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The Illegals: a unique but overlooked historical documentation of illegal immigration

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ABSTRACT

The Illegals (Meir Levin, 1948), which was produced by Americans for the Haganah (AFH) is the only film to provide real-time documentation of these survivors' attempts to immigrate illegally to Palestine. However, despite the film's significance as a unique visual document, it was not screened when it most mattered, before the founding of the State of Israel, and over the years has been marginalized in the Zionist collective memory and in Zionist research. Based on primary and secondary historical sources, this article provides the first comprehensive analysis of the behind-the-scenes story of *The Illegals* and its post-production difficulties. It examines the disagreements, the misunderstandings, and the reasons why it failed to reach its potential audiences in time, all of which caused one of the most important documentaries in the history of Zionism to sink into oblivion.

KEYWORDS

Illegal immigration;
American Zionism; Holocaust survivors; Zionist cinema

By the summer of 1946, there were more than 250,000 Holocaust survivors in displaced persons camps in Europe. From 1945 to 1948, Jewish organizations in the USA launched an international aid campaign aimed at three main target audiences: the Zionist movement and its institutions, the Jewish diaspora, and the non-Jewish world in general. *The Illegals* (Meir Levin, 1948), which was produced by Americans for the Haganah (AFH) is the only film to provide real-time documentation of these survivors' attempts to immigrate illegally to Palestine. Other American Zionist films that were produced by Hadassah, the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), The United Palestine Appeal (UPA) and The United Jewish Appeal (UJA) represented Jewish displaced persons in the DP camps and added scenes showing helter-skelter groups wandering the roads of Europe. None of them traced the illegal journey from the DP camps through Europe to the shores of Eretz-Israel.¹ However, despite the film's significance as a unique visual document, it was not screened when it most mattered, before the founding of the State of

Israel, and over the years has been marginalized in the Zionist collective memory and research.

Two scholars have primarily researched *The Illegals*: Ariel Schweitzer analyzes the film as a docudrama in the context of Zionist films of that era.² Simone Gigliotti discusses the film within the context of what she calls the “cinema of the displaced” which depicts Jewish displaced persons in the aftermath of World War II.³ Both acknowledge the film’s huge historical importance as a document of the *Brichah*⁴ and illegal immigration and its marginalization.

My article focuses on other topics that have eluded previous research; namely, the behind the scenes story of the film and the struggles over its distribution. Based on primary and secondary historical sources, this article provides the first comprehensive analysis of the post-production difficulties of *The Illegals*. It examines Levin’s connections with the Sonneborn Institute and Americans for the Haganah who sponsored the film, the disagreements, misunderstandings, and the reasons why it failed to reach its potential audiences in time. I show how post-production errors caused one of the most important documentaries in the history of Zionism to sink into oblivion.

The Sonneborn Institute, AFH, illegal immigration and *The Illegals*

Between 1945 and 1948 prominent Jewish organizations in the United States, led by *Hadassah*, the JDC, UPA and UJA launched a worldwide media campaign for the rehabilitation and resettlement of Holocaust survivors. The campaign targeted Jews and non-Jews around the world and helped to raise hundreds of millions of dollars. The disputes among American Jews over Holocaust representations and what Zionism should look like often intersected and played a prominent role in the narratives. Some organizations campaigned together (under UPA and UJA) but also separately because each organization had an agenda of its own.⁵

The Sonneborn Institute⁶ was a clandestine American Zionist organization that engaged in fundraising, arms procurement, and smuggling for the Haganah. The institute sought to secure boats and crew members to enable what was called in Hebrew *Aliyah Bet* or *Ha’apala*: illegal immigration of European Holocaust survivors to Palestine during the British Mandate, which only allowed the small number of entry passes authorized by the restrictions of the 1939 British White Paper. The Sonneborn institute, headed by businessman Rudolf Sonneborn (1899–1986) was the outcome of a secret meeting that took place on July 1, 1945 in New York. The lead speaker to the sixteen prominent Jewish businessmen and activists invited by United Jewish Appeal Director Henry Montor and Sonneborn was David Ben-Gurion, who stressed the pressing need to raise money for the purchase of arms.⁷ Sonneborn and his friends were asked “to form an ... American arm of the underground Haganah.”⁸

The goals of the organization according to Sonneborn were the “acquisition, reconditioning, staffing and supplying of vessels for so-called illegal immigration traffic from Europe to Palestine.” The organization raised millions of dollars and was able to purchase 18 ships (including the *Exodus*), which carried over 75,000 Holocaust survivors to Palestine. Starting in 1948, its focus shifted to arming the nascent state. The relationship between the Sonneborn group and mainstream American Zionist organizations was complicated as a result of the organization’s illegal activities.⁹

Americans for the Haganah (AFH) was founded in July 1947. It received its instructions from Haganah headquarters in Palestine and was one of the key components of the Haganah’s legal activities in Northern America. Both Jews and non-Jews representing a wide range of social and political orientations were members.¹⁰ One of the reasons to its creation was the need to counter the actions of the American League for a Free Palestine which supported the Jewish right-wing underground movement, the Irgun (*Etzel*). Ben Hecht, the well-known Jewish-American screenwriter, director, producer, playwright, journalist, and novelist scripted their advertisements. The organization attracted huge crowds and many celebrities to successful fundraising events.¹¹

The AFH’s primary goals were to increase support among American Jews for unrestricted Jewish immigration to Palestine, to disseminate information on the Haganah’s crucial role in bringing refugees to Palestine, to teach Americans about the struggle in Palestine, to raise money, to recruit volunteers for the Haganah and to inform the public about the Haganah’s importance, and after the proclamation of State of Israel, to inform the public about the importance of the Haganah’s transition from an underground militia to a modern army.¹² From 1945 to 1948 the AFH organized functions, conventions, disseminated its messages on the radio and published *Americans for the Haganah*, a biweekly magazine that included articles on the organization’s goals and mission.¹³ Its articles argued that Palestine was the only place for Holocaust survivors, praised the survivors’ bravery, the cruelty of the British authorities and made pleas for the continued support of Americans and in particular Jewish Americans to champion the survivors’ struggle for immigration.¹⁴ *The Illegals* was the only film produced by the AFH to visually represent this agenda.

The Illegals was filmed in 1947–1948. Meyer Levin (1905–1981), the celebrated Jewish-American novelist and journalist wrote, produced, and directed the film¹⁵ which documents Holocaust survivors in real time as they travel across Europe before finally boarding the *Lo Tafhidunu*, the first ship to cross the Mediterranean sea to Palestine after the United Nations’ vote on the Partition Plan on November 29, 1947. The *Lo Tafhidunu* (originally the *Maria Christina*),¹⁶ carried over 800 survivors from Poland, Romania, Hungary and Russia, including about 170 infants and children and approximately 100 pregnant women.¹⁷

The film depicts their exhausting voyage including their harrowing escapes, dangerous border crossings, and the survivors' perseverance as they crossed through Europe from the DP camp in Germany to the shores of the Italian Mediterranean on foot or by hiding in trucks.¹⁸ Scenes show the refugees – the young, the old, children and even infants – as they trudge through the cold and dark, or make efforts to conceal themselves during their escape. The physical and emotional hardship portrayed in these scenes is accompanied by narration that describes the events. Levin captured the risky passage through the deep snow in the Alps and the struggle against the forces of nature. The enormity of their journey until they finally reach the ship that will take them to freedom is brought home more sharply by a map that appears intermittently during the film. On the ship, Levin documents the overcrowded conditions, the human suffering, women fainting on deck after hours inside the body of the ship breathing the dank air, and the birth of a baby in these impossible conditions.

Levin was a American Jewish writer. He was born in Chicago, the son of Jewish-Lithuanian immigrants. His diverse career included running a marionette theatre, editing a magazine, working as a film critic and social worker, as well as writing articles and novels. He had been a pioneer in Palestine in the 1920s, served as a war correspondent in Spain in 1937, and later worked in Hollywood. During World War II, he covered the European front as a war correspondent. As part of this job, he was present during a number of concentration camp liberations and witnessed the horrific sights. “The names and the places would change” writes Martin Litvin, Levin’s biographer, “but the horror remained the same.”¹⁹

In 1946 Levin wrote the script for a fiction film entitled *My Fathers' House* [In Hebrew: *Beit Avi* (Herbert Klein, 1947)] and was involved in its production. *My Father's House*, which was sponsored by the Jewish National Fund (JNF), was one of the first fiction films produced in the yishuv after World War II. The film tells the story of David, an eleven year-old Holocaust survivor, as he searches for his father in Palestine.²⁰

While filming *My Father's House*, Levin, who was influenced by clashes he witnessed between Jews and the Mandate authorities, dreamed of making a documentary about the illegal immigration. His close friends who were all affected by World War II one way or the other, and had been imprisoned in concentration camps, served in the army, had family members who had suffered or were murdered during the Holocaust, all thought the film was a noble cause but impossible to achieve.²¹

Levin began contacting members of the Haganah with whom he was acquainted and upon returning to New York to edit *My Father's House*, he contacted the *AFH* to present his idea. The organization heads were not initially enthusiastic, and Levin was forced to conduct a long lobbying campaign. The argument that ultimately tipped the scales in his favour was “suppose that

there was a camera during the Exodus from Egypt and it was possible to document the event. What would you think if Jewish leaders had tried to prevent it?" The *AFH* management was convinced and provided him with a modest budget to cover expenses.²² Permission to photograph was granted by Vania Pomerantz (Ze'ev Hadari), who was the assistant to Shaul Avigur (Meirov), the head of the *Mossad le'Aliya Bet*. To prevent problems crossing borders between countries in Europe, Levin obtained a letter from Joseph Schwartz, director of the Joint Distribution Committee (*JDC*) in Europe stating that Levin and his team were filming a documentary about the *JDC*'s assistance to Holocaust survivors.²³ Likewise, he obtained letters of recommendation from Moshe Shertok (Sharett), the head of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency, and Marc Jarblum, the representative of the Jewish Agency for Palestine in France,²⁴ Nevertheless, Levin and his team were arrested three times during the filming.²⁵

The film's initial titles proclaim that "The people who appear in this film are the people of the exodus themselves, filmed on their way toward Palestine." This proclamation is not entirely true since this is a docudrama, a genre which differs from a "documentary" in that it has a fictional plot (played by actors) within a documentation of real events. Levin included two actors in the groups of survivors he documented and added their fictional story to the real documentation. Yankel Mikalovitch (Izhak Michaeli) and Tereska Torrès played Mica and Sarah Wilner. In the script, Mica and Sara fled to the USSR during World War II, where they met and got married. The film begins after the war, when Mica takes Sara to his hometown of Stryków, near Łódź in Poland.²⁶ After discovering that the town's Jews have all been murdered, they move to Warsaw, where Sarah discovers that she is pregnant. They decide to immigrate to Palestine so that their baby will be born in a better place. They contact the *Brichah* members, join a group of illegal immigrants and begin their journey across Europe towards a port. After many delays and numerous problems, they board the Haganah ship *Lo Tafhidunu*. A British vessel discovers the ship and it is seized. The film was made without strict dialogues so that they could adapt the narrative to events along the way and the dialogue was composed of bits of conversations that Levin had heard during his travels through post-war Europe.²⁷

Levin was influenced by Italian neorealism that aimed to depict the lives of ordinary people, blended documentary qualities into fiction films by using non-professional actors, filming on location instead of in a studio, and creating rough aesthetics that highlight its raw documentary-like features.²⁸ Mikalovitch and Torrès were not professional actors. Torrès (1920–2012) who later became a French novelist, was then Levin's fiancée.²⁹ Mikalovitch was a gym teacher in an orphanage in Paris. During the war he managed to avoid arrest through a combination of forged papers, luck, and resourcefulness. Only years later did Levin discover why he was so enthusiastic to take a part in the production:

First, during the filming, Mikalovitch had been recruited by the Haganah and carried out various missions for the organization in Europe. Second, some of the scenes were supposed to take place in his hometown in Poland (Stryków) and Mikalovitch wanted to go back to retrieve family property stolen during the war. The crew did film there. When Mikalovitch tried to find out what had happened to his family's property, he began to receive death threats from local Poles. He discreetly asked Levin to shoot quickly and leave but waited years to give him the reason.

The filming conditions were very tough. Torrès was fatigued and fell ill several times; equipment was broken or stolen along the way and the filming crew's van had several flat tyres.³⁰ These conditions forced Levin to replace three photographers during the journey.³¹ The filming demanded resourcefulness and subterfuge. The clandestine nature of the operation made it impossible to film in all locations, and in some instances, it was too dark to film. Some scenes thus had to be reenacted by the survivors at Levin's request.³² He could not film the Haganah members since they were operating illegally and in one scene he played a Haganah man himself.³³ The filming of the scene where the survivors board the ship attracted farmers from the surrounding area to the harbour. They were told that the film was about refugees fleeing during World War II and if the farmers agreed to help they would be paid. The farmers were delighted and with great enthusiasm began to help the "actors" onto the ship.³⁴

Post-shooting difficulties

As the ship approached the shores of Palestine, British soldiers came aboard. During the commotion, Levin kept filming, thus documenting historical moments typical of the period, but which had not previously been captured on film, such as British soldiers in military uniforms and helmets overpowering ragged survivors who were passively resisting while singing "Hatikvah."

Levin and his crew were arrested upon their arrival in Palestine and their documents, equipment, their filmed material was confiscated, and they were interrogated. The men were jailed for a week and Torrès was detained for two days in a women's prison, after which they were deported.

Over the years, Levin offered two differing accounts of how the film reels were smuggled out of Palestine. In 1947, he claimed that he had switched the labels of the exposed and unexposed boxes of reels while on ship, hoping that the British would return the "unexposed" reels to him if they were confiscated.³⁵ After Levin was released and learned that the reels were in Jerusalem, he managed to convince the CID officer, who wanted the materials to be sent to London for examination, that it would be a shame to send "empty" reels, and the "unexposed" reels were returned to him. Levin recounted later that "we tried to look very sad when we divided up the boxes that read 'exposed' and

the ones we took.” In an interview a few weeks before his death in 1981, Levin claimed that the officer, who was apparently sympathetic to their cause, actually allowed him to sort the empty reels in a separate room, which was when the switch occurred.³⁶

After the footage was secured, Haganah members promised to ship the reels to Marseilles. All that was left for Levin and his crew to do was to pack the material in an ordinary suitcase and hand it over to the Haganah members to be smuggled out of the country. The night before the trip, Levin packed the suitcases in their hotel room. He had just finished latching the bags when two CID officers knocked on the door to return their passports. One of the officers sat down and put his feet on the suitcase holding the clandestine material. When Torrès and Mikalovitch came in, they almost fainted. Mikalovitch managed to regain control and politely offered the officers cigarettes, while Torrès fled to the bathroom. After a brief conversation during which the officers expressed regret that they had been forced to imprison them and confiscate their property, the British handed over the passports and left. Two days later, Levin and the two actors were back in Paris.³⁷

The failed film distribution

The film’s distribution fell victim to a series of historical blunders. The reels from Palestine reached Levin in Paris in mid-January 1948. His goal was to release the material to the general public as quickly as possible. The Pathé news archive was given its five minutes of filmed material, as agreed, and immediately released them. Levin went to theatres to watch the audience’s reactions. The effect, he claimed, was stunning: “These five minutes explained the Jewish problem better than years of talking.”³⁸ He was told that these five minutes were shown to diplomats in Washington and had extraordinary influence.³⁹ Levin knew that he would not be able to complete the long version before the summer, but a short version could be shown immediately in theatres. He thus began producing a short film from the documentary footage called *The Voyage of the Unafraid*. Less than ten days later he gave a copy to David Wohl, the Executive Director of AFH in New York, accompanied by a request that it be quickly distributed to general audiences, and not be limited to Jewish circuits.⁴⁰

AFH executives presented the short version to major US film distribution companies, including Twentieth Century Fox, MGM, and others. Representatives of the companies were impressed by this version but thought that its screening would curtail the success of the longer version. This prompted the AFH not to distribute the short version commercially but rather provided it to Jewish organizations, such as Hadassah.⁴¹ Some of the documentary material was also used by various news outlets.⁴² When Levin found out, he threatened to stop production of the long version.⁴³ He made phone calls, sent telegrams,

and explained in every possible way the importance of commercially distributing the short version, but in vain. In Levin's memoir, he relates that at that point, he felt that the footage might as well have stayed in the CID offices in Jerusalem.⁴⁴

The long version was only completed after the founding of the State. The film premiered in July 1948 at the Ambassador Theater in New York, and was received with great acclaim by the American press.⁴⁵ "It is a shocking story about brave people sacrificing everything for their ideals ... brilliantly described by the young author Meyer Levin, possessing a discerning eye, on the basis of understanding, a humane approach and true admiration for the unsung heroes," wrote one of the reviewers. *The Advance* reporter called the film "heartbreaking yet encouraging" and described the scenes on the ship as "very moving." He noted that from a technical point of view, it was obvious that the film had been made under very difficult conditions but had the power of reality and sincerity. He wrote that any individual with even "an ounce of humanity in his heart" should see this film and "we must act in accordance with its message."⁴⁶ The *New York Times* reviewer commented that the film fell "far short of the slick standards of the Hollywood 'semi-documentary' school," but pointed out that this has to do with the fact that it was made under difficult conditions and stated that "Levin makes the most of the poignant futility of the effort which leads, nine times out of ten, not to Palestine, but to a British internment camp on the Island of Cyprus."⁴⁷ In France the film was screened in theatres for two months. Reviewers remarked that "the pictures sometimes flicker, they are not always sharp, but they are a clear testimony, accusatory evidence, hard evidence of an absurd yet so familiar world."⁴⁸ Despite the favourable reviews, when *The Illegals* was distributed in major US cities, the response was lukewarm. Wohl thought that the lack of success was due to its summer release.⁴⁹ Over the years, Levin offered a number of explanations to account for the film's commercial failure. In his 1950 autobiography, he argued that a documentary film about Jewish suffering was not a cinematic attraction at the time since both Jews and non-Jews were not yet willing to come to terms with the realities of World War II and its aftermath. As one businessman put it, "My lawyer donates \$20,000 a year to the United Jewish Appeal in my name. I give the money and that is enough. I do not want to know the stories."⁵⁰ However, recent studies suggest that Jewish American responses to the Holocaust in the aftermath of World War II led to differing narratives within the Jewish American community.⁵¹ In a later interview, Levin suggested that the lack of success was due to the problematic distribution of the film. Copies were not sent to Europe, it was poorly distributed among Jewish communities in the United States, and it took a year and a half to obtain a copy to be shown in Israel. In a 1980 interview, Levin blamed the summer and the fact that people were not used to watching documentary films.⁵²

As time passed, the conflicts between Levin and Wohl over the film's distribution only worsened. Aside from screenings in the United States, Levin wanted to present the film in Italian and French film festivals, but these requests had to be submitted through Israel (its representative in these festivals). Levin asked Wohl to coordinate this with the Israeli government. Wohl told him that the film had been submitted to all the festivals, but that it was rejected, and that the Israeli embassy in the United States had been told that Israel would not be able to screen the film.⁵³ Levin, however, received a letter from the Israel Information Ministry stating that they had never been told that the film could be submitted to the festivals under Israeli auspices. Enraged, Levin accused Wohl of negligence. He claimed that the AFH had utterly failed and demanded that the original film and copies be handed over to him, so that he could donate them to the State of Israel.⁵⁴

Levin's accusations forced Wohl to write a report in which he claimed that Levin was trying to assert ownership of the film, and exploit it for his personal gain, and that he was the only one who would make a profit from the film. This, according to Levin, made his blood boil. Not only had he donated his time, but he had also undergone tremendous personal hardships during the filming and afterwards to complete the film. He demanded to have the decision arbitrated by a committee, to clear his name and to transfer the film to Israel. At the hearing, Wohl suggested that the money received for the distribution of the short film had gone into Levin's pocket. In response, Levin hit him.⁵⁵

The film's screening in Israel was also mired in difficulties. An agreement with Twentieth Century Fox for publicity in Israel was signed in June 1949.⁵⁶ The license was obtained from the Israel film review board in early July 1949,⁵⁷ but went unused because the copy that was sent to Israel was of poor quality and some scenes were missing.⁵⁸ Levin did not hide his anger and his distress. He laid out his arguments in a long final letter to the head of the AFH, Avraham Feinberg. His fury was directed at Wohl, who, according to Levin, was always suspicious and afraid of being exploited. Levin suggested that this distrust was the root of all the difficulties and said that as soon as Wohl refused to release the short version, he knew that the film would fail. He detailed all the ways in which he felt Wohl's work was careless, including the loss of a long report Levin had written about the making of the film that was never published, and two reels of colour documentation from the ship that had been transferred to the AFH and had also been lost. Levin branded Wohl's treatment of the film "criminal negligence" and complained that copies of the film had never been sent to Europe in spite of the considerable demand from various communities who were eager to view it.

Even if I had nothing to do with the film, and I chanced upon this chain of facts, I, as a Jew, would think this is scandalous. How is it possible that a person who has already

proven that his incapability is destructive, will be allowed to continue treating the film?⁵⁹

Levin was furious at Wohl. In a personal letter he called him a “pathological skeptic,” and expressed his opinion unequivocally: “You have no ability to hold a public office in a Jewish organization ... In your relationship with me you proved that you are a liar and devoid of moral values.”⁶⁰

The mismanagement did not stop there. In the new copy which was finally sent to Israel, the colour corrections that Levin had requested had not been made, and the night scenes looked like daylight. Levin was unsurprised and he wrote to Wohl⁶¹: “Of course, I didn’t expect you to do anything right, even if it is a single detail.” He once again asked Wohl to deliver all the copies and negatives to Israel. Wohl insisted that the country had showed no interest in obtaining the film.⁶² However, a letter I found sent to Wohl by I. Kalinov, head of the Press Information and Cinema Department in the Ministry of Interior Affairs, proves otherwise. In addition to his interest in this film, Kalinov asked Wohl to “provide us with other films that you think may be of interest to Israel.” Kalinov destined the short film for schools, settlements, cultural clubs, and other uses.⁶³ Thus at least part of the mismanagement was motivated by Wohl’s personal grudge against Levin.

The film was screened in Israel only in the summer of 1950. The premiere took place on June 3 at the Allenby Theatre in Tel Aviv.⁶⁴ Like the American press, the Israeli press was also full of praise: “Meyer Levin deserves recognition for this film ... a film like this comes about only once in many years ... everyone must see the film.” B. David from *Dvar Hashavua* commended the acting and claimed that although not cinematically brilliant, it found its way to viewers’ hearts because of its humane and honest approach.⁶⁵ M. Ratin, a reporter for *Al Hamishmar*, also praised the film. He found the technical side problematic, but claimed that it contributed to the film: “The photography is worse in the film’s first third, but it heightens the feeling of veracity, of being faithful to reality at all costs, and any attempt to enhance the photography would have damaged the overall impression.”⁶⁶ *The Palestine Post* reviewer was highly impressed by the scenes documenting the seizure of the ship by the British. He too noted that the problematic photography sharpened the documentary nature of the film.⁶⁷ Despite these flattering reviews, the fledgling state had already moved on to deal with other subjects, and audiences did not flock to see the film. “People do not want to remember past troubles,”⁶⁸ explained the Twentieth Century Fox representative in Israel.

Can any of the parties involved be blamed for the fact that such an important and unique film failed to reach its intended audiences in time? Levin was well known for his hot temper. He recognized the crucial importance of giving voice to survivors, and then fell out with the artists, producers, and distributors who differed with him on policy and strategy. This led to clashes and made him feel

that he and the victims of the Holocaust had been betrayed. One of the best known examples of such a clash is Levin's attempts to adapt the *Diary of Anne Frank* for the theatre. What began as a warm collaboration between Levin and Anne's father, Otto Frank turned into a notorious dispute that lasted several decades and included litigation and public scandal.⁶⁹

On the other hand, Levin was correct in stating that the film's distribution system failed miserably. The delays in distribution are likely to have tipped the scales and led to the film's failure. From the end of World War II to the proclamation of the State of Israel, Zionists made enormous efforts to place the plight of Holocaust survivors on the American agenda and to keep it in the public eye. The personal conflicts and the struggle between Levin and Wohl, however, resulted in the release of *The Illegals* after the founding of the State. Illegal immigration was no longer in the headlines, and public attention was directed toward other issues. Jewish organizations had already turned to new and more pressing issues, such as the strengthening of Israel and the problems of Jews elsewhere in the world.

According to Gigliotti, Levin was furious over the success of the film *Exodus* (Otto Preminger, 1960), which was based on Leon Uris's eponymous novel (1958). *Exodus* was a massive Hollywood production that garnered international acclaim whereas Levin's film was destined to gather dust on the shelf. Levin claimed that his film was much closer to actual reality than the fictional story of *Exodus*. In response, he released a new 55 -minute version of *The Illegals* dubbed in Hebrew, English, French and Spanish.⁷⁰ But it did not help. Since the 1950s, the film has only been screened in the United States by Jewish organizations and institutions dealing with documentary material, such as the Museum of Modern Art, which showed it as part of its Documentary Classics series.⁷¹ Some scenes from the film were incorporated into other documentaries in the following decades.⁷² With time, the film, as a whole, was forgotten and sidelined in Zionist commemoration.

***The Illegals'* historical importance**

The Illegals was the only film made in the aftermath of World War II that managed to document, from within, the excruciating experience of the Holocaust survivors' journey and record rare and dramatic historical moments through a production process which necessitated determination and perseverance against all odds. A combination of personal disputes and distribution mistakes caused one of the most important films in the history of Zionism to fail to reach the audience in time. Levin's inability to draw the public's attention with the version he produced in the 1960s shows that the Zionist world did not grasp its historical importance. The majority of the Zionist collective memory agents – historians, teachers, writers, public figures, politicians etc. – of the following

decades forgot its existence, so the film was seldom researched, discussed in public forums, or screened.

To date, the only version accessible to the public at large is a short version uploaded by the Steven Spielberg Archive in 2010. In this version the sound and lighting are problematic in various scenes. Within the last year, as part of their mission aimed at for the preservation and accessibility of cinematic works in contemporary media, the Israeli film Archive – the Jerusalem Cinematheque decided to produce a reconstructed copy of *The Illegals*, a film they call a “masterpiece.” In May 2019 the restored and digitized version was completed. The film will be uploaded to a designated web site in the second quarter of 2020 and will be accessible to the public.⁷³ Perhaps it will help rescue this film from limbo and enable it to be restored to its rightful place as one of the most fascinating and historically important documents of pre-State Zionism.

Notes

1. Steir-Livny, *One Trauma*; Deblinger, *In a World Still Trembling*.
2. Schweitzer, “*The Illegals*.”
3. Gigliotti, “Home Seeking.”
4. Organized escape movement from Europe 1944–1948. The initiators were Holocaust survivors who helped survivors flee Europe (especially Eastern Europe) and bring them to Palestine. See Bauer, *Flight*.
5. For the similarities and differences between organizational agendas, see Diner, *We Remember*; Steir-Livny, *One Trauma*; Deblinger, *In a World Still Trembling*.
6. Despite the institute’s significance, its story has generally been marginalized. The story of the Sonneborn Institute, its actions and the establishment of the AFH are to be found in Slater, *The Pledge*, 21–8; Penslar, “Rebels,” 171–91; Sonneborn, *The Time*; and in Rosen, *In Quest*, especially, 23, 42–9, 126–87, 448, 454.
7. Slater, *The Pledge*, 21–8; Penslar, “Rebels,” 181–85.
8. Slater, *The Pledge*, 27; Saxon, “Rudolf Sonneborn;” “Israel Lobbyist.”
9. Penslar, “Rebels” 186–7.
10. Rosen, *In Quest*, 170–87, 454.
11. Slater, *The Pledge*, 92–7; Rosen, *In Quest*, 171–5; Yosef Hochshtein, “Haganah in the USA,” Aug. 7, 1988, first edition: 1, 6–7, Haganah Archive 40/118; “Americans for Haganah.”
12. Hochstein, “The Haganah;” Rosen, *In Quest*, 454.
13. Early in 1948, it changed its name to *Haganah Speaks*.
14. Rosen, *In Quest*, 176–181; Steir-Livny, *One Trauma*, 164–66, 123, 126, 130–31.
15. “Izhak Michaeli.” It seems that all previous attempts to photograph such a journey ended with the British capturing the footage and confiscating it. See “Secret Jewish Exodus from Europe to Palestine,” *New York Journal*, Jul. 2, 1948, CZA, F41/88.
16. Her code name in the Haganah was “The Christian.” The English translation of *Lo Tafhidunu* is “The Unafraid.”
17. According to the Haganah’s secret report, there were 850 people. The Israeli press was divided: *Mishmar* concluded that 880 people were on board, while *Hatzofe*, *Davar*, *Hamashkif*, *Yediot Ahronot* and *Ha’aretz* reported that there were 853. See: “850

- 'Lo Taffhidunu' Māapilim were deported to Cyprus," *Mishmar*, Dec. 24, 1947, Haganah Archives, 14/240; "850 Illegal Immigrants to Cyprus," *Hatzofe*, Dec. 24, 1947, Haganah Archives, 14/240; "Ma'apilim from 'Lo Taffhidunu' were transferred in Haifa to a deportation ship," *Yediot Ahronot*, Dec. 23, 1947, *ibid*; "The 850 Māapilim were deported to Cyprus," *Ha'aretz*, Dec. 24, 1947, *ibid*; "The Māapilim were expelled," *Davar*, December v, 1947, *Ibid* "853 Mā'apilim from 'Lo Taffhidunu were deported to Cyprus," *Hamashkif*, Dec. 24, 1947, *ibid*.
18. Gigliotti, "Home seeking," see 176–81.
 19. Litvin, *Audacious Pilgrim*, 126. See also Loewy, "Retracing."
 20. Steir-Livny, "Shattered," 29–51.
 21. Litvin, *Audacious Pilgrim*, 152–9. After the establishment of the State of Israel, Levin wrote a screenplay for another film, a documentary about Yemenite immigration during Operation Magic Carpet (*Flight to Freedom*, 1950). See Kronish, "Reminiscences," 10–20; Schnitzer, *Israeli Cinema*, 384; Levin, *In Search*.
 22. Besides the photographer, no one received payment for the film. Levin, *In Search*, 359; Kronish, "Reminiscences," 22–3. On the subject of the budget, see "Repatriation Epic Going Unrecorded," *The Illegals*. Matisse Collection, Spielberg Archive.
 23. Kronish, "Reminiscences," 21–4.
 24. FSS Top Secret Report on the Transfer of the "Lo Taffhidunu" Mā'apilim. Jan.13, 1948, Haganah Archives, 14/240/ see p.2.
 25. Once for questioning in the Russian occupation zone, a second time by a commander in the American occupation zone, and a third by the British at Haifa port. Kronish, "Reminiscences," 242.
 26. "The Illegals Outline," Spielberg Archive, <http://hudd.huji.ac.il/ArtlidHomepage.asp>.
 27. Levin, *In Search*, 380–90; Kronish, "Reminiscences," 18–20. Levin, "You Can Make a Film Too," 1–25. N.D. CZA F41/83, 7–20.
 28. Schweitzer, "The Illegals."
 29. Torrès, *The Converts*, 7, 10, 158.
 30. Levin, "Putting Palestine," 59–63; Levin, *In Search*, 380, 405.
 31. Levin, *In Search*, 369–80; Kronish, "Reminiscences," 15–23.
 32. Levin, *In Search*, 366
 33. Anderman, "The Jewish Film."
 34. "The testimony of Ada Sereni," Haganah Archives, 19.40, 36.
 35. *Ibid*, 21–2.
 36. Levin, "Putting Palestine," 23. Compare with Kronish, "Reminiscences," 30–1.
 37. Levin, "Putting Palestine," 24–5.
 38. Levin, *In Search*, 462.
 39. Kronish, "Reminiscences," 31.
 40. Levin, *In Search*, 462; Levin to David Wohl (hereinafter: Wohl), CZA, 2.1948. F41/83; Levin to Wohl, Mar. 27 1948, CZA, 2.1948. F41/83; Levin to Wohl. Apr. 4, 1948, CZA, 2.1948, F41/83.
 41. "No 'Acted Scenes' in Haganah Film," *Haganah Speaks*, Apr. 17, 1948, Vol. 2, no. 6:7.
 42. Frank, AFH, to D.R.W., 9.4.1948, CZA, F41/83.
 43. Levin to Wohl, Apr. 4.1948, CZA, F41/83; Levin to Wohl, Apr. 5, 1948.
 44. Levin, *In Search*, 463.
 45. Levin to Charles Plato, N.D., CZA, F41/83.
 46. *The Advance*, CZA, Aug. 1, 1948, F41/88; *Modern Sykron*, CZA, Aug. 1, 1948 F41/88.
 47. T.F.B. "How Displaced."
 48. Schweitzer, "The Illegal."
 49. Wohl to Charles Schleifer, 20th Century Fox, July 19, 1948. CZA F41/87.

50. Levin, *In Search*, 467.
51. Scholars such as Jeffrey Shandler, Lawrence Baron, Hasia R. Diner, and Rachel Beth Deblinger reject the notion that the Holocaust was ignored in the collective consciousness of American Jewry in the aftermath of World War II and that American Jews did not commemorate the Holocaust prior to the 1960s. See Shandler, *While America Watches*; Baron, "The Holocaust," 62–88; Diner, *We Remember*; Deblinger, *In a World Still Trembling*.
52. "Repatriation Epic Going Unrecorded," *The Illegals*. Matis Collection, Spielberg Archive.
53. Levin to Wohl, May 28, 1949, CZA F41/89; Wohl to Levin, June 1, 1949, CZA F41/89.
54. Levin to Wohl, June 28, 1949, CZA F41/89.
55. Levin, *In Search*, 473.
56. Wohl to Levin, June 15, 1949, CZA F41/89; Harriet Simmons to R. Mishka, 'Meyer and Bernstein', Apr. 12, 1949, CZA F41/89.
57. "Film screening authorization in the film and play review committee," July 5, 1947, Israel State Archives, ac 6/4/1833,3614/g.
58. Simcha Greenwald, "20th Century Fox to Mr. Cornfield, 20th Century Fox," June 10, 1949, CZA, F41/89.
59. Levin to Feinberg, Oct. 7, 1949; Levin to Feinberg, Oct. 19, 1949, CZA, F41/89.
60. Levin to Wohl, Nov. 7, 1949, CZA, F41/89.
61. *Ibid.*
62. Wohl to R. Mishka, "Meyer and Bernstein," Dec. 1, 1949, CZA, F41/89.
63. Kalinov, head of Press, Information and Cinema Department, to David Wohl, Dec. 2, 1949, CZA, F41/89.
64. Greenwald, "20th Century Fox to Wohl," June 27, 1950, CZA, KKL5/14119.
65. "The Illegals," *Dvar Hashavua*, June 8, 1950.
66. M. Ratzin, "The Illegals," *Al Hamishmar*, June 7, 1950: 2, Film section.
67. *Palestine Post*, "At the Cinema," CZA, June 6, 1950, F41/88.
68. Greenwald, "20th Century Fox to Wohl," June 27, 1950, CZA, KKL6/15109.
69. Levin adapted the diary into a play with Frank's approval, but after many disputes this version was not produced. Another version of the *Diary* was written for the theatre and became a huge success. Levin sued for plagiarism but ended up withdrawing his claims and never produced his play. He referred to this ordeal as his "nightmare" and wrote a book about it. See: Levin, *The Obsession*. In Levin's view, his version was rejected because it was "too Jewish." See Graver, *An Obsession*; Melnick, *The Stolen Legacy of Anne Frank*. See also Har-Gil, "Dvar Hashavua;" Lapid, "The Zealot;" Merwin, "Meyer Levin's 'Obsession.'"
 70. Gigliotti, "Home seeking," 183.
 71. Kronish, "Reminiscences," 32–3; S. Greenwald, 20th Century Fox to Wohl, June 27, 1950, CZA, KKL5/14119, 1950.
 72. For example, scenes from *The Illegals* were incorporated in the 1979 Israeli documentary *The Last Sea* (Haim Gouri, Jacques Ehrlich, and David Bergman), without mentioning that some of the scenes used (of the survivor couple) were fictional. See Anderman "The Jewish Film."
 73. The digitization and restoration of *The Illegals* is part of a NIS 25 million project of the Israel Film Archive – the Jerusalem Cinémathèque to restore and digitize Eretz-Israeli and Israeli films from the late 19th century to 2011–2012. Each year an independent board chooses two films for restoration (due to the high cost, this year *The Illegals* was one of the films selected). See Liat Steir-Livny, "An Interview with Meir Russo, manager of the Israel Film Archive – the Jerusalem Cinémathèque," June 16, 2019.

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