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Sderot, A Love Story

by Gary Rosenblatt
Editor And Publisher

Sderot, Israel — There's far more to Sderot than the almost daily Kassam rocket attacks and the victimized, stressed-out residents we read about in the headlines.

There is all of that, for sure, but there are also stories to be told of people here who are as in love with this mostly poor town of about 20,000, about a mile from the Gaza border, as they are frustrated with and deeply pained by a government that has allowed them to be targeted by Palestinian militants' rockets for more than seven years.

Meet one of Sderot's most recent residents, Laura Bialis, a 35-year-old filmmaker from Los Angeles, who is viewed by the locals with a mixture of admiration and curiosity because while many of them are

desperate to leave, she chose to move here six months ago. Hers is a love story with a special twist.

When I spent the day with her here last week, Bialis, a warm, outgoing and upbeat woman, was just back from a month in New York, where "Refusenik," her feature documentary about the Soviet Jewry movement, opened to glowing reviews. Rather than basking in the praise, though, she is hard at work on her latest project,

trying to tell the story of Sderot, documenting "the trauma and also strength of this community, and how people use their art to survive."

Long before the rocket attacks began on Sderot in 2000, the town was known for the pop music it produced, most notably a band called Teapacks, which blended rock and the traditional music of North Africa — not surprising since many of the residents or their parents are from Morocco.

Bialis, whose only previous trip to Israel was with her parents when she was 10, visited Israel several times while making "Refusenik," interviewing Natan Sharansky and others who served time in Russian jails for their Zionist commitment.

During those visits she became increasingly obsessed, she says, with the difficult situation in Sderot, and soon learned about groups of teenagers who relieved their

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stress and frustration by practicing their ethnic rock music in bomb shelters-turned-community centers, most notably one in the center of town labeled Sderock.

After "Refusenik" was completed, she began to spend time in Sderot, getting to know the young musicians and artists who told her they choose to focus on their work rather than on the fear they live with constantly.

And make no mistake: that fear is real. It doesn't take long for a visitor to learn that life here is measured not in days or hours or even minutes but in 15-second intervals. That's how long the siren warning is when a Kassam is on its way, telling you how long you have to seek protection from one of the many small shelters found around the city.

Residents weigh even the most trivial decisions — when to take a shower, when to visit a neighbor — because, without being overly dramatic, it can be a matter of life or death. Eight people have died from the attacks, and many more have been wounded.

On the morning of my visit, we went to a home whose residents, Robbie and Lavi, two film students in their 20s and friends of Bialis, were moving out that day. Bialis and her cameraman filmed the sad scene of furniture being removed and items being packed. She explained that a Kassam rocket had hit the house last month. When the warning siren went off, Lavi had just showered and was sitting on his bed, deciding whether or not to rush to the reinforced "safe room" in the house. (Many houses in Sderot do not have them.)

At the last moment he made a dash for it, just before a Kassam landed in the house, in his room, on his bed. No one was injured, but we saw the demolished room and understood why Lavi and Robbie were moving a few miles away.

What was harder to understand is why anyone who could afford to leave Sderot would stay.

Avi Vaknin, a low-key, thoughtful 29-year-old singer, songwriter and music producer, tried to explain. It was he who started Sderock some years ago and who helped two-dozen teenagers, many of them now in the army, to channel their anger, frustration and fear into original music, which he produced and recorded.

"The music is a sign of hope here," he said. "We take a desperate situation and try to make something positive out of it."

He expressed contempt for the politicians who come to Sderot and make pronouncements of solidarity, while nothing changes. But he said he is torn between wanting to flee, so he can "once again live freely," and choosing to stay put, near his parents (who refuse to leave) and friends. "Why should I leave this place?" he asks. "It's mine." But a moment later he admits that just getting through each day in Sderot, "I feel like a soldier without a uniform."

Vaknin said his music is not about the situation per se, but listening to several songs on his new album, one appreciates the blend of cynicism, yearning and tenderness infused in the melodies and lyrics. In one song, "Square of the Lost," he sings: "Boy, boy, take yourself to the holy land. To die for who? Boy, boy, here's where I get off, today you are alone only for yourself."

When Bialis came to Sderot, she interviewed Vaknin and got to know him and his friends, fellow artists. She soon decided that the way to tell the story of the town — its resilience and creativity — was through its music makers and artists.

She took us to the local cultural center to meet Michah Biton, who does after-school drama, singing and dance with local youngsters age 6 to 18, sometimes incorporating the reality of Sderot and sometimes avoiding it. And Bialis took us to the Cinematheque (one of only four in the country), which regularly draws large crowds to its independent films. There are two screening rooms, she told us. One has a bomb shelter; the other does not. When the siren goes off, patrons of the vulnerable theater are asked to stay in place so as not to precipitate a stampede into the other screening room's shelter, Bialis said.

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“I wanted to show the story that isn’t being told” in the news, she explained, adding that she is “inspired” every day by those she is documenting. And now there is more to the story.

Unlike previous documentaries Bialis has done, including a biography of a Holocaust survivor, a report on life in postwar Kosovo and the “Refusenik” story of how grass-roots activism helped free more than a million Soviet Jews, this film about Sderot has completely overtaken her life, blurring the distinctions between the personal and the professional.

That’s because Bialis has not only fallen in love with Sderot, but with Avi Vaknin, their friendship having grown into romance. She plans to make aliyah this summer, after realizing during her frequent commutes between the U.S. and Israel last year, that “I felt like my work was there but my life is here.”

Can an L.A. woman from an assimilated Jewish family and an Israeli man from an Orthodox Moroccan family find happiness in a poor Israeli town hit by Palestinian rockets almost every day?

It sounds far too kitschy, even for fiction. But it’s real — perhaps the subject for Bialis’ next film, and just one more story behind the headlines of Sderot. n

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