


TROPICAL LIFE



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TV Film Revives Heyday of Jewish Culture

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David Weintraub's trek into the past began inauspiciously enough. His great aunt, poet Dora Teitelboim, asked for help establishing a foundation to promote Yiddish culture. The newly minted lawyer agreed.

"I thought my role was to help found it," Weintraub recalls. "Then once it was off the ground I'd be done."

That was in 1992, and, of course, he was wrong. Slowly, subtly, the language and customs that had been an essential part of his Brooklyn childhood began to call him home. As executive director of the Dora Teitelboim Center for Yiddish Culture, Weintraub spent more and more of his time on foundation business -- publishing books,

researching and setting up exhibits -- only to discover that much of the culture the center had pledged to promote and protect was being forgotten as his grandparents' generation faded away.

So the Yiddish aficionado who had never tried his hand behind a camera decided to make a film. *Where Neon Goes to Die* airs at 6 tonight on WPBT-PBS 2. A poignant love letter to the heyday of Yiddishland on South Beach, the documentary chronicles an ethnic vitality that thrived for six decades in a part of town now better known for its glamorous nightlife and people.



JARED LAZURUS

FILMMAKERS' VIEW: In the '50s and '60s, "Yiddish culture underwent a revival in Miami Beach," says David Weintraub. "It was like the Catskills coming south."

RECONNECTING

"This wasn't Varicose Beach or where people came to die," Weintraub says from his home near Charlotte, N.C. "People came here to live, to reconnect with the old country, with who they were and where they came from."

Miami Beach, he says, was "the shtetl by the sea."

Making the film, however, was no easy matter. In fact, Weintraub, who is in his 40s, had originally planned a traveling exhibit funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. But he discovered few tangible items, and almost nothing in the archives of Miami Beach. "In all this stuff they had, there was only one photo but lots and lots of cheesecake and Jackie Gleason."

Undaunted,
Weintraub, whose
grandparents had
wintered on the

JEWISH CULTURE, FROM 1M

Beach, placed ads in newspapers, delved into newspaper and oral-history archives and eventually found a trove of information in New York. Combining rare footage and interviews with members of the Yiddish stage, he traces the history of a community born in the 1920s, fed by retirees and World War II veterans in the '50s, then prematurely and unintentionally destroyed by South Beach's wave of Art Deco restoration that forced out the elderly who could not afford the newly gentrified

In the peak 1950s and '60s, Miami Beach was home to eight Yiddish radio stations, six Yiddish theaters, 15 chapters of the Workmen's Circle (a Yiddish cultural institution) and countless informal musical groups that often performed at Lummus Park on Ocean Drive. During that same period, Miami's Jewish population swelled to more than 140,000, almost 10 times more than what it had been before the war.

A REVIVAL

BACK IN THE DAY: In 1977, vaudeville was alive and well at the now-defunct Cinema Theatre at 1235 Washington Ave., Miami Beach.

DAVID GODLIS

south."

Yet, Jews also faced widespread prejudice. Restricted covenants barred them from certain apartments and hotels. One ad: *Every room with a view, without a Jew.*

"In doing the research, I realized that the story was also about the loss of this community," says Weintraub, who lived in Miami for about 10 years when he was younger. "What happened to Yiddishland in South Beach happened to the culture of Overtown when I-95 was built."

His documentary, he says, "transcends a particular place and time and people. It's about the loss of culture and culturenesia, and maybe, too, a call to preserve the last vestiges of history."

Yiddish culture is not the only ethnic legacy that thrived in fertile semi-tropical soil only to be subsumed by the next big thing. He cites the disappearance of the ancient Calusa Indians whose fishing settlements dominated the coasts and waterways of South Florida before the Spanish explorers arrived and the demise of Miami's Overtown as a hub of black culture. In interviews and on film, Weintraub laments "the development and the mall-ification of America that creates pretty facades for tourists but does nothing to preserve cultural milestones."



HARD QUESTIONS

He hopes viewers
come away from the
documentary asking
hard questions about
what they really want
in their
neighborhoods.

"What's more
important to us?" he
asks. ``Where and
how do we want to
live? How do we
reclaim our cultural
turf? I hope [the film]
helps us understand
what we've lost."