available on Netflix.

Grossman's previous film, *Blessed Is the Match: The Life and Death of Hannah Senesh*, was shortlisted for an Academy Award, won the audience award at 13 film festivals, was broadcast on PBS and nominated for a Primetime Emmy.

She is currently beginning production on a new film, *Who Will Write Our History*, about Emanuel Ringelblum and the secret archives of the Warsaw Ghetto. The film is based on the book of the same name by West Hartford resident Dr. Sam Kassow, a professor at Trinity College.

**Q: How did you get involved in "Above and Beyond"?**

A: We had just premiered our last film, "Hava Nagila: The Movie," with the opening night film at the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival – a great night with about 1200 people. I think it was the next day, I was on vacation and feeling very happy and I got an email with the name Spielberg attached to it, and I thought one of my friends was pulling my leg because perhaps I had gotten a little full of myself and they were trying to bring me down. But it actually turned out to be Nancy Spielberg. I asked somebody who would know if Steven had a sister named Nancy and they confirmed that he did. And so we began our conversation. She immediately infected me with her enthusiasm and passion for this project and she was looking for a director. I guess I was the Jewish filmmaking flavor of the month and some people had given her my name and we started talking and we ended up working together – which I think was really a good thing for me.

**Q: What in particular drew you to this film?**

A: I'm kind of a hopeless sucker for anything that has anything to do with any part of Jewish history, whether it be something about the Jews in ancient Rome or the Jews in Oregon today. I'm just endlessly fascinated by Jewish history – in particular, the Jewish history of the 20th century. So it was natural for me to become engaged with it, and I realized that I really didn't know anything in any great detail about the '48 war so it was an opportunity to learn about that.

**Q: Did you have any particular challenges in shooting this film?**

A: I think the biggest challenge for me was that I had never done special effects with computer generated imagery (CGI) before. So there was a very steep learning curve to learn about storyboarding for CGI and then executing the storyboards for the live action elements of the CGI; shooting with people in planes and backdrops and sending all that to ILM [Industrial Light & Magic, the motions picture visual effects company founded by George Lucas] in a form that they could composite it and extend that into the flying sequences that they did. So that was challenging for me. It was a terrific learning experience; they were amazing to work with and very, very helpful all along the way and creative. Of course, they're the best in the world, so it was a great experience.

**Q: You've optioned the rights to Sam Kassow's book *Who Will Write Our History*. Tell us about that.**

A: I'm a pretty avid reader of Jewish history. I read the book and I had the same feeling I had when I made the decision to make the film about Hannah Senesh – that this was something I had to do; I had to tell this story. The book is a masterwork of history but it is not necessarily going to be read by a mass audience; but the story is so profoundly important that I'm hoping that the film will be basically a translation of the book into a form for mass consumption.

I've done some additional interviews with Sam [at the recent opening of the Jewish museum in Poland]; I filmed at the Jewish Historical Institute where the archives are housed and I went to Israel and did some recreations and some green screen experiments. I'm working on a sample reel now that will be unveiled for the very first time at a private fundraising event in Hartford on March 23, the night after the closing night screening of "Above and Beyond" at the Hartford Jewish Film Festival. I'm actually working on a schedule timeline right now. I think it's going to be done in January 2017.

**Q: Will Sam Kassow continue to be involved in this project?**

A: Oh yes. I'm leaning very heavily on him. I wouldn't do it without his input, oversight and knowledge. He's been very involved and he will be very involved at every stage of the production to make sure that everything is historically accurate, that I'm not missing important points. He's my first audience, I want him to be happy and we'll go from there to the rest of the world.



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Sunday, March 22 | 7:30 PM  
Reel Talk and Closing Night Reception follows film  
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