

ARTS IN THE JEWISH WORLD

New film explores relationships:

Survivor and son come to terms with haunting Holocaust memories

By WALTER RUBY

It is exceedingly rare in these days of escapist mass market movies that a serious, non-commercial documentary film dealing with an unabashedly Jewish theme is selected for a run at a quality Manhattan cinema.

Director Steven Brand's "Kaddish," which opened January 9 at Reade's 23rd Street West Triplex for a two-week engagement, is something of a landmark film in both style and content. It is the first film in this writer's memory since "The Sorrow and the Pity" on the theme of the Holocaust that eschews both gruesome pictures of crematoria and false idealizing and sentimentalizing of the victims.

Instead, "Kaddish" is a deeply personal docudrama focusing on the lifelong struggles of a Holocaust survivor from Romania and his American born son to come to grips with the meaning of the horrific slaughter of six million Jews.

Both Zoltan Klein, who survived the mass deportation of Jews from his town in Transylvania by hiding in a small hole in the ground for six months, and Brooklyn born and raised Yossi Klein are burdened by the overwhelming weight of the Holocaust as they attempt to build close family and personal relationships.

"Kaddish" documents Zoltan's decision to build a family and a new life in America despite the horrors he has seen and Yossi's long struggle to give meaning to his own life, which has been scarred both by his father's stories about the Holocaust that was and by his own premonitions of future holocausts to come.

Focused Exclusively on Klein Family

Brand, today a film editor at ABC's "20/20," decided to make "Kaddish" after meeting Yossi Klein at a conference on Jewish film in New York in 1976. Brand originally intended to focus his film on the lives of several Holocaust survivors and their children, but in 1978, after Zoltan died suddenly in the middle of the filming, Brand decided to focus the film exclusively on the Klein family, and particularly on Yossi, as he struggled to deal with the shock of his father's death and later decided to pursue a career in journalism and to make aliyah.

Yossi Klein, a onetime reporter for the *Jewish World*, and later editor in chief of the iconoclastic but short lived *New Jewish Times*, lives today in Jerusalem and contributes articles to the *Village Voice* and *Moment* magazine.

"Kaddish" offers a probing look at the evolution of Yossi's thinking about his Jewish identity and how it relates to the meaning of his life, from his days as a militant demonstrator for Soviet Jewry in the late 1960s, through a period of self-doubt and alienation from Judaism, ending with his resolution of many of his conflicts about the Holocaust at the International Conference of Holocaust Survivors in Jerusalem

in 1981. A postscript informs us that Yossi later married and moved to Jerusalem.

Throughout the film, Brand maintains his intense focus on the inner lives of Zoltan and Yossi Klein. The other two members of the Klein family, Zoltan's wife Breindy and his daughter Karen, are on camera infrequently, which strikes this reviewer as unfortunate, since both women seem articulate and interesting, although less tortured and intellectual than the father and son.

Insights into Jewish Psycho-history

However, the intellectual strength and emotional power of "Kaddish" lies in the fact that through the combined mind's eye of this strong and loving father and his sensitive and brilliant son, the viewer experiences much of the psycho-history of world Jewry in the second half of the 20th century.

Zoltan is driven by a fierce will to live, but his experiences have made him suspicious and resentful of the non-Jewish world, evincing a Menachem Begin-like determination to maintain Jewish strength and identity and to resist the anti-Semitism he believes is always lurking outside.

Yossi, although raised in Borough Park and nurtured on his father's reminiscences of the horrors of the Holocaust, has a less fortress-like outlook on the world. He is a child of the 1960s, able and eager to explore a far wider world of thought and ideas—both Jewish and secular—than his father ever knew.

Yet Yossi too is obsessed with the Holocaust, an event he never personally experienced, and knows that he must overcome the paralyzing horror that grips his psyche if he is ever to gain satisfaction from living.

Escaped Deportation from Transylvania

In the early part of the film, Zoltan tells the story of how he escaped the deportation of the Jews of Transylvania by hiding in a hole he dug together with two friends, and how he returned to his Transylvanian town after the conquest of the area by the Soviets to find that virtually every Jew in his town has been exterminated—including his mother and father.

Later Zoltan came to America and met and married Breindy, an Orthodox Jewish girl who eventually convinced Zoltan that they ought to have children despite his misgivings about bringing Jewish children into a world where "nobody likes us."

According to Yossi, Zoltan was a strong and affectionate father, "larger than life." Yet although he now lived in Brooklyn and ran a candy store, part of Zoltan still inhabited the bunker where he had hidden in the forests of Transylvania. While Breindy read to little Yossi from Dr. Zeuss, Zoltan's bedtime stories all dealt with the bunker and other stories of the Holocaust, and these horrific stories had a shattering impact. Yossi recalls, "As a child I had nightmares that I was



An activist for Soviet Jewry in the 1960s, Yossi Klein (second from left) was arrested frequently during sit-ins and street demonstrations.

being chased by Nazis on the Coney Island boardwalk. I pretended to be happy but I wasn't. My real life was subterranean."

Yossi began writing at the age of 10, and his first piece, the story of his father, was published as a centerfold in the *Jewish Press*. He wrote poetry about the horrors of the crematoria. In sixth grade he led a discussion group obsessed with the idea that the Jews of America might confront a Holocaust.

Became Professional Jewish Activist

As an adolescent, Yossi became an activist in the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry and the Jewish Defense League. (One of the film's flaws is that it makes no mention of Yossi's involvement with the JDL.) In the film, Yossi narrates how he became a "professional Jewish activist" and how he was arrested in numerous sit-ins and street demonstrations. Yossi came to scorn the American Jewish community as "a community that had it made," refusing to face the reality that "if Belz [in Romania] can be destroyed, then why can't 47th Street be destroyed?" He adds, "I was rabidly anti-American."

Yossi's activist stage came to a head in 1973 when, with his father's blessing, he joined six other Soviet Jewry activists in

a flight to Moscow, where they tried to take over the Soviet emigration office. Yossi recalls, "There was an instant tumult. They beat the shit out of us and told us to go home." But the demonstrators blocked traffic in Moscow and held up Jewish banners until they were arrested and sentenced to three years in prison before being freed after American intervention.

Yossi narrates, "After that trip, things were anti-climactic." The intense activist energy waned and people drifted apart. Yossi asked himself, "Is this the sum total of being Jewish?" and felt himself "someone constantly on the verge of annihilation and revelation."

Brand follows Yossi through a period of personal crisis during which he went through therapy and questioned his intense preoccupation with Jewishness. "I tried to break away from my legacy and to become a normal American...Shabbos would come, and I would say, 'Enough with the boiled chicken.' I'd say, 'We need a post-holocaust Judaism, in which there would be no room for boiled chicken.'"

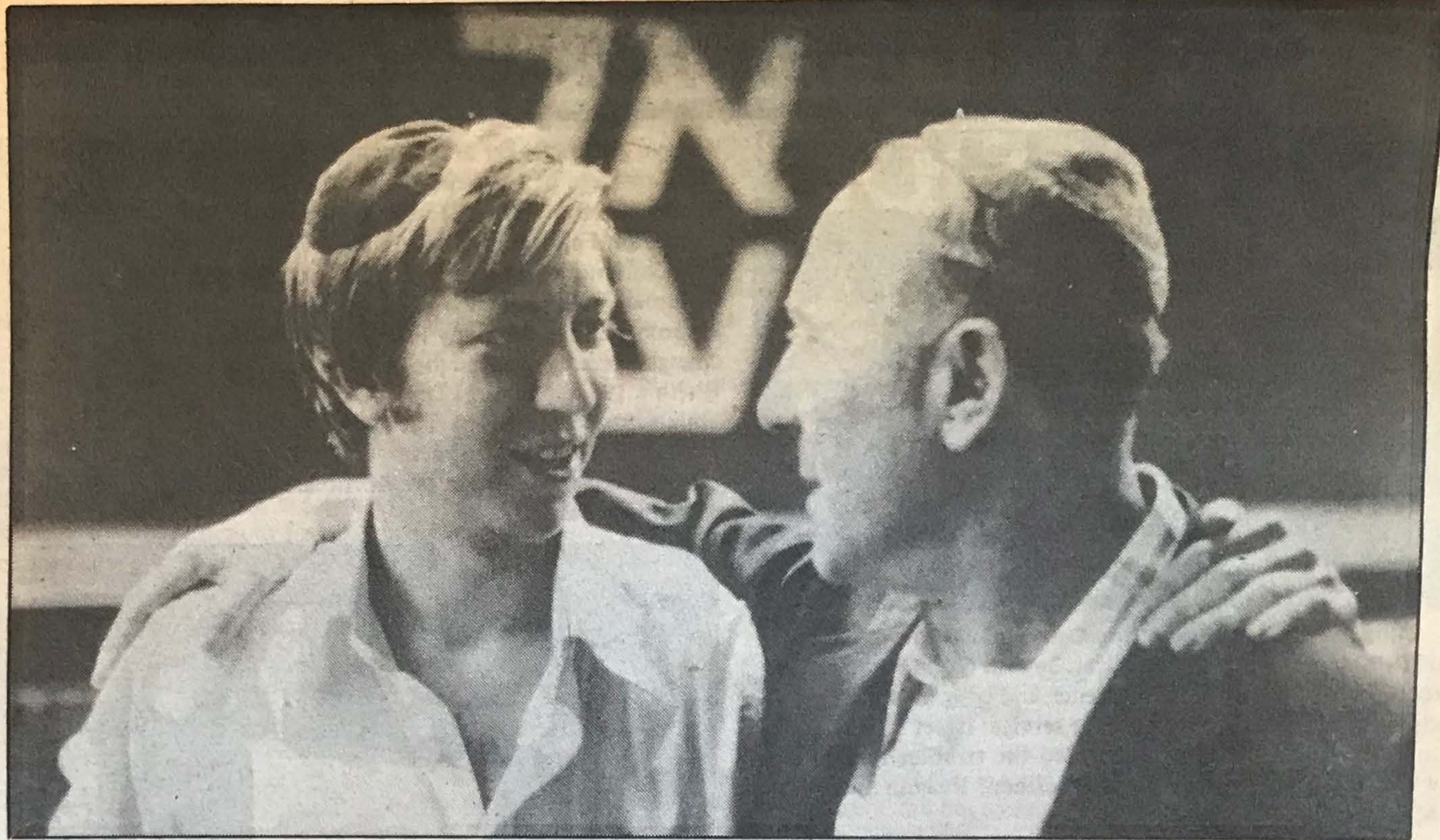
Father's Death was Great Crisis

The great crisis of Yossi's life occurred in 1978 when Zoltan suddenly died of a heart attack during a trip to Israel. Yossi narrates, "I felt that he was already dead...he was used up...when they lowered his body into the hole, [I felt] it is the same as the hole he had hidden in. There is just enough room to lie down in."

In the weeks that followed, Yossi ruminated at length about the meaning of Zoltan's death. "There is something wrong with accepting his death with equanimity...I miss him very much...it is also a Jewish loss. I am very afraid to bring children into a world where there are no survivors living."

Yossi decided that just as his father recreated order and meaning in his life after the shattering experience of the Holocaust, he would create order in his life as well. His efforts to put his life back together took him from a period of introspection and mourning while he ran the family candy store to his first faltering steps as a free lance journalist and later to his experiences at *New Jewish Times*, a journal that was praised by many as brilliant if somewhat erratic.

Yossi recalls ruefully, "We were accused of being apocalyptic." Indeed, the article most often remembered from the paper was a controversial essay by Yossi in which he noted the similarities between Brooklyn's hasidim and the punks of the East Village; both groups, Yossi noted, live outside normal society and expect the end of the world momentarily. Yossi himself ruminates a great deal about the decline of America and the possibility of nuclear and genocidal holocausts. The



Yossi Klein (left) struggles to find meaning for his own Jewishness, as well as his father Zoltan's, in the docudrama "Kaddish."

financial collapse of *New Jewish Times* only seems to confirm for him the belief that America and the world are rotten.

Yossi finally seems to come to peace with himself while attending the World Gathering of Holocaust Survivors, which he covered as a journalist. As the shofars blow at the end of the gathering, Yossi feels exaltation. "I never heard anything like that sound. [It sounded like] the heralding of redemption...all the barriers broke down between this life and the other. Everyone was there—we had come together. I thought, 'This is where it ends. Not in a camp, or a hole in the ground, but here.'"

Powerful and Compelling Film

It is possible to quibble over some aspects of "Kaddish." At 92 minutes, it seems a trifle overlong, and on occasion Yossi's apocalyptic meanderings become repetitive and a bit obtuse.

There can be no question, however, that is a powerful and

compelling film—rich in ideas and intellectual force, imbued with anger, grief and compassion.

"Kaddish" is a film that every American Jew—committed and assimilated, religious and secular—ought to see, because more than any film in recent memory it raises fundamental questions as to the meaning of our lives as Jews. The film offers a direct challenge to all of the mechanisms that the various American Jewish sub-groups have erected to avoid having to deal with the issues that Zoltan and Yossi Klein faced head-on.

Brand seems to be saying that behind the facade of the affluence and security of American Jewish life, we still inhabit—to one degree or another—the psychological bunker of Zoltan Klein and that our collective fear of annihilation governs more aspects of our lives than most of us are prepared to examine. Brand, together with Zoltan and Yossi Klein, deserve great credit for reminding us that only by honestly confronting our demons can we ever hope to exorcise them. □