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Chicago native, writer & veteran...[BIO](#)

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Interview with Award Winning Chicago-Israeli Filmmaker Shuli Eshel: A Pioneer in History & for Women



Shuli Eshel is an award winning filmmaker, born in Jerusalem, Israel. She is a feminist and human rights advocate. Many of her films proved important firsts in the United States and Israel and can be attributed to history, politics, the women's movement and the Jewish communities. Some of her works even impacted Israel's legislation early in her career. Shuli obtained her Master of Fine Arts in film and television in London, England at the Hornsey College of Art after receiving her B.A. in English & American Literature and Linguistics from the Tel-Aviv University in Israel. She realized very early that women were not being treated equal. This led to a pursuit in film with a feminist consciousness.

Shuli worked for Israeli television in the current affairs division from 1975 to 1977 as a production assistant. It was when the reporter she was working with had a family emergency that she had the opportunity to impact legislation, by producing a half hour documentary about illegal abortions in Israel. The documentary was so controversial, that a group of Israeli parliament members came to view it and the following week, the Israeli parliament legalized abortion in Israel.

The young filmmaker was active in politics, demonstrating and fighting for women's rights in Israel. This call for change is what led Shuli to join the Women's Party ticket in 1976 and run for the Israeli parliament. Founded by Marcia Freedman, an American-Israeli activist and feminist leader, Shuli was a model candidate for the new party. However, this career in politics was short lived when the party needed someone to do commercials to influence the vote. In light of this, Shuli removed herself from the party's ticket. "So I decided at that moment that I would rather use film to influence people's thinking than be a politician," Shuli said. In a campaign commercial, Shuli revealed that housewives of Israel were not even aware of their important contributions in the 1977 election. Eshel made housewives realize their roles as being equal hard-working contributors to Israel's society.

Eshel has always had ambition and is a stark advocate of human rights and equality. She prioritized these convictions over family. "I felt that men expect you to be in a certain role and that you cannot really have a career and have children. That was a thing that really bothered me when I was younger. I am aware now that a lot of women are able to do both. But I think it is very difficult. And I chose a career rather than be a homemaker."

When Shuli returned to the United States in 1989, she was confronted with a set of challenges. She wanted to make a life for herself. Shortly after arriving, her marriage started crumbling and she got divorced: "Life is full of challenges all the time ...when I first came to the United States it was a big cultural shock for me because I came from a different culture. And I felt kind of like an immigrant and I had to adjust and find work and so forth," the documentary maker said. In 1991, she started teaching part-time at Columbia College with a given salary of \$800.00 a month. "And that was not enough to sustain me and so I had to look for other work. And uh, it's a struggle. It's a challenge. You talk about challenges? That was a challenge. You have challenges all the time in life."

However, Eshel eventually had a breakthrough and was awarded a contract to do commercials and fundraising videos for Carol Moseley-Braun, the first African American woman to run for the U.S. Senate. Braun won. On account of her success, Shuli co-founded a company called Cavalcade Communications Group with Roger Schatz, a fellow professor at Columbia College. This was an opportunity to make a substantial living for the very first time. "Continuing to make independent films under Eshel Productions was a challenge but it was not my livelihood. I had to continue working and making money through my regular company. All the films that I am making are in addition to making a living. That is number one. Number two, because the money trickles in slowly, it takes longer to create the film," she said.

Looking back at her feminist contributions to Israel, Shuli states that legislative roles have increased for women, though the country has some of the same barriers as the United States. Even though Golda Meir was elected as the first woman prime minister in Israel, Shuli feels that Israel still has a long way to go. She hopes that Former U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton will run for president in 2016.

Today, Shuli is promoting possibly one her most notable contributions to world history, *A Voice Among the Silent: The Legacy of James G. McDonald*, a film that confronts the truth about President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the role he played before and during the holocaust. The film shines light for the first time on the efforts of James G. McDonald to warn world leaders of Adolf Hitler's plans for the Jews. These accounts are based on a recent discovery of the diary of James G. McDonald, first U.S. Ambassador to Israel. Below is a timeline of many of her most important works, including her most recent film, and the events surrounding them.

SHULI'S HISTORICAL DOCUMENTARY TIMELINE

(1977)- "Artificial Abortions" (Translation from Hebrew)

Artificial Abortions was a half hour documentary produced for Israeli television. As a production assistant in the current affairs division at a local TV station, Shuli Eshel was working with a reporter who was doing a documentary on the subject of abortions in Israel, which was illegal at the time. The reporter had to take a sudden leave of absence and she was given an approval to take over this one production. Shuli attributes the success of the documentary to her strong feminist perspective that helped influence Israeli parliament which ended up legalizing abortion the following week. "The members of the Israeli parliament came to the television station because some of the members did not get to see the documentary... They had a private screening. And after that, they took a vote and voted for legal abortions in Israel," Shuli added.

(1981) *To Be a Woman-Soldier: The Role of Women in the Israeli Army*

To be a Woman-Soldier: The Role of Women in the Israeli Army was Shuli Eshel's first full length groundbreaking documentary. Shuli made women become aware of their role as second class citizens in the army. The film exploded the myth of equality between the sexes not only in the army but in Israeli society as a whole. People thought that there was equality in Israel but her documentary exposed the truth about the role that women play in the military. Shuli was the first to make a documentary of its kind. "I exposed the myth of equality in Israel.

Because up until then, everybody thought that because women served in the army that there is equality in Israel,” she said.

(1992) Carol Moseley Braun

Carol Moseley Braun is a documentation of the first African American woman that was elected to the U.S. Senate. Shuli was selected to produce former U.S. Senator Carol Moseley Braun’s commercials and fundraising videos. Though she was already working on Mudpeoples, which focuses on the first all African-American women artists collective in Chicago which was released later, Shuli stated that the project prepared her for the film on Braun. “Everything I did was from a social perspective. I am against discrimination against women, color, ethnic groups, religion and everything. I am very much a fighter for human rights,” Shuli said.

(1994) MudPeoples: A Portrait of Clay Artist Marva Jolly

MudPeoples. A Portrait of Clay Artist Marva Jolly is a documented story about Clay artist Marva Lee Pitchford Jolly, an African-American woman who grew up on a farm in Crenshaw, Mississippi. Shuli said she had a knack for being the first to tackle certain issues. She wasn’t aware of this at the time, but Mudpeoples Studio, and Sapphire and Crystals, founded by Marva Jolly were the first all African-American women artists collective in Chicago. The film premiered at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1994 and then aired on WTTW.

(2000) Gutman – Life and work of Israeli Artist Nahum Gutman

The 2000 release of The Life and work of Israeli Artist Nahum Gutman was a possible result of a desire Eshel made to the universe. “I said that I wanted to make a film for Israel’s 60th anniversary in 1998,” said Eshel. She believes this statement led her to the production that documented the life and work of Nahum Gutman who is not only an artist but a hero to Israel. She made the film for the Gutman Museum in Tel-Aviv, Israel and it is been shown permanently at the museum for schools from all over Israel. The film discusses the history of Tel Aviv from 1909 to 1980 through the lens of an artist. Shuli produced, directed the film and raised the money for the production. She donated the film to the Gutman Museum, though she kept the rights to sell it in the museum’s gift shop and all over the world.

(2002) Maxwell Street: A Living Memory. The Jewish Experience in Chicago

Maxwell Street: A Living Memory. The Jewish Experience in Chicago recaptures the memories of Maxwell Street a historical market place in Chicago, built by Eastern European Jewish immigrants. The film premiered at the Chicago Historical Society, now renamed The Chicago History Museum to a record crowd of over 1,000 people, according to Shuli in 2002.

(2007) Jewish Women in American Sport. Settlement Houses to the Olympics

Jewish Women in American Sport. Settlement Houses to the Olympics confront the stereotypes of Jewish women. “When I told people that I was making a film about Jewish women in sports they asked, “Are there any? The stereotype is that Jewish mothers want their daughters to marry lawyers and doctors. And so sports is not really an element in the Jewish culture,” Shuli said. This film was a result of studies led by Professor Linda Borish of Michigan University who was doing research on Jewish women in sports. This research and eventual collaboration led to Shuli’s production. It premiered at the Spertus Museum in 2007. Shuli exposed the vital role Jewish women have played as athletes, administrators and activists from the settlement houses in the 1880s into the 21st century, confronting ethnic and gender constraints, and changing American society. This was also a first because no one had made a film about the role of Jewish women in American sports. It does not only include Jewish women as athletes, but also many women who have won Olympic medals were often trained by Jewish women in all aspects of sports. The film has been bought by many universities, colleges and libraries throughout the United States, and is slowly changing the perception of Jewish women in sports.

(2013) Passion for Dancing: The Story of Shulamith

Shuli wanted to be a ballet dancer but had an accident at age 13. In 2003, she reconnected with her childhood passion for dancing through Salsa. Passion for Dancing: The Story of Shulamith is also an autobiography on Shuli Eshel which discloses much of her life and work and passion for dancing. "I felt it changed my whole life. Once you reconnect with your passion, you become alive. You become younger, more vital and energetic... And it reconnected me to Chicago. Because until then, I did not know if I wanted to stay in Chicago because of the cold winters. But once I reconnected to my childhood passion, I became apart of the Salsa community...Also, when you are on the dance floor, you are like one with God. It transforms you. When you are connected to your passion, you forget about all your worries, and all the stress and everything, and you know you are on a different level and I also felt it was very spiritual and it was very transformative," she said.

Eshel was able to raise \$10,000 for the film. Most of the funds were retrieved from the Salsa community and private donors. The film was completed last year and premiered on May 19, 2013 to a full house at the Instituto Cervantes of Chicago which is dedicated to offering programs to promote the Spanish language and culture. "It was amazing, the love and the reaction!" Shuli explained that the last third of the film includes her friends from the Salsa community who have enriched her life. She started The Voice Among the Silent, her most recent project right after this film.

(2014) A Voice Among the Silent: The Legacy of James G. McDonald

The Voice Among the Silent: The Legacy of James G. McDonald is a documentary that is based on the recent discovery of the diaries of the first U.S. Ambassador to Israel, James G. McDonald. The diaries reveal McDonald's attempts to warn world leaders including President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the future Pope Pius XII about Adolf Hitler's plans for the Jews. After a face-to-face meeting with Hitler, McDonald worked diligently to warn the world of the impending doom he foresaw. Through humanitarian efforts, McDonald helped over a 2,000.00 Jewish refugees flee Nazi Germany. James G. McDonald served as the League of Nations' commissioner for refugees and as an adviser to President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Shuli says that, "A Voice Among The Silent urges people to speak up when they are confronted with evil. It is very important to bridge age, color, religion and hold hands together and fight for human rights and human justices. And it is very important at this stage in my life. And James McDonald did that and we can learn a lot from his activism, experience and foresight. "

This controversial film confronts a myth about the former President Franklin Delano Roosevelt during the Holocaust. "And there are those who think that he did everything he could to save the Jews and there are those like me that think that he did very little. And the facts show that he did very, very little to save the Jews of Europe. The film has already confronted controversy even through FDR's attitude to the Jews of Europe and has been documented in other films. People even today do not want to tell the truth about what happened because they are worried that if you attack Roosevelt who was a Democrat, and by the way, so am I, the current president will be attacked. But my film has nothing to do with my political stance. It's to do with the truth based on the meticulous diaries kept by James McDonald. And the truth is that Roosevelt was probably a little anti-Semitic and did not do much to save the Jews in Europe...I think that people had not learned enough about how to speak up and fight against genocide. And that is why the film that I made now is relevant to what happened under Clinton's watch and what happened in Rwanda. It is relevant today as much as it was 80 years ago because it can happen again."

The Voice Among the Silent will premiere in Chicago on November 9th at the Illinois Holocaust Museum in conjunction with Kristallnacht ("the night of broken glass") which was the beginning of the holocaust. "On November 9th 1939, the Jews were killed and sent to concentration camps. It was a horrible, horrible day for humanity, never to be repeated again." Shuli noted.

Also, the film will be shown in Indiana University Cinema in early December in conjunction with the third volume of McDonald's diary being released in the middle of November.

The film will also be premiered in New York at a date to be announced. An educational screening of the film was moderated by Congresswoman Donna Christensen in April this year on Capitol Hill in Washington D.C, in honor of Holocaust Remembrance Day.

With the help and support of McDonald's daughter and other donors, Shuli was able to overcome one of the biggest challenges in making independent documentaries- funding. With her assistance, she was able to garner donations from private donors. In addition to the financial support for A Voice Among the Silent, photographs of Hitler that have never been seen before were donated to the project and can be seen in this film.