

Aviva Kempner "The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg"

Written by Kam Williams



Viva Aviva!

A child of a Holocaust survivor and a US Army officer, Aviva Kempner was born in Berlin, Germany after World War II. She was inspired by her heritage to produce and co-write *Partisans of Vilna*, a documentary on Jewish resistance against the Nazis. She was also the executive producer of the 1989 Grammy-award nominated record, *Partisans of Vilna: The Songs of World War II Jewish Resistance*.

Kempner is the scriptwriter, director and producer of *The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg*, a film about the Jewish slugger who fought anti-Semitism in the 1930s and 40s. It was awarded top honors by the National Society of Film Critics, the National Board of Review, the New York Film Critics Circle, and the Broadcast Film Critics Association. The film received a George Peabody Award and was nominated for an Emmy, too.

In her documentaries, Kempner investigates non-stereotypical images of Jews in history and focuses on the untold stories of Jewish heroes. Upset with the 2000 election results, she was inspired to make the short, "Today I Vote for My Joey," from the script she wrote about Election Day in Palm Beach for the American Film Institute's Directing Workshop for Women.

She produced and directed *Yoo-Hoo, Mrs. Goldberg*, a 90-minute documentary on America's favorite radio and television personality. Gertrude Berg was the creator, principal writer and star of the popular 1930s radio show and later the 1950s weekly TV sitcom, "The Goldbergs."

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Kempner writes film criticism and feature articles for numerous publications, including *The Boston Globe*

,
The Forward

,
Washington Jewish Week

and

The Washington Post

. She also lectures about cinema throughout the country. She started the Washington Jewish Film Festival in 1989.

Kam Williams: Thanks for the interview, Aviva. How has being the daughter of a Holocaust survivor shaped your life?

Aviva Kempner: As a child of a survivor born in post-war Europe, I had grown up fantasizing about being in the resistance during World War II. In late 1979, I had a roots awakening to explore my Jewish roots. Since then, I have devoted myself to countering negative screen images of Jews.

KW: How would you say Jews have been stereotyped?

AK: Typically, Jews are portrayed by the suicidal, female Holocaust survivor, the nebbishy Jewish male and the domineering Jewish mother. I am committed to making documentaries which counter these negative portrayals by showing non-stereotypical images of Jews.

KW: How did you get your start in filmmaking?

AK: I was determined to make a film about my obsession: Jewish resistance to the Nazis. I incorporated the Ciesla Foundation which I named for my grandparents who had died in Auschwitz. Ciesla was their last name. I worked with Josh Waltetzky to make *Partisans of Vilna* in the Eighties, a film which examined the unexplored theme of Jewish opposition to Hitler.

KW: And how did you decide to do a documentary on Hank Greenberg?

AK: In 1986, when I heard that he had died, I knew that my second film should be about him. Here was an athlete who had emerged when Jewish Americans faced anti-Semitism in social and economic arenas, a subject rarely documented on film. I wanted this film to address Hank Greenberg's lesser-known accomplishments while highlighting the extent of domestic anti-Semitism in the Thirties and Forties.

KW: How are the Hank Greenberg and *Partisans of Vilna* documentaries linked?

AK: Both works explore the role and inner workings of Jewish heroes, from those facing life and death situations to those fighting to gain approval in American popular culture.

KW: What message do you have for other would-be documentarists?

AK: I think of parallel others who want to portray their cultures—like Italian, Irish or African-American—in new, eye-opening ways. Unlike the mainstream cinema portrayals, most Italians aren't in the Mafia, most Irish aren't alcoholics and most blacks aren't drug dealers.

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Maybe it's up to this generation of documentary filmmakers to set the record straight.

KW: Why did it take 13 years to complete Hank Greenberg?

AK: It was all about raising money for the rights to the archival and feature footage. That was so expensive that I had to stop and start about 20 times.

KW: Where did you find those old Tiger fans whose reminiscences are such a colorful part of the film?

AK: I grew up in Detroit, so I knew how to find them. I call them my Greek-like Borscht Belt chorus. I've been an avid baseball fan since I was a young girl. My father was one of those dads who lived and breathed baseball. I always loved listening to fans talking about Hank with such admiration.

During my childhood, I heard about Hank Greenberg to the point I thought it was a part of Kol Nidre [the service sung on Yom Kippur]. It was that over the top fanaticism, hero worship and love of the game that I wanted to capture.

KW: It was also special to see some of Hank's teammates and to hear "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" sung in Yiddish."

AK: That was Mandy Patinkin. There were so many valuable contributors to the project, as you see watching the film. Tapes of Hank... Interviews with his family... Legendary announcer Ernie Harwell... sportswriter Dick Schaap... And Walter Matthau repeatedly made me laugh so hard, I had to stop filming.

KW: In the film, Dick Schaap says that when Hank was closing in on Babe Ruth's home run record, there was a conspiracy to not let a Jew break it. Yet, Hank's son says his father never complained that pitchers were ordered to deliberately walk him. There was something touching about the juxtaposition of these two reflections, your even-handed approach here was excellent.

AK: I felt the best way was to present both sides.

KW: Well, I watched the film with baseball fans of all ages and of both sexes, and everybody loved it. It really resonates with everyone.

AK: Oh, that makes my day. I love that women and kids love it. That's why I devoted so many years to the project. Hank was under-known. And his is truly a great American story.

KW: Thanks for the time, Aviva.

AK: Thanks you, Kam.

To see a trailer for "The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg," visit: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZpsZVvaTUfw>

To order a copy of "The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg on DVD," visit: http://hankgreenbergfilm.org/?page_id=9