

Love and persistence amid the Kassams

Laura Bialis's new documentary, 'Rock in the Red Zone,' tells the tale of the southern border town of Sderot

BY JESSICA STEINBERG | December 12, 2014, 8:54 am |

Laura Bialis found love, and the subject of her latest documentary, "Rock in the Red Zone," in Sderot, the southern town on Israel's periphery that has been barraged with Kassam rockets for the last 14 years.

It was during her fourth trip to Israel that the 41-year-old filmmaker, born and raised in Los Angeles, discovered the intensive music scene that has developed in Sderot over the course of many years. She also came across Sderock, a bomb shelter music studio, and its manager, musician Avi Vaknin.

Seven years later, "Rock in the Red Zone," which premiered at the Haifa Film Festival in October, will be screened in Sderot, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem this month.

Bialis is now married to Vaknin, and they're the parents of a four-year-old daughter.

"It's a love story, and it's not me and Avi, but falling in love with this place that is so inspiring," said Bialis. "It was like unpeeling layers of an onion."

Bialis, whose Los Angeles upbringing included tenuous connections to synagogue and observance, had visited Israel twice as a child and once for an extended period of time while working on "Refusenik," her documentary chronicling the movement to free Russian Jews.

The USC School of Cinema graduate spent time during that three-month period with former refuseniks Natan Sharansky, Yuli Edelstein and Yosef Burg, and took some Hebrew classes at night.

It was that stay that clinched her own connection to Israel, but it was only upon returning to Los Angeles that she first heard about Sderot. An Israeli friend who regularly emailed articles about Israel sent one that referred to the southern town.

"At the very end, it mentioned rockets falling in Sderot," said Bialis.

A self-professed novice with regard to Israeli geography and news, Bialis said she figured Sderot must be a Jewish settlement located over the Green Line if it was getting bombed. That was not the case.

“I didn’t know much at the time, and I just couldn’t figure out how that could be happening,” she said.

She started wondering how people could live through that kind of disruption in their lives.

“How do they get things done if they have 15 seconds to get to a bomb shelter,” she said. “I felt the whole picture wasn’t being given.”

Her interest was further piqued when she found out that Kobi Oz and his band Teapacks were from Sderot.

Bialis was between projects and came back to Israel for a quick visit, gathering a film crew and heading down south to explore the border town.

“I figured I could tell the story through the experience of the musicians,” she said.

When Bialis first landed in Sderot in 2007, Vaknin was the somewhat uncooperative manager of Sderock, willing to help when she wanted to interview his young clients but uninterested in being interviewed himself.

A son of a local family, he was also a guitarist and budding singer/songwriter who had been working on his debut album for the last four or five years, said Bialis.

“His music was really what we were looking for,” she said. “It was the music you’d imagine, the music that comes from really hard places, and we found it, this guy with this amazing album that he hadn’t released yet. He was a perfectionist.”

Vaknin was, however, something of a challenge. He was always too busy to stop and talk to her. When they planned to drive in a caravan of cars to Tel Aviv for the performance of a Sderot youth band, he drove off without Bialis and her crew.

But Bialis was accustomed to being patient when it came to befriending new subjects.

Her first professional documentary, “TAK FOR ALT – Survival of a Human Spirit” told the story of educator and Holocaust survivor Judy Meisel and the trip Meisel took — with Bialis in tow — back to Eastern Europe to visit the ghetto and concentration camp she was confined in and places in Denmark where she recuperated after her liberation, as well as her involvement in the anti-racist movement in the US.

Bialis's student film, "Daybreak Berlin" about the last day of World War II in Berlin, entailed building a bunker from scratch on a Hollywood lot and then having to clean it up to avoid a \$25,000 fine.

"I'm the only crazy person in my family," Bialis admitted. "I choose topics that I think are important and that I think should have a larger footprint."

Vaknin didn't know about her dogged persistence. It was only when Bialis returned to Sderot for several months, intending to work solely on the new film, that he took her — and her art — seriously.

"He was shocked that I would come back," she said. "He told me he didn't like the press, because they would just come to Sderot and take pictures of people screaming after a Kassam had fallen and that's not what Sderot is."

The local and mainstream press hadn't paid much attention to the small town full of immigrants from the former Soviet Union, Ethiopia and the Jewish communities of the Middle East until the rockets started being lobbed from the nearby Gaza Strip in the early 2000s. Sderot became known for images of houses turned to rubble and residents crying, shouting or stoic in response.

Bialis, in the film, attempts to show the complexity of the place and its people.

"Sderot is kind of like a parallel universe, a crazy existence, and it's amazing and crazy that people keep on with it," she said.

Bialis introduces viewers to the town's residents, to Vaknin, his bandmates and their roommates, to the owner of the local cafe, and to Micha Biton, a local musician who speaks eloquently and at length about the struggles of living one's life in a place like Sderot, as well as Teapacks vocalist Oz, and Hagit Yaso, a young Ethiopian-Israeli who ended up winning TV talent show "A Star Is Born."

She wove together the events of the last seven years, the rockets and army incursions, including the most recent one last summer, as well as joyous post-Passover Mimouna celebrations and activist efforts by Sderot residents and other Israelis to bring the town's security issues to the fore. There are also hints about her love story with Vaknin, a relationship that seemed to have taken them both by surprise.

It began when Vaknin helped Bialis look for a place to live upon her return to Sderot.

"He asked me to bring him back a special microphone he bought on eBay, and he said he'd help me find an apartment," said Bialis.

They eventually stumbled upon a 200-square-meter (2,153-square-foot) house in Sderot with a dunam of land (10,763 square feet) out back. Bialis was excited about the possibilities and wanted

to rent it. Vaknin thought she was crazy, especially when she suggested they move in together and split the space and costs.

His reaction, said Bialis, was typical Sderot.

“How am I going to tell my parents I’m moving in with a perfect stranger from America that no one knows?” she said.

At the time, Bialis was still involved in a long-term relationship; she and Vaknin were just friends. Friends who could barely communicate, that is.

“Sometimes we would stop and load Morfix” — the dictionary app — “because I didn’t understand what he was talking about,” she said. “And it was the same for him.”

They figured it out. Bialis and Vaknin got engaged in June 2008 and were married in September — in their backyard, after compromising with his parents and having a huge henna party before the wedding.

There are only a few hints and references to their romance in the film, which is far more focused on the ongoing Kassam onslaught and how both the budding and veteran musicians of Sderot deal with the situation.

“It’s a huge film,” said Bialis. “You could make a film only about Sderot and Kassams or only about music. Stuff is happening all the time.”

As for Vaknin and Bialis, they made a pact that they wouldn’t leave Sderot because of the rockets. After the army’s first incursion into Gaza in 2009 left Sderot rocket-free for a period of time, the newlyweds moved to Tel Aviv, mostly to help boost Vaknin’s career and ease Bialis’s aliyah process.

Vaknin was about to release his first album and needed to be closer to Tel Aviv and its music scene.

“People told him to take the chance and go,” said Bialis. “He felt some sort of limitation; he’d gotten to the top of the pile in the south, but where was he going to go from there?”

Once they moved to Tel Aviv, Vaknin was invited to join a studio as well as other albums of other musicians, including Shlomo Artzi and Kobi Oz.

At this point, Bialis doesn’t know when or if they’ll move back to Sderot. They visit Vaknin’s family almost every weekend, but for now, their home is in Tel Aviv. In fact, when rockets began falling across a wider swath of Israel last summer, they found themselves in the bomb shelter again, but this time in Tel Aviv.

Ironically, said Bialis, Sderot now feels like a fortress, as dozens of shelters have been placed throughout the town, with schools, kindergartens and other public spaces built within inside bomb shelters.

For Bialis and Vaknin, however, a return to Sderot would be about the place, its people and its spirit.

“There’s a defiance [about the people of Sderot], of this is who I am, this is who I’m going to be,” and it’s reflected in the music, said Bialis. “Their music actually made an impact in changing Israeli music and it’s amazing that it came from that background. When it comes on at parties, I have to get up and dance.”

“Rock in the Red Zone” will premiere in the Sderot Cinematheque on December 13, 7 p.m.; at the Tel Aviv Cinematheque on December 18, 9 p.m.; and at the Jerusalem Cinematheque on December 25, 8:30 p.m.