

## REVIEWS

*Friends from France (Les Interdits, France, 2013)*, written and directed by Anne Weil and Philippe Kotlarski, 101 min.

At the beginning of the 2013 French drama *Friends from France (Les Interdits)*, a young Parisian couple comes to Odessa, a Soviet city on the Black Sea, ostensibly on tour. The year is 1979, and the relationship between the Soviets and the West is tense, therefore, our couple and other tourists are closely scrutinized, their every step monitored by the omnipresent KGB agents. This is why the couple's mission is so difficult: in fact, these two are no ordinary lovebirds on an exotic quest, but rather Jewish cousins who have come to the evil empire on a mission to help their less fortunate co-religionists by bringing them a few brochures about Israel, answering their questions about Judaism, and expressing solidarity. Carole (in a powerful performance by Soko, a French singer and actor) is a rambunctious emotional type, a dark beauty with a mop of curly hair, who is willing to take risks, whereas her cousin Jérôme (Jérémy Lippman), a bespectacled pale intellectual, is more cautious and cynical. Still, both are intent on escaping the tightly overseen tour events and embarking on their own journey, disguised as romantic walks. Soon, it becomes clear that the love affair is much more than a disguise: Jérôme has been infatuated with Carole for some time, and now that they are together in a dangerous environment, the erotic tension between them becomes unavoidable. Still, their personal drama is not the main challenge to their mission, and neither is KGB surveillance.

The main dramatic tension of the film—and the main challenge to the couple's mission—is their relationships with local Jews, a small group of refuseniks whom they succeed in meeting secretly. The characterization of refuseniks is the strongest suit of this film, as it revises and complicates the image of the refusenik in the popular Jewish imagination. The term itself dates to the late 1960s, when Soviet Jews, emboldened by the victorious 1967 Six-Day War, started to apply en masse for exit visas and were routinely denied. This diverse group of people—Jewish nationalists, human rights activists, various dissidents, and even economic opportunists—became known in the West as refuseniks, those refused the right to emigrate. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Soviet emigration movement drew wide support from American, Israeli, and European Jewish activists, many of them college students and young people.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the Soviet emigration movement is usually considered part of the Jew-

1 For background on this subject, see Gal Beckerman, *When They Come for Us, We'll be Gone* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010).

ish revival movement, but it is equally important to see it as a youth movement. It is fair to say that most refusenik activists were young professionals, suffocated in the Soviet environment and wanting not only to live openly as Jews but also to realize their tremendous creative and intellectual potentials. To wit, in the 1970s, they organized underground research symposia, seminars, art shows, and publications.

Soviet Jews who escaped the tight grip of Brezhnev's regime often joined the Western activists and became their mascots. Consequently, refuseniks were seen as heroic figures—a symbol of Jewish triumph, of Jewish solidarity the world over—but even this limited portrait has rarely been seen on screen, and never in a narrative feature. The documentary *Refusenik* (2008, dir. Laura Bialis) presents its protagonists as heroes who persevered through Soviet prisons and persecutions, and joined, valiantly, their Jewish brethren in the free world.

The accomplishment of *Friends from France* is that it avoids falling in the trap of simplistic stereotypes. Many refuseniks faced tremendous challenges, and we are reminded of the high human price they had to pay for their flight, which is often overlooked. In *Friends from France*, refuseniks are not supermen spouting ideological slogans and heroically standing up to the vicious KGB. Instead, they are flawed characters: paranoid, depressed, traumatized by the years of exclusion and persecution, seeking refuge in drugs, or sex, or alcohol. They populate a dark oppressive world, as is recreated on screen through shadowy shots, filmed in hues of grey, blue, and brown. Action takes place predominantly in the nighttime in washed-out impoverished settings that convey so well the lifestyle and mood of the refuseniks. The casting adds to the veracity of the setting, with refuseniks portrayed by several well-known Russian-Israeli actors whose personal or familial past resonate with the on-screen action. Viktor (an excellent Vladimir Fridman) is a physicist who has been denied an exit visa for ten years even though his beloved wife and son immigrated to Israel. Heartbroken by the separation from his family, excluded from his profession and surrounding society, he cuts a disturbing and tragic figure. Knowingly risking Jérôme's safety, Victor entrusts him with a journal of his imprisonment in a Soviet psychiatric facility. Victor's beautiful niece, Vera (Ania Bukstein), an underground Hebrew teacher, flirts with Jérôme, but it is more than just flirting; she is desperate to get out. "I am dying here," she tells him. "Marry me, take me out of here!" Meanwhile, Carole has a more perilous liaison with a charismatic singer who has an addiction to heroin and a predilection for violent sex. Each of these characters are depicted with their own pains and hopes, and none of them want to see the glossy brochures on Israel, or hear an official vote of support. Still, they are hungry for human touch, for a peek into a different world, as the depressed wife of a refusenik orders a babbling Carole: "Tell us about Paris! Tell us about your life there."

Aside from the refuseniks and KGB brutes, Carole and Jérôme encounter other Westerners in the Odessa Jewish underground. They learn that a swarthy David (Alexandre Chacon), a French Jewish activist, has his own ax to grind. It is difficult for Carole and Jérôme to figure out this dark and incomprehensible world, to understand the political forces and personal interests.

Staying uninvolved is even harder, and they do get involved, taking considerable risks and facing unforgiving consequences. Flirting with danger turns into an actual threat to life, as Jérôme is arrested at the Soviet border on suspicion of smuggling out Victor's subversive journal. The KGB cannot find the journal, but that enrages them even more, and they brutally beat the young man. Meanwhile, Carole is landing in Paris, precious journal in hand. Why did she take the journal from Jérôme, unbeknownst to him? Is this a story of heroism or betrayal?

The trip to Odessa proves to be fateful for both Carole and Jérôme. Their lives are irrevocably changed and their relationship destroyed. They meet again only ten years later, in Israel, at a family event with some familiar characters present: Carole is now married to David, Jérôme to Vera, and Victor is still cynical and alone.

This epilogue set in Israel is the weakest part of the film. While it dots all the i's, explaining not only the profound estrangement between the two cousins but also establishing the paternity of Carole's child conceived in Odessa, this unnecessary slide into melodrama doesn't change the main thrust of the film. At its best, the film serves as a window into a difficult, and often forgotten, chapter of history: it memorializes and pays tribute to the refuseniks by portraying them not as infallible symbols but as individuals in all their painful, uncomfortable humanity.

Olga Gershenson, University of Massachusetts, Amherst



**Maud Mandel. *Muslims and Jews in France: History of a Conflict*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014. 272 pages. Hardcover \$35.00. ISBN: 9780691125817.**

The issue of Muslim-Jewish relations in France took center stage in 2014, once again. As the 2014 war in Gaza unfolded in the Middle East, a video recording of pro-Palestinian protesters attacking a Jewish synagogue in the 11th arrondissement of Paris went viral. Newspapers across the globe reported on the modest but steady rise of French Jews immigrating to Israel, a trend commonly attributed to France's purportedly inhospitable environment for Jews, and the rise of antisemitism amongst France's Muslim youth. Cultural commentators in France and abroad advanced several explanations for the rise of antisemitism among French Muslim minorities, and the disconcerting tendency to attribute current events in Israel to diaspora Jewry. Some commentators pointed to the disadvantaged position of Muslim youth within French social and economic life, while others blamed age-old Muslim antisemitism, and yet others directly linked developments in France to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.