

Music Box Films Presents

AIDA'S SECRETS



95 MINUTES | ISRAEL, GERMANY, US | 2016 | NOT RATED | 1.85:1
IN HEBREW AND ENGLISH WITH SUBTITLES

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LOGLINE

In this moving documentary, the discovery of records from WWII sparks a family's quest for answers as two brothers separated as babies reunite with each other and their elderly mother, Aida, who hid more from them than just each other.

SHORT SUMMARY

A web of family secrets unravels in this moving documentary following a family fractured by war. Two brothers, Izak and Shep, were born inside the Bergen-Belsen displaced persons camp in 1945 and separated as babies, never told of the other's existence. Nearly 70 years later, the discovery of family records leads the brothers to an emotional reunion with their elderly mother, Aida, who hid more from Izak and Shep than just each other.

LONG SUMMARY

In this moving documentary, the discovery of records from WWII sparks a family's quest for answers as two brothers separated as babies reunite with each other and their elderly mother, who hid more from them than just each other.

Izak Szewelwicz was born in the Bergen-Belsen displaced persons camp in 1945 and sent for adoption in Israel. Though Izak was able to form a relationship with his birth mother, his life was turned upside down years later when he located not only his birth certificate, but also another of a brother he never knew existed.

Filmmakers Alon and Shaul Schwarz set out to find answers for Izak, uncovering questions of identity, resilience, and the plight of displaced persons as Izak and his brother Shep—both nearly 70 years old—finally meet in Canada before traveling to a nursing home in Quebec to introduce Shep to his elderly mother, Aida, for the first time.

FESTIVALS AND AWARDS

Winner - Jury Prize for Best Documentary, 2017 Atlanta Jewish Film Festival

Winner - Audience Award, 2017 Miami Jewish Film Festival

Official Selection, 2017 New York Jewish Film Festival

True Stories Selection, 2017 Palm Springs International Film Festival

Winner - Audience Award, 2016 Tel Aviv's DocAviv International Film Festival

World Premiere, 2016 Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival

THE HISTORY

Izak Szewelwicz was born in the Bergen Belsen Displaced Persons Camp in 1945 and sent to Israel as an orphan from postwar Germany. After two years at various orphanages, he was placed into a loving foster home in a small agricultural village in Israel. He was raised as a Zionist Israeli.

At the age of ten, a classmate told Izak his foster parents were not his real parents. When he approached his foster parents, Izak learned that he had a biological mother, named Aida, living in Canada, and she had been searching for him for years. Aida and Izak got in touch and started a relationship. Izak was eager to learn more about his biological father, but Aida just shook him off and said, "Your father was a good man, he died in the war. That's all you need to know."

In 2015, Izak chaperoned his granddaughter on a school trip to the concentration camps in Poland. Upon returning to Israel, he found himself emotionally overwhelmed and decided to proactively seek answers about his past. He tracked down his adoption files and made a life-changing discovery: his father had been alive after the war, and had reportedly divorced his mother.

Seeking answers, Izak located his birth certificate through the ITS archives at Bad Arolsen in Germany. He was shocked to discover another birth certificate; one of a brother he never knew existed.

This brother had been sent to Canada after the war, but he had not emigrated with his parents. Each family member left the displaced persons camp separately, at a different date over a four-year period.

Only now does Izak realize that at different times in his life, many of his most

trusted family members have lied to him. First, his foster parents. Then, his biological mother and even his foster siblings - all knew he had a biological brother but kept it secret.

From Izak's Aryan appearance, everyone assumed he might have been the product of a relationship between his mother and a German man. Was this man a Nazi? An SS officer? What was the nature of their relationship? Is it possible that Izak's mother was raped during the war or had an illicit affair within a concentration camp?

THE FILM

Izak is the uncle of Israeli filmmakers and brothers, Shaul and Alon Schwarz. He joined their family decades ago when he married his childhood sweetheart, Racheli (Shaul and Alon's aunt). The family has always accepted Izak as a loving and cherished member, no different than any other despite his undeniable physical differences: Izak is 6'5" tall, blonde and blue-eyed, with a strapping, muscular build – a stark physical contrast to the average Israeli Jew and the rest of Izak's family. Izak and Racheli started a family of their own and have three children and eight grandchildren.

As a child, Alon was told that Izak had a blind brother but was warned that this was a secret, and he was never to tell anyone. Alon kept the secret for 35 years until Izak told him about his own findings. After learning about Izak's discoveries, Alon decided to do all he could to locate Izak's brother. Through Alon's research and the discoveries of a British genealogist, Izak's long-lost brother— an eccentric and inspirational blind man and former Paralympic athlete named Shep Shell – has been found. Shep lives in Winnipeg, Canada. Like Izak, Shep has lived most of his life unaware that he had a biological brother and a living mother. The film follows Izak as he travels to meet his long lost brother for the first time. Then, Izak takes Shep with him to meet their mother for the first time after 68 years.

While Aida acknowledges Shep as her son upon meeting him, she does not shed any more light on the mystery of why she left him and why she never told Izak about Shep, but instead raises more questions about their past. Why has the truth about Izak's and Shep's past been kept from them their entire life? Why have those closest to them continued to lie and cover up the truth, even as they

approach 70 years of age? What were the circumstances surrounding their births? Who was Izak's real father?

As the brothers try to find answers about their mysterious past, we dive into the life stories of people after liberation. The film offers a rare glimpse into the displaced persons camps in post WWII Germany, showing the vibrant and often wild social life that flourished among the young survivors. We discover a community that was rebound from the ashes, and lived life to the fullest, complete with parties, dancing, and sex. In the first year after liberation, of approximately 6000 single adult survivors at Bergen Belsen DP Camp, 1300 babies were born—a world record in childbirth.

On the way to visit his mother once again, Shep and the film crew stopped at a Jewish archive in Montreal. They found a certificate for Aida that was created several months after she first arrived in Canada in 1949. On the back of the card a hand written note said she was 7 months pregnant and looking to place her child. Given the fact that Izak was born in 1945, and Shep in 1946, we now know that there was another sibling.

It is the profound personal discoveries that Izak and Shep make along the way that set this documentary apart from any family history story ever told on screen. From the first moments of filming in early November 2013, Shaul and Alon witnessed not only the reunion of a family after 7 decades, but also the painful reconciliation of one's identity that goes hand-in-hand with uncovering a difficult and secretive past. The many question marks surrounding the plot make this film a wild journey through time, to periods when the concepts of love, life, and death were shaken and rebuilt, resulting in a journey of observing human nature, the desperate need to survive, rekindle passion, and create a new life and new family.

CREW BIOS

Alon Schwarz, Director and Producer

Alon is an Israeli filmmaker and entrepreneur. He began working as a video editor in Israel ten years ago. In 2013, Alon joined his brother Shaul as scriptwriter and editorial consultant for the film *Narco Cultura*, which premiered at Sundance in 2013 and was theatrically distributed in the United States, Mexico and Japan.

Shaul Schwarz, Co-Director and DP

Shaul Schwarz is an Israeli documentary film director, cinematographer and award-winning photojournalist. His feature-length documentary *Narco Cultura* premiered at Sundance in 2013 and screened at film festivals worldwide including The Berlin International Film Festival and Hot Docs. He has shot and directed content for TNT, The Discovery Channel, The History Channel, and CNN. He is also a regular photographic contributor to *TIME Magazine* and *National Geographic*. Schwarz is based in Brooklyn, New York and is currently producing short film content for online publications while developing his third feature-length documentary. He is the founder of Reel Peak Films.

Halil Efrat, Editor

- 2013** ALBUM 61 (Director)
- 2011** CONNECTED (Editor, documentary TV series)
- 2010** BIG BROTHER (Director)
- 2010** 77 STEPS (Editor)
- 2010** RED BAND (Editor)
- 2006** SOUVENIRS (Co-director, editor)
- 2006** SWEET MUD (Editor)

Barak Heymann, Executive Producer

Barak Heymann has been directing and producing documentaries for TV and cinema for a decade. Barak's and Tomer's independent film company (Heymann Brothers Films) has produced over 20 documentaries, some as international co-productions. Their films have premiered in festivals worldwide, such as Berlinale, IDFA, DOKLEIPZIG, and Hot Docs, and have won prestigious awards.

Erik Winkler, German Co-Producer

Erik Winkler holds a Master degree in TV Production from the University of Manchester and a diploma in film directing from the Academy of Media Arts Cologne. As a producer for LICHTBLICK Film Cologne from 2003 until 2007, he worked on several successful documentaries such as *The Champagne Spy* and *Massacre*. In 2008, he co-founded HUPE Film with Andreas Brauer and Martin Roelly. Since then, the company has been responsible for successful films such as *Work Hard Play Hard*, *Dancing With Bellies*, *The Hitman's Solitude Before The Shot*, and international co-productions such as *15 Corners of The World* and *Boles*. Erik Winkler holds teaching assignments at the University Of Applied Sciences Mainz and the MHMK Cologne. He is chairman of the filmmaker's association Filmbüro NW and a member of the European Documentary Network (EDN).