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AND THEY CALL THIS STUDIO MORIAH

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LOS ANGELES (AP) -- One Hollywood film studio has commanded only A-list talent since its inception - Elizabeth Taylor, Morgan Freeman, Sandra Bullock, Michael Douglas, Nicole Kidman - and they all worked for free. What kind of studio head has such pull? It's Rabbi Marvin Hier, the mini-mogul of Moriah Films, the movie division of the Simon Wiesenthal Center.



AP Photo/Nimrod Erez

Founded by Hier in 1981, Moriah Films has won two Academy Awards for its historical documentaries. Its latest effort, "The Prime Ministers: The Pioneers," featuring the voices of Bullock and Christoph Waltz, opens Wednesday

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in Los Angeles and expands to more cities next month.

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"We just finished our 13th film, and every top name in Hollywood that has recorded - and it's an A list - has done it as a public service," Hier said during an interview at his office at the Wiesenthal Center. "We've never paid any one of them. That was a tradition set (early on) and it was quite remarkable."



It all started with Elizabeth Taylor.

Hier established Moriah Films just a few years after opening the Wiesenthal Center in 1977. He was planning a slide show about the Holocaust when Fay Kanin, then president of the film academy, suggested he consider making a movie instead. U.S. Senator John Warner was involved with the Wiesenthal Center at the time - and was married to Taylor - so she became the narrator of its inaugural film "Genocide," which won the Oscar for documentary feature.



The dozen movies Moriah Films made since have attracted such stars as Kevin Costner, Whoopi Goldberg, Brooke Shields, Dustin Hoffman and Ben Kingsley.

"I think they understand the Simon Wiesenthal Center is an organization dedicated to perpetuating the memory of the Holocaust and also to fighting anti-Semitism and the campaigns in the world to discredit Israel, so they want to help in that manner," Hier said. "And I think it helps them that they're following a long tradition of what some of the greatest names in the entertainment community have done."

The Wiesenthal Center, a human-rights organization that provides Holocaust education and fights anti-Semitism, began its deep ties to Hollywood when

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Frank Sinatra and Taylor were on the original board of directors and made introductions throughout the entertainment industry. Today, movie moguls Jeffrey Katzenberg and Ron Meyer link the Wiesenthal Center to the Hollywood community.

Hier said it's important for the Wiesenthal Center to put Jewish history on film to reach worldwide audiences for years to come.

"We've been very lucky with all the celebrities, but the reason why the rabbi started this and saw the value of film early on wasn't to meet celebrities," said Richard Trank, who has directed nine Moriah movies. "We wanted to have a reach to all walks of life: young and old, Jews and non-Jews."

Hier has fond memories of watching Roy Rogers' pictures at New York's Palestine Theater as a boy and remains a movie fan today. But Moriah Films aims to do more than entertain.

"If you want to impact Jewish history, you have to say something to the world, the world out there," he said. "We need friends in the non-Jewish community. They need to know what happened to the Jews; that 6 million were murdered in the Nazi Holocaust, and even after 6 million were murdered in the Holocaust, Israel doesn't have a peaceful month."

That sense of social justice and fostering human understanding is also a draw for top talent, including those in "The Prime Ministers," which is based on a book by former speechwriter Yehuda Avner and focuses on Israeli prime ministers Golda Meir and Levi Eshkol and then-ambassador Yitzhak Rabin.

Bullock, who voices Meir in "The Prime Ministers," even mastered some Yiddish for the role.

"After that reading, she can come into any (synagogue) and people will really think she's Jewish!" Hier said.

Some stars, including Kingsley, Douglas and Waltz, have volunteered their talents more than once.

"I love narrating the material," Kingsley told The Associated Press. "It's enlightening, passionate, mature and deals with the ravages of the 20th century in a very articulate way that hopefully will reach the eyes and ears of young minds who will see the lessons of history and not ignore them."



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