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'Walt Disney of Israeli animation' was Mossad agent, who forged docs for Eli Cohen

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(JNS) — Before discovering the story of Joseph and Rebecca Bau, who married secretly in the Plaszow concentration camp during the Holocaust, Deborah Smerecnik never imagined that she would make a film.

“It was the love story that drew me in and the fact that there were so many miracles,” she told JNS. “I’m very much a believer in miracles, and I wanted to tell a redemptive story that encourages people to hold on and persevere.”

Smerecnik, who wrote the 2024 film “Bau: Artist at War,” devoted some 15 years to the project, which she admits she nearly abandoned multiple times. The dream “and the belief that I was meant to do it” drove her on, she said.

“Many times, when I’ve had difficult times, I’ve thought about what they went through,” she told JNS. “My husband had Alzheimer’s for eight years. He just passed. But it was the fact that they persevered, they overcame so much, that I keep telling myself — what they went through is so much harder than the majority of things I’ve ever gone through.”

“If they can do it, then I better, right?” she said. “You know, buck up and keep going.”

Some 200 people attended a screening of the film, which Sean McNamara directed, on Sunday at the Center for Jewish History in Manhattan. The Holocaust and United Nations Outreach Programme and B’nai B’rith International organized the event, which included a question-and-answer period with Smerecnik, McNamara and Cila Bau and Hadasa Bau, both daughters of the film protagonists.

Joseph Bau was a celebrated artist, writer and Mossad operative, who relied on his drawing and typography skills and his humor to create signs with Gothic script and maps for a Nazi captain before finding refuge in Oskar Schindler’s Brännlitz camp.

Daniel S. Mariaschin, CEO of B’nai B’rith International, who moderated the discussion during the event, told JNS that Bau “made great contributions not only to his fellow concentration camp inmates, keeping their spirits up and forging some documents to save people, but then after, in terms of his service to the State of Israel.”

“He really was one of those Renaissance men, who was also a great hero of Israel and the Jewish people,” Mariaschin said.

A cosmetologist who was forced to serve as the Nazi captain’s manicurist, Rebecca Bau used her position to discreetly glimpse execution lists and hide prisoners marked for death. She survived Auschwitz and Lichtewerden and, after the war, reunited with her husband. Their wedding in the women’s barracks of Plaszow was first portrayed in Steven Spielberg’s “Schindler’s List.”

B’nai B’rith honored the Baus posthumously in April 2020 with the Jewish Rescuers Citation during a Yom HaShoah ceremony recognizing 16 people, who risked their lives to save fellow Jews.

‘Miracles happen’

Smerecnik told attendees that she and her colleagues felt a strong chemistry with McNamara, the film director, from the start. “We all seemed to be in unity as to how we wanted it done,” she said.

McNamara told JNS that hearing the family’s story and meeting with Cila and Hadasa made him eager to take the project on. “Here are these two people, who fell in love in the worst possible conditions but were able to stay together and then have two beautiful daughters,” he said. “That’s what drew me to it.”

Bau’s humor resonated deeply with McNamara, who tends to gravitate toward inspirational stories.

“He was able to capture people’s hearts and lighten them up,” he told JNS. “Even in the worst possible conditions, he’d be joking about it. I love a person who, when I’m feeling low, comes up, cracks a joke and just makes you smile and laugh.”

McNamara hopes that viewers will take away from the film that “miracles happen.”

“It starts with love,” he said. “If you love, love trumps everything. If you can find the person of your dreams, that’s the key.”

False identities

Hailed as the “Walt Disney of Israeli animation,” Joseph Bau moved to Israel with Rebecca and their 3-year-old daughter Hadasa in 1950. After living in Haifa, the family moved to Tel Aviv, where the cartoonist and graphic artist created a small studio to continue.

In ensuing decades, Bau became a prominent figure in Israeli cinema, designing movie posters and advertisements for films throughout the 1960s and 1970s. He also — his daughters learned after his death —

worked for the Mossad, creating false identities and documents for covert operatives, including the Israeli spy Eli Cohen.

During the question period of the program, a woman said that Bau's aptitude for forgery impacted her personally. "Joseph Bau saved my father's life," she said, noting that her father, a Chassidic Jew with blond hair and blue eyes, lived under false documents that Bau forged for much of the Holocaust.

"The only reason my father was eventually arrested and sent to Plaszow was that someone turned him in," she said. "Who knows what would have happened if he had been taken earlier? I might not even be here today to tell this story."

Hadasa Bau told JNS that the most important lesson that she learned from her parents was to "be happy, just be happy, because life is so simple."

As a young girl, her father encouraged her to record her good deeds in a journal, but she often struggled to do so.

"It's not important to write it. Only to do it," she recalled him saying. "At first, I thought it was just a game. But slowly I started to understand."

Her mother, a pillar of the community, was "the center of all the women," she told JNS. "She was a beautician, and women would come to her for advice." Both of her parents "knew that laughter heals people. It's not just about what you see with your eyes. It's something inside you. Laughter gives you power and strength to be happy," she added. "That was our parents' secret. Be happy."

Museum at a crossroads

The Joseph Bau House Museum, which the Bau daughters created 25 years ago in their father's Tel Aviv art studio, receives top rankings on

online travel sites, but the building in which it is located has been sold and is set for demolition.

The sisters and supporters are trying to secure a new location and to ensure the museum's preservation.

Dr. Nisan Hershkowitz, a New York dentist, told JNS that the film "is a very accurate representation of what the actual Bau House of Tel Aviv preserves."

"I've been there, and I now appreciate it so much more because of the documentary," he said. "I was very, very moved, and I learned a lot through it."

"You not only see all of the art and all of the things he did during the time of the Holocaust," Anya Farber, a Holocaust lecturer from Connecticut, told JNS. "You see what the man was like."

"We need to do whatever we can to keep the museum going," Farber said. "Wherever it has to be, even if it has to move, we have to do whatever we can to support it."