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Shooting the truth

Swedish director Bo Persson talks about antisemitism and his new film 'Watching the Moon at Night' **By Mordechai Beck**

"THE INFAMOUS Munich massacre in 1972, in which 11 Israeli Olympic sportsmen were killed, was the first time in Europe after World War II in which an international terrorist attack was a blatant act of antisemitism." Thus claims Bo Persson, a Swedish-born documentary filmmaker, on a recent visit to Israel.

"I'm not saying that this is always the case, but these two manifestations of fanaticism often converge. Maybe it's not always obvious. But whether we are talking about right-wing or left-wing terrorism, there is often an element of antisemitism under the surface. The IRA or the Red Army in Germany, for example, had antisemitic elements integral to their outlook. These were the issues we wanted to explore in 'Watching the Moon at Night,' which I made with co-director Joanna Helander. Moreover, we wanted to give an equal platform to Jewish, Muslim and Christian victims of terrorism," Persson tells The Jerusalem Report.

'Watching the Moon at Night' is currently being screened around Europe, as well as in Israel and the US. The title is an English translation of a poem by Polish Nobel prize-winning poet Wislawa Szymborska, which talks about terrorists at night preparing to commit an act of terrorism the following day.

"We wanted to open the film with a poem to show that it is not a reportage documentary, it is more a cinematic essay that asks questions but doesn't provide simple answers. Hopefully, it will inspire the audience to think."

Like many controversial films it was not



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Bo Persson

easy to make: "It took about five years to produce," Persson says. "The film was financed by the Swedish Film Institute, Swedish Public TV, a regional Film Fund, and by our own company. Then, as it was ready for screening, Swedish TV said they would not show it. They never gave an official reason. If they would explain their way of thinking, it would be obvious that they were breaking the rules of Swedish Public TV. A few 'political commissars' are in charge of the documentary department and it was they who prevented the airing of the film. However, journalists from the major national newspapers are defending the film against what they see as censorship. I didn't say it. They said it.

"These gatekeepers of Swedish TV cannot stomach certain things in the film, pri-

marily that we include Israeli civilian victims of terrorism," continues Persson. "We could show victims of terrorism all over the world, but with Israeli victims it's another story. On this issue, these gentleman seem to have a similar view to that of Hamas, which is to say that all citizens of Israel are legitimate targets. Therefore, there are no 'victims of terrorism' in Israel. It's crazy. If I would not have included Arnold Roth (an Israeli lawyer whose daughter was murdered by terrorists and who appears in the film), it would have been much easier. Or Dan Alon, one of the Israeli athletes who survived the 1972 Munich massacre."

According to Persson, antisemitism isn't the only reason the film has met with resistance. "There are three Muslims in the film, but they are sharp critics of Islamist terrorism: Cherifa Khedar from Algeria, whose brother and sister were murdered, Ramin Jahanbegloo from Iran who challenged [former Iranian president Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad because of the latter's Holocaust denial, and Dr. Zuhdi Jasser with a background from Syria who says that the mosque must be separated from the state," he explains.

"The so-called left wing, but uneducated people, have an apparent problem with these dissidents within the global Muslim community instead of embracing the fact that there are articulate and courageous dissidents in the global Muslim community who are for human rights."

'Watching the Moon at Night' was recently screened at both the Tel Aviv and Jerusalem cinematheques.

Joanna Helander (co-director), Wojciech Staron (Director of photography), Henry Abramovitch (psychologist in Jerusalem, participant in the film)



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“The Swedish ambassador attended the showing in Tel Aviv and when interviewed afterward, he praised our film,” says Persson. “He was upset that Swedish TV doesn’t show it. I assume this reflects that some Swedish diplomats are not pleased with the ongoing conflict between the Swedish government and Israel.

“More than 1,500 people have now signed a petition, including members of the Swedish parliament, members of the Swedish Nobel Committee and leading scholars in Swedish and foreign universities, protesting against the censorship of the film. The director of Swedish TV preferred not to respond.”

Persson, however, is not fazed: “We will win,” he declares. “Many Swedes are afraid not to be politically correct. To be PC in Sweden today is to believe that Israel is the biggest problem in the world. What happens in the Congo or Darfur etc. is much less of a problem.

“Well, it’s important to stand firm and to disagree with this demonization of Israel.”

THIS IS not the first time Persson has clashed with the establishment in his own country. “I made another film in the early 1990s called ‘Returning.’ It’s about photographer Joanna Helander who grew up in Poland and was imprisoned there in 1968. Afterward, she emigrated to Sweden. She didn’t know what had happened to her Jewish relatives during the Holocaust because her father never spoke about it. Later she wrote a book about how her father survived in Katowice and at what price. The film was

inspired by her many journeys back to Poland, and the reasons why she left. The film was shown here at the Jerusalem Film Festival in 1994,” he says.

“In connection with the theatrical release of the film, we organized a conference in Stockholm about the conspiracy of silence in 1941 and 1942 in Sweden and the West about the news of the ongoing Holocaust. The information was available to governments and the media from the summer of 1942 for everyone who wanted to know. The first official protests came from members of the Polish government-in-exile, especially Szmuel Zygielbojm, leader of Bund, in June 1942. It then took months for the American administration to publicly address the issue. In ‘The New York Times’ the news appeared on the back pages,” he explains.

“The number one specialist on this topic is Walter Laqueur, who is an important voice in ‘Watching the Moon at Night.’ Back in 1994, we invited him to Sweden to lecture on how the truth about the Holocaust was suppressed in the West from 1941-42. I told Walter that I knew that he was born in Breslau, Silesia and that he had escaped Germany in 1938, the day before Kristallnacht. He then mentioned that his father’s family was from a small town called Staedtli, not far from Breslau. He was astonished that I had

filmed at the Jewish cemetery there. ‘Why did you go such a godforsaken place?’ he asked. I told him that Joanna’s family, Schifftan, used to live there. ‘Amazing, it means we are relatives!’ he says. That’s how we met,” he recounts.

“Over the past 25 years, he has become a good friend and also my mentor in contemporary history. We met in Washington, DC, London, Berlin, Breslau, and Jerusalem.”

Laqueur, who will be 97 this year, has a rather pessimistic outlook on things. He says that the motivation for wishful thinking is so strong, even during the Holocaust – even among Jewish organizations – people did not want to believe the lethal threats, that the worst could happen.

Similarly, Persson is very critical about his native country for never coming clean about its past. “The younger generation has been taught the myth that Sweden was neutral during the war and that neutrality is a virtue. This is, of course, not true. Swedish industry exported to the Nazi war machine until the end of the war. Alleged ‘neutrality’ is a crime when people are being murdered. Part of the present anti-Israeli dimension is connected with the suppressed guilt from the Second World War and the fact that Sweden never dealt with this in public trials. Twenty-five years ago, when a new generation of politicians arose, I had hopes that

Photo from "Watching the Moon at Night", from a memorial in Paris dedicated to victims of terrorism.



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things would change in Sweden – which in other respects, is a liberal, open society. But I was soon disillusioned.”

Persson backs up his observations by citing his own film. “We included a segment of one of the leaders of Hamas openly declaring that he was inspired by the example of European antisemitism. According to the EU, after all, Hamas is a terrorist organization. People in Sweden deduce from this that the PA is the angel, which is, of course, not true. The Swedish government is giving large sums of money to the PA – not that this money is going to the Palestinian people. But my government doesn't want to look too closely at what happens to the money.”

Persson notes that even otherwise well-informed people in Scandinavia have no idea about the ban on free journalism among the Palestinians. “When I ask them whether they know that Hamas and the PA persecute bloggers, journalists, trade union leaders, etc., they say to me: ‘You are spending too much time in Israel’ instead of saying, ‘I didn't know that,’ they will have an emotional outburst.

“The biggest Swedish newspaper, ‘Aftonbladet,’ promoted the fake story of the Israeli IDF harvesting organs of Palestinians,” he continues. “The Swedish ambassador at the time in Tel Aviv was so embarrassed that she wrote on the website of the embassy that she was very upset about the ‘Aftonbladet’ article. What happened? Her remarks were removed. It sounds like science fiction, but it's true.

“There are many Muslims in Sweden but this, of course, is not a homogeneous group. Some of them – many from Iran, many Kurds – are very much against political Islam. Many from Iran ran away from the ayatollahs. On the other hand, some 3,400 Swedish citizens, maybe more, went to fight with the Islamic State. Many of them have come back to Sweden. Politicians talk about how to ‘re-assimilate’ them into society. In my opinion, they should be imprisoned and

put on trial. But it's not happening,” says Persson.

“It is an inconvenient truth that Sweden has been an attractive base for Islamist networks, both from al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab. According to the Swedish police, there has been a ten-fold increase in the number of jihadists in Sweden between 2010 and 2017.”

FROM THE very start, Persson has fought for transparency. In another era, he would be called, perhaps, a rootless cosmopolitan, a man much given to traveling and shedding a critical eye on the world he is obliged to inhabit. He has seen and recorded much of what interests him in documentary movies.

Though he was brought up in Sweden, where he was born in 1953, he seemed destined to travel. “When I was 17, I went on a one-year scholarship to the States as an exchange student. It was the spring of 1971. The musical ‘Hair’ was running at the time and ‘One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest.’ My real passion at the time was for theater.

“Later I spent time in Paris and in Rome [with the artistically radical Living Theater group]. But I also started to travel to former Eastern Europe. During the last 40 years, I’ve been to Poland over 100 times. I have been and remain close to a Polish avant garde theater in Poznan called the Eighth Day Theater. Joanna Helander and I made

a feature-length documentary about the actors from this group – how they worked underground, how they lived in exile before returning to Poland 1989 after the democratization of the country,” he recounts.

“Today, it’s again a very strange situation in Poland. The year 2018 marks the 50th anniversary of the 1968 student revolt in Poland, but also of the government-sponsored antisemitic campaign. It is a very alarming situation with the present government. No one knows where it will end, but there is no reason to be optimistic.”

“Watching the Moon at Night’ has been screened in some 15 countries. In Washington, DC, the former director of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Walter Reich, requested it. In New York, it was shown at the Center for Jewish History and at the JCC on the Upper West Side. The European Parliament screened it a week after [Palestinian Authority] President [Mahmoud] Abbas gave a speech saying that the Israelis were “poisoning the water of the Palestinians.

“Our film is being screened in a time of troubles,” says Persson. “[Former UK chief] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks recently wrote that antisemitism was the most successful ideology of the 20th century. Communism and Nazism came and went but antisemitism prevailed. Unfortunately, many of my colleagues don’t want to see this.” ■