

'ONLY AFTER I FINISHED MY BOOK DID I REALIZE THAT I WAS LIVING THE FIRST FIFTY YEARS OF ISRAELI HISTORY'

When the fly on the wall buzzes, it's wise to take note

Opening October 18 in New York, new documentary 'The Prime Ministers: The Pioneers,' part one of political insider Yehuda Avner's memoir, uses Hollywood stars to bring Israel's leaders to life

BY RENEE GHERT-ZAND | October 17, 2013, 4:17 pm |

Ambassador Yehuda Avner admits he broke the law. But no one's coming after the diplomat and advisor to four Israeli prime ministers for saving the confidential notes he took at all the high-level meetings he attended over the course of decades. On the contrary, many people are thanking him for stashing his detailed minutes away, because without them, [Avner](#) could not have written his well-received 2010 political memoir, "[The Prime Ministers](#)."

Now, there's a new documentary film based on the book. "[The Prime Ministers: The Pioneers](#)," directed by Richard Trank, opens in New York on October 18 and in Los Angeles on November 6.

It's the first in a series of two films. According to Trank, there was simply too much in Avner's book for only one movie. The first film deals with the premierships of Levi Eshkol and Golda Meir in the 1960s and early 1970s, and the second one (due out next summer) focuses on Yitzhak Rabin and Menachem Begin's tenures from 1974 to 1983.

Audiences need to keep in mind that the film, like Avner's book, is a memoir. It's history as it is told from Avner's personal perspective as someone close to prime ministers and other key political players during Israel's first decades. Those looking for an expansive, balanced historical account will be disappointed.

Trank provides some broader context to the events Avner recounts, but he's interested in how the 84-year-old remembers things. Given where Avner was standing, we're, of course, going to get Israel's side of things — and a bit from her allies'. And if you are looking for major insights about internal Israeli politics, this is not the film for you either. Avner, who joined Israel's foreign service in 1958, is a diplomat at heart, focusing on Israel's security and relations with the Americans and Europeans.

That being said, Trank nonetheless weaves an enjoyable and informative narrative with “The Prime Ministers.” Even Israeli political history buffs are sure to learn something new.

“Yehuda provides an amazing vantage point as an insider. He provides facts, but he gives his own interpretation of them,” says Trank, who heads up [Moriah Films](#), the film and video arm of the [Simon Wiesenthal Center](#). “But he still tried to be balanced in his approach. He was as fair to Begin as he was to Rabin.”

It was Rabbi Marvin Hier, dean and founder of the Wiesenthal Center, who suggested Trank take a look at Avner’s book. Having recently completed [a film on Theodor Herzl](#), the Los Angeles-based director read the memoir on a long plane trip in the summer of 2011.

“I loved it and thought it would be great to bring Avner’s stories to the screen, but I remember thinking that the film would be dependent on Avner’s being good on film,” he recalls.

Trank soon realized he had nothing to worry about. Avner, who still speaks with the accent of his native Manchester, England 66 years after his aliyah to Israel, is quite the storyteller.

“I’m actually a very soft spoken guy,” Avner modestly claims. “But I come across in the film as very passionate.” Avner gives all the credit to Trank, saying it was his skillful interviewing technique that prompted animated responses from him.

Trank pulled out of the book its most cinematic elements, and complimented Avner’s “talking head” narration filmed at Jerusalem’s King David Hotel with an impressive array of archival material.

“I had a great team that helped me with the archival research. We have relationships with archives in Israel and Europe, including some private ones,” the director shares. “It was important to us to include in the film stuff people hadn’t seen before.”

For instance, Trank dug up rare Israel Broadcasting Authority film footage of Golda Meir crying upon her being chosen prime minister by the Mapai party after Levi Eshkol’s sudden death.

“I had recounted that she cried, but I hadn’t remembered that this was caught on film,” Avner says. “The way Rick tailored the historical footage to the narrative was amazing and highly dramatic.”

There are many other lesser-seen visuals to excite history enthusiasts. Among them are: photos of Golda Meir, wearing an army-issue jacket, meeting privately with small groups of soldiers on the Golan Heights at the beginning of the Yom Kippur War; Harry Truman’s personal dedication to Avner inside the copy of his memoir he gave to the prime ministerial aide as a gift; photo proofs from a critical meeting between President Lyndon Johnson and Prime Minister Eshkol at LBJ’s Texas ranch in January 1968; and images of transcripts of conversations between President Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger that Trank found at the Nixon Library.

The film takes different approaches in presenting Eshkol and Meir.

“Yehuda’s responsibilities changed with each leader, and he had a different relationship with each of them,” Trank notes. But that does not account fully for the way in which the portion of the film about Eshkol has a different flavor than the one about Meir.

Although Trank aims to introduce audiences to Eshkol, one of the lesser known Israeli prime ministers (especially to people under the age of 55), he still emphasizes his political role over his personality.

“I chose to emphasize the situation in Israel at the time,” the filmmaker explains. “I wanted to highlight Eshkol’s role in changing the strategic relationship between Israel and the US.”

When it comes to Golda, we get more about her as a person, including details about her life before she rose to her party’s upper echelons and key roles in government. “I wanted to present Golda the woman and what she was up against — especially with the Yom Kippur War,” Trank says.

The director brings the historical players in the film to life not only visually, but also through their own words. At times, they are heard speaking in their own voices, but throughout much of the film, their words are declaimed by famous Hollywood actors. Sandra Bullock (Golda Meir), Michael Douglas (Yitzhak Rabin), Leonard Nimoy (Levi Eshkol), and Christoph Waltz all donated their time to the project.

Avner says he is very pleased with the film. Viewing it, he perceives all the high drama in the events he took part in and witnessed as a top political aide to four prime ministers, and as a diplomat in New York and Washington (he later served as Israel’s ambassador to England and Australia).

“I didn’t have such clarity of mind at the time,” Avner recalls of the times when the events were actually unfolding. “It was all rather stressful and I was immersed in the job I was there to do.”

“Only after I finished my book did I realize that I was living the first fifty years of Israeli history. I never set out to write a history. I set out to write a story to bring these people I worked for and with to life,” he offers.

“I’m told I have succeeded.”