The Silicon Valley Jewish Film Festival will screen the 2017 documentary “Remember Baghdad” on Oct. 30, with JIMENA serving as a co-sponsor. JIMENA (Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa) was founded in 2001 by Gina Waldman, a Jew from Libya, and her Egyptian friend, the late Joseph Wahed. The S.F.-based nonprofit’s core mission is to bear witness to the suffering of Jewish refugees from Arab lands. The SVJFF recently sat down with Waldman to talk about the film, which follows the lives of four Iraqi Jewish families.

SVJFF: Can you tell us a bit of your personal story?

Gina Waldman: For each war that took place between Arab countries and Israel, there was a huge exodus of refugees. During the Six-Day War in 1967, most Jews had to go into hiding, including my family in Libya. My British boss hid me in a garage for over a month, until the government proclaimed that we had to be expelled from the country, with $20 in pocket, one suitcase per person and a one-way exit visa … We landed in Malta, continued to Rome and were assisted by HIAS (then known as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) … My core family and I stayed in Rome for two years; other family members immigrated to Israel. We were all split up. At 21, I made the difficult decision to move to the U.S. alone.

How did you come to co-found JIMENA?

It was 9/11 that really propelled me. There was talk about how people want to blow up planes and fly them into buildings out of desperation. I realized that it wasn’t about being desperate, but rather about a culture of hatred against the Jews of Arab countries that had been perpetuated for decades. As a Libyan Jew, I was a target of this hatred, too. I wanted to speak against intolerance, specifically in Muslim society. Issues and historical narratives of Jews from other countries [besides the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe] were not being adequately addressed, as very little was known.

What has JIMENA accomplished that you’re particularly proud of?

One thing is how we’ve put our story into the narrative of the Middle East. Most people familiar with the refugee issue during that time would refer only to Palestinian refugees, ignoring the fact that we Jews also have a narrative. Another thing is that we’ve pushed the Israeli government, which had
completely neglected our narrative because they didn't see the importance of it. JIMENA uses education to create an awareness of these narratives.

What drew JIMENA to co-sponsor “Remember Baghdad”?

Movies are an effective educational tool. It's important for the public to see how Jews lived in countries besides Poland or Russia, and how they co-existed in some of them. Another reason is that I'm totally sympathetic to some of the narratives (in the film). The lifestyle of the Iraqi Jews back then is important for viewers to see.

Edwin Shuker, the protagonist in “Remember Baghdad,” wanted to buy property in Baghdad to hang onto that last remnant of his family history. I could relate to how nostalgic he was about his background and growing up in Iraq. But realistically speaking, Jews could not live in Iraq today. Anti-Semitism is even stronger today in the Arab countries than it was when Jews were living there. But while JIMENA respects the hopes and aspirations of (individual) refugees, as an institution we are committed to representing the greater interests of Jewish refugees from Arab countries. Of the 1 million Jews who fled or were ethnically cleansed from the region, 650,000 settled in Israel and are legally barred from entering the countries that exiled them, including Iraq. We confidently believe the vast majority of Jewish refugees and their descendants have no interest in returning to countries that violated their basic human rights and confiscated their assets and communal property as they fled or were expelled. Edwin is a friend of JIMENA and we appreciate his advocacy; however, we view his desire for Iraqi Jews to buy property in Iraq as an anomaly opinion that we don't endorse.

What was especially meaningful for you in the film? What do you think makes it significant today?

The part about identity. Jews from the Arab countries identify very strongly with their own tradition and culture. In the film, it's when you see David Dangoor looking through the photo album at the wonderful, smiling faces of people who loved living in the community where they lived. There was a sense of belonging. In countries where Jews were oppressed, Jews stuck together in their insular communities. We developed strong friendships and bonds, embracing one another with love and affection. We cared for and helped one another. This is an innate part of how I grew up.

The film also portrays very sad moments. People share the anguish of the Farhud, or pogrom, which also happened in Libya. I think it was 1945 when people in Libya took to the streets. People were murdered. My father volunteered to bury the severed bodies of his friends. This traumatized him for the rest of his life. My mother ran from rooftop to rooftop until she was saved by a Christian woman who hid her in her house. All this came back to me
when watching the film. Righteous Arabs who saved the lives of Jews should not be overlooked.

“Remember Baghdad” 6:30 p.m. Oct. 30 in the Silicon Valley Jewish Film Festival. 69 minutes. In English, Arabic and Hebrew with English subtitles. Followed by a panel discussion with former State Department adviser Abraham D. Sofaer and Baghdad natives Jamil Ezra and Aaron Matityahu. At AMC Saratoga 14, 700 El Paseo de Saratoga, San Jose. $12-$14. svjff.org

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