

## The Diversity of the Jewish Identity and its Difficult Expression in Vienna or When Films Reveal Unease Regarding the Jewish Identity

by Jérôme Segal

Films sometimes still have a bad reputation among the arts. Conservative persons might consider them as being inflammatory: they cannot be easily quoted and it might be tempting to follow critics without having seen them. Moreover, opinions expressed by characters of a film can easily be attributed to the film director and his/her supporters. Against this background, when it happens that films are presented as ‘Jewish films’, passionate debates might emerge, as is the case in Vienna, through the discussions inside the Jewish community concerning the Vienna Jewish Film Festival (VJFF).

Nowadays, there are more than 100 Jewish film festivals throughout the world, about two-thirds of them in the US. In many cases, these festivals are conceived as spin-offs of official Jewish organisations. Their film programme is governed by institutions which promote a strict and often rather conservative definition of Jewishness. Three main criteria usually dominate in the selection of films: religion, life in Israel and the extermination of the Jews during WWII<sup>7</sup>. These Jewish film festivals, which consequently have restricted curatorial freedom, rely heavily on the good will and sponsorship of Jewish community centres. The inauguration of these festivals can be considered as a kind of ‘hereditary genesis’ since they are particularly mouthpieces of the communities. The VJFF, clearly does not belong to this category. It is linked more to the spirit of the first Jewish film festival, incepted in San Francisco in 1981. Films are considered as food for thought and the festival was never directly linked to the Israelitische Kultugemeinde (IKG or Austrian Jewish Community). Frédéric-Gérard Kaczek who created the VJFF in 1991 (following the idea of the director of the Jewish Institute of Adult Education), is a Belgian citizen who grew up in Brussels with close ties to Austria since his parents were Viennese Jews who escaped the country in 1938. Together with his wife Monika, they decided to use the festival to express the richness and diversity of the Jewish identity. When, in 1994, they decided for instance to focus on ‘Jewish Humour’, they approached celebrities who were invited to the festival’s opening with a letter that read:

*“We try not just to collect films from Jewish artists or authors (and it was a difficult decision to forego the Marx Brothers, Billy Wilder and many others), but we also prefer to choose films dealing in some way or other with Jewish identity at a specific time or in a specific society<sup>8</sup>.”*

In their interest for the diversity, revolving around the eternal question ‘What is a Jewish film?’, the programmers also insisted on choosing films concerning the ‘Jewish State’, and its creation. In this perspective, they followed the tradition of the former Austrian Chancellor, Bruno Kreisky (who led Austria from 1970 to 1983). Supporting the festival, the Minister of Science and transport, Caspar Einem, wrote ‘(...) *the Jewish Film Days follow the best Austrian tradition, that of Bruno Kreisky, who was the first to realise that if the people in Israel want to find themselves, they will have to learn to speak to one another.*’ (id.) Therefore, the Kaczeks did not hesitate to show in 2004 Al-

7 The expressions ‘Holocaust’ and ‘Shoah’, widely accepted, respectively in the Anglo-Saxon and European contexts, are discarded here for their religious connotations.

8 Archive of the Jewish Film Festival, privately owned by the current directors of the festival

Nakba: the Palestinian Catastrophe 1948, by director Benny Brunner (Israel/Netherlands, 1997), dealing with the displacement of 750,000 Palestinians following the creation of the State of Israel in 1948.

An important public rift with the IKG came about as a result of the programming for the following year, which included *Paradise Now* (Hany Abu-Assad, 2005), a film co-produced by the occupied Palestinian Territory, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Israel. Raimund Fastenbauer, general secretary for Jewish affairs at the IKG, asserted that this ‘*scandalous film*’ - which received the audience prize at the Berlinale and was nominated for an Oscar - legitimized the ‘*killing of innocent people in Israel*’<sup>9</sup>. Three years later, in 2008, the festival’s focus was both the 60th anniversary of the State of Israel and on the Naqba; Fastenbauer went so far as to suggest in a widely-diffused weekly (*Profil*) that the festival should be renamed ‘*Palestinian film festival*’.



Both scans from Profil 7-11-2008

In November 2010, two films again caused controversy and interestingly, none of them was linked to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Fastenbauer declared this time that two films of the festival could hurt the religious feelings of community members: *Fucking Different Tel Aviv*, a queer short films compilation made by gay and lesbian film makers and *Covenant: Women, God and All Between (brit)*, by the orthodox director Nurit Jacobs Yinon<sup>10</sup>. Fastenbauer stated that this latter film was making fun of the circumcision (‘*brit*’), a statement completely false but not astonishing as he later recognized he had not seen the film. The festival team never asked for any financial support from the IKG, the director only wanted to pay for an advertisement in the community monthly (*Die Gemeinde*), announcing that the festival was going to take place and mentioning the festival’s website. This was denied and led to the topic addressed in *Profil*. Feeling poorly represented in the

9 Edlinger, Thomas and Stefan Griessemann (2005), ‘Anschlagskultur - der palästinensische Selbstmordattentäter-Film *Paradise Now* sorgt für Zündstoff - auch in Wien’, *Profil* 36, 45, 196-201.

10 Stefan Griessemann, ‘Entmündigung der Gemeinde’, *Profil*, 47, 120,

media by the IKG officials and, above all, upset by years of interference of the IKG in the cultural affairs, three Jewish intellectuals decided to organize a collective protest. The film director Ruth Beckermann, the writer and historian Doron Rabinovici and the social scientist Evelyn Klein managed to gain the support of more than 200 other community members. The protest for more tolerance was published in *Die Gemeinde* and the president of the IKG, Ariel Muzicant called for a general discussion on 17 January 2011<sup>11</sup>.



pic by michaela tulipan

Nobody from the festival team was invited on the podium which opposed Muzicant and Fastenbauer on the one side, Rabinovici and Beckermann on the other. The latter noticed that when she organized a series of talks labelled 'Facing Israel' for the IKG, she had a complete curatorial freedom. Why then should the festival directors submit their films list to the IKG to be allowed to pay for an advertisement? Is it really because in Sweden anti-Semites are trying to ban the *brit*, that a films dealing with the relations between mothers and their sons in their very first days should be condemned? Do not the statutes of the IKG stipulate that it should provide information about the Jewish cultural life in Vienna? Interestingly, Muzicant explained that he was fearing the split of the Ultraorthodox community, which represents about 3000 of the 7500 members. But among the crowded audience in the community centre, no one was expressing the idea that his or her religious feelings would have been hurt. On the contrary, an orthodox woman intervened to say she did not want her religious obedience to be demonized! A Haredim in charge of the '*Sanatorium Maimonides Zentrum*', a nursing home and health centre, said that since *Die Gemeinde* was the only journal allowed in his home, it was good if the festival could be announced. He even further declared that he screened *Eyes Wide Open* (Haim Tabakman, 2009) in his center, a film openly dealing with a homosexual relationship between two orthodox Jews of Meha Shearim in Jerusalem.

Jewish film festivals always serve at least two goals: consolidating a sense of solidarity within a community, on the one hand, and shaping the image of that community in the city or country hosting the festival, on the other. The rather petty position of the IKG probably results in a fear that the festival might play a role in these directions. The Israeli Embassy in Austria, for instance, is much more positive regarding the festival and contributes to its success by shipping films. Looking at the Jewish film festivals in Berlin or Amsterdam (both independent in their artistic choices but supported by official Jewish organisations) might also help the IKG to realize they do not have to fear the

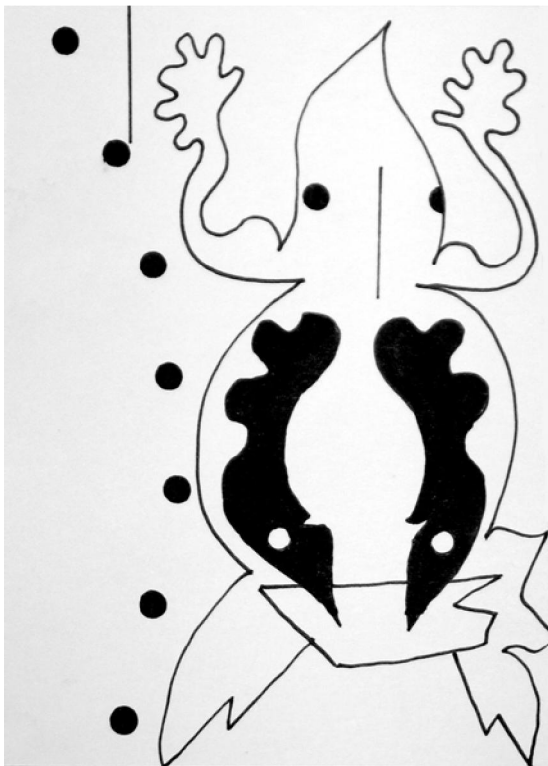
<sup>11</sup> *Die Gemeinde*, 683, Dec. 2010, 8-12.

festival that way. The pioneers of the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, Deborah Kaufman and Janice Plotkin, claimed that their festival ‘*affirmed that secular culture could play a significant role in defining Jewish identity*<sup>12</sup>.’ It is this very belief on which its Viennese counterpart bases its forward-looking work, with the hope of better relations with the local official Jewish organisation.

Photos taken from J.Segal's Blog, see <http://wp.me/pfmWq-v3>,  
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### nurit moshav ovdim by stephan dom



nurit was a moshav on gilboa mountain in northern israel. moshav is a type of(f) is-raeli town or settlement, in particular a type of(f) cooperative agricultural com-muntiy of individual farms pioneered by labour zionists during the second aliyah. we are the workers.

· stephan dom: hometown & current location: Vienna, Austria, worker ·  
[stephandom.blogspot.com](http://stephandom.blogspot.com)

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12 ‘The Jewish Film Festival’, *Jews and American Popular Culture, Vol. 1 Movies, Radio, and Television*. San Francis-co: the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, 109-122:112.