

FILM

Speak, Memory

By David Edelstein

KADDISH. Directed and produced by Steve Brand. A Ways and Means Production. A First Run Release, 23rd Street West Triplex, January 9 through 22.

Yossi Klein was named after a relative who'd been gassed at a death camp, and that's probably the least disturbing part of his inheritance. His father, Zoltan, was one of those Holocaust survivors with a story so hellish you can't believe he kept his sanity; and as a tot Yossi heard the tale again and again, until it traveled beyond his brain and into his bloodstream—until his own inner world teemed with Nazis and roundups and harbingers of apocalypse. It would be years before he made peace with that legacy, and those years are chronicled in *Kaddish*, an intense and moving documentary that doesn't stop at Yossi Klein. Watching it for the second time (I wrote about the film when it premiered in last year's New Directors/New Films festival) I felt I was seeing something vital, something biographies provide and movies almost never do. *Kaddish* is more than the story of a Jew confronting an atrocity committed before he was born; it's about coping with an overpowering parental legacy. And it's about the passing of events from generation to generation—how the lessons of history are actually learned.

The history is ghastly. In the last year of the Third Reich, the Germans moved into Hungary, and on May 3, 1944, Zoltan Klein and two friends buried themselves in a hole some four feet deep, five feet long, and eight feet wide. When they emerged from the "bunker" on October 27, they found 200 Jews left alive in a town that once held 4000. Zoltan emigrated to Boro Park in Brooklyn (where many of the yeshivas are named after decimated European towns), married Bertha Breindy, and, despite misgivings about bringing Jewish children into a world where "nobody likes us," fathered two. It was Yossi, the elder, who would become the caretaker of his father's memory.

Steve Brand, a documentary filmmaker and producer for ABC's *20/20*, met Yossi at a Holocaust convention in 1976 and decided to collaborate with the writer—a sometime *Voice* contributor from his home in Israel—on a film about Holocaust survivors and their descendants. (Brand's parents had escaped from Austria in 1939.) Zoltan and Yossi were only two of the subjects, but it didn't take long to see that by themselves they could sustain a feature-length film. Brand shot the Klein family from 1978 to 1981: he got Zoltan recalling his sensations in the "boonker"; the father and son arguing over the Shabbos table about the direction (and menu) of post-Holocaust Judaism; and he got Yossi's reaction to Zoltan's sudden death, on a trip to Israel, in 1978. As Yossi watches videotapes of his late father, he speaks affectingly of his own hell and about the issues confronting the Jew in the modern world. But *Kaddish* isn't just a platform for a smart guy's ruminations. Yossi is a character in a great odyssey—he's the movie's hero and, in some ways, its clown.

For there's something funny—morbid, but funny—about a pubescent boy who generated newspaper articles with titles like "Complacency Is Disastrous" and "We Must Act Now!" And there's something charming about his dapper, determined father, all rakish hats and big teeth in photos, surveying his son's labors with grim satisfaction. From the start Zoltan—like many persecuted people—threw himself into parenting. When

Yossi wanted a bedtime story, Mrs. Klein read Dr. Seuss and Mr. Klein told Holocaust tales. Unsurprisingly, the lad dreamt about Nazis chasing and killing him on the Coney Island boardwalk while bystanders ate cotton candy and looked away. "What if this country were taken over by Nazis?" he remembers thinking when he looked at non-Jews. "Would you hide me?" Before long he formed a society that made plans for defending the "Boro Park ghetto."

Quiet and controlled as Yossi seemed on the surface, his insides were roiling. "My real life was underground, subterranean," he recalls, and the echo of his

dren, other parents. There isn't a moment that doesn't resonate.

Yossi lost his direction after the Soviet excursion. He went into therapy and considered shedding his heritage; his relationship with his father was frayed by squabbles over Israeli politics. Then Zoltan had a heart attack and was buried once more, this time forever. *Kaddish* loses some momentum thereafter, but if that's a flaw, it's a useful one. Zoltan's experiences have given him such weight and authority that we're drawn to his vision of the world as his son is; when he dies we lose a wonderful camera subject. Brand leaves Yossi depressed, living with his mother, and trying to maintain the family candy business. ("I have to pretend I know what I'm doing. I have to pretend I'm a businessman.")

He picks the story up again in 1981, as Yossi channels his energy into editing the radical *New Jewish Times*—a short-lived journal of Jewish affairs that some labeled alarmist and apocalyptic. In his article, "Waiting for the End of the World," Klein made a connection between Hasidic Jews and the blue-haired punks of the East Village, maintaining



Yossi Klein and his father Zoltan, a Holocaust survivor, in *Kaddish*: a shared burden and a shared triumph

father's interment is deliberate. One reason this story is so lucid is that Klein can make the connections, dredge up the metaphors, and articulate his inner churnings. And he's not afraid to spill it all out in front of the camera. *Kaddish* is a triumph of therapy—it shows how if you're smart and brave and searching, you can talk through just about anything. For much of the movie, Klein speaks to us, as it were, from the couch. With his droopy eyes and hangdog air, he's a moony Jewish Hamlet—driven by a father's tales of woe, wrestling over possible courses of action, and regarding himself with somewhat mocking self-consciousness.

In college, Yossi specialized in Jewish demonstrations the way other kids "specialized in medicine." Encouraged by his father, he and his sister blocked traffic for Soviet Jewry and were carted repeatedly to jail; and in 1973, Yossi was one of a group that journeyed to Russia in a bizarre attempt to take over the Soviet immigration office and issue visas to Jews. They got the shit kicked out of them. In news footage of the shaken young people being embraced by their parents, a woman hollers at the camera that she's a mother and she's proud, that more children should fight to save mankind the way her child has. Again and again this profile mushrooms, encompassing other survivors, other chil-

that both communities live from day to day with the concept of an imminent holocaust. The comparison didn't exactly thrill the Hasidim, and Yossi notes, sadly, that sales of the journal in Boro Park haven't been high. He rattles on about cultural decay, fascism from the left, fascism from the right, and the perils of materialism. He points out that the Holocaust was "the only coherent program for solving the problems of the modern world," and that "sooner or later people are going to turn to the man with the only solution—the final solution." Wandering around the East Village, past John Waters marquees and the Mohawked denizens of St. Mark's Place, Klein seems like a Moses who's seen too much, who's trying to write his own commandments for an insane age.

He looks natter than ever, however, and has learned to speak with confidence. I've never met Yossi Klein, but I've felt like his mother. We watch him with various hair lengths and degrees of facial fuzz and think, "Grow the beard or don't grow the beard, but make up your mind, damn it." We watch his kid sister get married and think, "When are you going to meet a nice girl and settle down with her, Yossi?" (He does, in a postscript to the movie, but it doesn't tell you she's a gentile. Who converted.)

The journey has a destination: the 1981 World Survivors' Conference in Israel,

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where Yossi watches fathers ceremonially pass the burden of the Holocaust—in call-and-response prayers—to their sons. He's there both as a journalist, and to represent his father. (The articles, under the title "Beyond the Dream State: Journeys into the New Israel," ran in the *Voice* October 19 and 26, 1982. In part they address the Labor government's

failure to unseat the Likud and Labor's history of "forgetting" the Holocaust ever happened—a warning "that no matter what we choose to do, no trauma can be suppressed.") Yossi speaks of his jealousy watching an event that would have been "the culmination of my father's life"; but when the shofars blow at the conference close, "all barriers between this life and the other side were broken." As in many religious odysseys, he finds his answer in ritual, which looks back at the past and forward to the future, which spans generations, which intimates a shared burden and a shared triumph. The film begins and ends with the *kaddish* over his father's grave, in Israel.

Kaddish is so rich I left eager to argue about it and brood over it. Was Zoltan right to "turn himself into a monument" (in Yossi's words) and funnel all that horror into the head of a small child—who still seems a bit of a nervous wreck? Or was it his duty to his people and his child to pass that burden on? And how should Yossi convey this message to his children? And is Israel really the place to do it?

Yossi Klein thinks so. "I dream of an Israel whose people will make the transition from traumatized refugees to spiritual survivors," he writes. *Kaddish* is overwhelming proof that moving on to the next chapter doesn't begin with closing the book.