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# 'History doesn't have to be boring'

By Tali Heruti-Sover

Tags: Simcha Jacobovici

"There he is. That's him," a loud whisper could be heard among a group of tourists standing at the edge of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in East Jerusalem. Simcha Jacobovici, tall and smiling, adjusts the colorful skullcap on his head and hugs one of the women who asks to have her picture taken with him. "I've seen all your programs," she tells him. Several tourists from Italy, Spain and Britain approach Jacobovici, along with quite a few Israelis, too.

During the past two years, Jacobovici, 54, a Canadian- Israeli producer and director of documentary films, has achieved fame. His face has become familiar to people the world over as a result of the series of films he has produced, and mostly because of the very popular "Naked Archaeologist" TV series, which he produced in Canada and is locally broadcast on Channel 8.

"History doesn't have to be boring," says the man who has done for archaeology what Jamie Oliver, the Naked Chef, has done for cooking. "My films are a kind of Hollywood and the series is rock 'n' roll."

Jacobovici's personality reflects many contradictions: He is a religious Jew who does research on Jesus; he is an idealist who wants to save the world, but at the same time, he is also a tough businessman. Plus he is a very famous creative artist and a very approachable person. He was born in Israel to parents who had survived the Holocaust and immigrated from Romania. The family settled in the center of the country.

When he was still a child, his mother became seriously ill. "My whole childhood

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went by between those two periods," he relates. "It looked like a series of heart attacks that kept happening, a lot of ambulances came to the house and there were many hospitalizations. For years I lived with the feeling that I was liable to lose her at any moment."

The doctors had only one recommendation for the family: to leave the humidity and heat of Israel and move to a different climate. "This was tragic," Jacobovici says. "They had just arrived in Israel and had begun to settle down after having lost everything in the Holocaust, and once more they had to leave and start all over again." The destination was Canada - "a quiet and cold democracy," as he defines it.

Their new home's distance from Israel, forced on the Jacobovics, did not affect their Zionism. After completing his B.A. studies in philosophy and political science at McGill University in Montreal, Jacobovici returned to Israel and enlisted in the Israel Defense Forces' Artillery Corps, "so I would have something to do in the next war." When he returned to Canada to do his master's degree at the University of Toronto, he was elected chairman of the North American Jewish Student Alliance. "Back then, we controlled the campuses," he says. "Nowadays the anti-Zionists are in control."

It was the late 1970s, a very stormy period on Canadian campuses. There were demonstrations against the Iron Curtain and calls for freeing Soviet Jewry on the one hand, and extensive fundraising for Israel, which had suffered a harsh blow in the 1973 war, on the other. Slowly, and somewhat overshadowed by these events, news on the situation of Ethiopian Jewry also began trickling in.

"The government of Israel didn't take any interest in them," Jacobovici remembers. "I couldn't understand that: Black Jews are being killed, raped and harmed, yet the Jewish People is remaining silent."

He decided to act, but the ideology of the Student Alliance did not support him. "The message was to 'go raise money and donate it to Israel,'" he relates. "The Jewish community suppressed us. No one wanted to hear difficult questions."

### The Mossad confiscates

Jacobovici decided he would not keep quiet. Parallel to his political activity, he became an investigative journalist, and in 1980 and 1981, published three articles in The New York Times about the situation of Ethiopian Jews. He says he wanted to spread a message "that didn't interest anyone, because Africa is far away."

In 1981 he borrowed a book on documentary filmmaking, raised a few thousand dollars and set out with a crew to the refugee camps in Sudan and Ethiopia. During the trip, he suffered from malaria, was bitten by a poisonous spider and nearly lost a leg - but he returned to Israel with dozens of hours of footage that documented the difficult situation of the Jews in Africa.

At the airport, several Mossad agents were waiting for him. "Just a few weeks earlier I had taken out a book of basic instructions for filming and all of a sudden I'm sitting in the Prime Minister's Office, shivering with malaria, facing the head of the Mossad who is explaining to me that he is confiscating the material I had filmed because I am doing damage to Israel."

The material was released after Jacobovici threatened to tell an international news conference about the confiscation, and it later became a film that won an honorable mention in a pre-Academy Award ceremony in 1985. According to The Economist, the film footage was one of the factors that prompted Israel to

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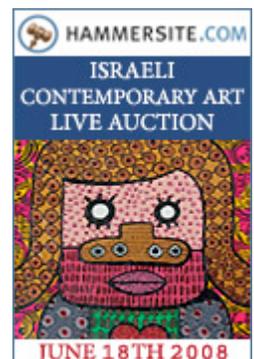
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decide to bring over the Ethiopian Jews.

"I realized how influential a documentary film could be," says Jacobovici. "Without meaning to, I had discovered a field characterized by art, interest and also a real ability to move things. I realized that I had found my profession."

A meeting with a friend from university, a frustrated lawyer, led to the establishment of the Associated Producers production company in 1984 in Toronto. "We were young, we had no significant expenses and we ate a lot of pizza. It was a modest start," Jacobovici recalls. The business model was simple and boutique-like: one quality film a year that would be based on investigative journalism and would deal with a social issue. "We chose topics that interested us and that we thought were important. Money was not the goal then. We wanted to influence people and build a brand."

The company began to acquire a reputation, but as in the case of other documentary producers, the commercial networks treated it like a stepchild that has to fight for its place. But the Associated Producers had a breakthrough at the end of the 1980s.

"Until then, the market was made up of a number of large networks," Jacobovici explains, "a kind of monopoly. But with the advent of cable television at the end of the 1980s, suddenly there was a sea of possibilities. Everyone was looking for content and turned to whomever could provide it."

Jacobovici's first significant film was "Deadly Currents." For six months he followed the first intifada and was one of the few people in the world who were allowed to film the questioning of a collaborator. In 1996, Associated Producers won the Emmy Award in the category of investigative journalism for a film about the Ebola epidemic in Africa. A year later the company picked up another Emmy for a film about trafficking in children in India. In between, the company's films won prizes at various festivals.

Why have you chosen to film mostly in dangerous places?

Jacobovici: "I don't have a death wish. It all starts with repairing the world, from the very natural feeling that I need to do this because it interests me, a feeling that creates a desire to go, film and come home safely."

### **Skullcap categorization**

At the beginning of the 1990s, Jacobovici underwent a personal change when he embarked on a slow process of becoming religiously observant. Four years went by before he started wearing a skullcap and a tallit (prayer shawl), but he is not prepared to be categorized in any way.

"That's our problem, the outfit," he says. "I wear a large and colorful skullcap so as not to belong to any stream. What difference does it make what kind of skullcap I wear? The important thing is the person underneath."

Meanwhile, after receiving two Emmys, the reputation of Associated Producers had become firmly established. "We were stars," says Jacobovici, "but the money wasn't coming in. According to our business model, we wouldn't work for anyone - the film was always ours and the money for it would be raised in advance, we wouldn't spend out-of-pocket. In actuality, we often invested large sums in order to complete budgets and even though the films - we were already making three a year - were widely distributed, sometimes we made a profit but we often took a loss. If we completed a film with the books balanced, we considered that to be a financial success."

The production of a documentary film resembles a marathon, he explains:

"When they tell me that something has to be ready in 18 months, I feel pressured. In our terms that's very soon." The cost ranges between \$100,000 for a low-budget production to millions of dollars. The production of "The Lost Tomb of Jesus," for example, cost \$4 million and took about three years.

"Formulating the idea usually takes up the least amount of time," relates the producer. "The really hard part is raising the money." It usually comes from international funds, various broadcast organizations (Yes Docu, for example), government subsidies and sometimes even private individuals. It is necessary to wait at least six months and sometimes even as much as a few years from the moment a funding request has been made until an answer is received. Since the production of a film can not get under way without an ensured budget, production companies have to work on a large number of projects at the same time.

Currently Jacobovici and his staff are working on 30 projects, which will translate into 28 screen hours. "It's a lot of work," he admits, "but there's no alternative."

The prolonged work process also affects the cash flow. The profits of a production company can come from two sources: The first is a surplus of funds, left over at the end of a production, and the second is from sales and distribution, after the film is completed and screened. Of course, there is always the danger that the money that has been raised will not cover the entire process. Another risk is that the various broadcast and distribution organizations will not be interested in the film in the end, and that it will not sell. These risks necessitate cautious financial management and attention to expenditures over time. One of the ways to control expenses is to maintain a particularly small permanent staff (relative to the company's cash flow) and to hire additional employees for project-work only. In this way the company avoids spending a lot of money on paying salaries, but the flip side is that good manpower is not always available when needed.

Jacobovici's financial salvation has come from TV stations. "The mid-1990s saw the development of departments that dealt with reality shows, and they were looking for people who knew how to produce documentaries with a twist. The British Granada network approached us with a proposal to collaborate: They were the rich daddy and we were the hippies who came from outside the establishment."

And the collaboration was successful?

"At first, yes. Suddenly we had lots of money and we were able to do a lot of things. All at once we became a big office with lots of employees and we drove around in big cars, we whooped it up at parties in Cannes and were invited onto luxurious yachts. But it's like a square who marries a hippie girl. At first he is crazy about her long hair and her sandals, but then they start to get on each other's nerves.

"They made commercial demands and were prepared to pay for them, but after a while we started to feel uncomfortable. We had been a quality boutique and turned into a production line in a factory."

Jacobovici wanted to return to independent production, but found it almost impossible. "I was already married and a father, money was coming in and the connections in the industry had become stronger. We convinced ourselves that this was good," he recalls. "People told us that the documentary was passe, that reality is the future, that we were lucky to have obtained an excellent umbrella like that, and I started to think so, too. After three years I felt that I had had enough. My partner, with whom I'd been for 15 years, was in fact happy [with the arrangement] and the chemistry between us was spoiled. We

split up."

The difficult split, in 2003, set Jacobovici on a different path. He started making films and series about history and archaeology because he wanted to prove that "these fields have value and they can obtain high ratings if you know how to realize them." Among his most famous films, all of which synthesize entertainment and documentary, is the series that proves that the Exodus from Egypt could have been a real event, "The Naked Archaeologist," and a very personal film called "Charging the Rhino," which will be broadcast on Channel 8 in the near future.

In the most controversial of his films, "The Lost Tomb of Jesus," Jacobovici reveals the burial cave of Jesus (who, according to Christian tradition, ascended to heaven) in Jerusalem. The film has been broadcast on hundreds of television stations the world over, and has generated numerous reactions: There were demonstrations against it in Chile, the film was banned in Italy, the British bought it for \$400,000 but didn't broadcast it and The Discovery Channel, which did air it, suffered threats from Christian extremists. Even today, Jacobovici is attacked by archaeologists and experts. But this doesn't bother him.

How can a religious Jew with a skullcap and tallit make a film about Jesus?

"I'm often asked about that, but I don't see any contradiction. Unlike Jews who say 'he is theirs,' I know that he is one of us."

Because of the content with which he deals, he gained a personal friend and new executive producer: James Cameron, who, among other things, directed the box office hit "Titanic."

"One of the experts on the film about the Exodus from Egypt was a friend of Cameron's and he introduced me to him," Jacobovici explains. "I think he liked me because I didn't want anything from him when we met - unlike many others. Like me, he loves history and archaeology and we have a shared passion. His involvement in the production of the films and the fact that he appears as the moderator in the film about the Exodus are natural developments."

### **On stage**

About three years ago, Jacobovici underwent another big change. After having been the producer behind the scenes, he appeared on screen and started to moderate the programs he produces. "I discovered that I like to fool around and go wild in front of the camera, to laugh a bit with the experts, to ask questions that don't usually get asked. The fact that my face has become familiar and that people stop me in the street to have their pictures taken with me makes me smile, but that isn't why I am there. Now we are filming the second season and after that I'll go back to working behind the scenes."

Recently, he has come to perceive his work differently. "I've realized that I have to grow, to become a real businessman and an executive. Before I didn't really think about money, but rather about films. Now, as the father of five children, I realize that there is no alternative but to start managing the company seriously, to monitor the cash flow and to know how much we are spending on coffee and parking. These things don't manage themselves and I am the person who has to be in control."

His process of "growing up" has included a move to Israel. Jacobovici, who speaks excellent Hebrew, went back and forth between Canada and Israel most of the time until he came here with his family eight months ago, became accredited as a foreign journalist, and rented a house in Ra'anana.

"We gave it a year," he says, "and after two months we held a family council and we decided that this is it. We are here. At present I am in the stages of setting up an Israeli company that will work with the company in Canada and make joint productions."

Why now of all times?

"Because I had to be established enough in the world, so as not to be dependent on the local industry and not to step on anyone's toes. My business will not rise or fall if Channel 1 or 2 doesn't buy a film of mine, because I work in the international market. And the technology helps, too, because it allows me to be here and to manage a company overseas. From a personal perspective, I wanted my children to grow up here because, unlike most of our leaders, I believe in the Zionist project. I feel completely at home here."

After 30 years of international production, fame, and with good friends like James Cameron, how much are you in fact worth now: millions, tens of millions, hundreds of millions?

"This is a question that only gets asked in Israel."

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