



## **SVJFF interviews Gina Waldman, Founder of JIMENA (*Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa*)**

*The Silicon Valley Jewish Film Festival (SVJFF) screens the West Coast premiere of “Remember Baghdad” on October 30th at 6:30-8pm, at the AMC Saratoga 14, in San Jose. A panel discussion will follow, led by Abraham Sofaer, with special guests Jamil Ezra and Aaron Matityahu. “Remember Baghdad” is the untold story of Iraq, told through the eyes of the Jews. It follows the lives of four Jewish families trying to make sense of turbulent times. The screening is sponsored by Marian and Abraham Sofaer, and co-sponsored by JIMENA (Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa).*

Trailer: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=1&v=z86Dhp-D9-o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=z86Dhp-D9-o)

Tickets: <https://www.brownpapertickets.com/event/3606806>

*We caught up with Gina Waldman, just before she jetted off again to speak at a leadership conference. Waldman’s accomplishments are admirable. She’s a winner of the prestigious Martin Luther King Jr. Humanitarian Award and has testified as an expert witness in front of the Human Rights Council, and the US Congress Human Rights Caucus. As Director of the Bay Area Council for Soviet Jewry, Waldman facilitated the procurement of freedom for thousands of Soviet Jews. She’s worked closely with a Nobel Peace Prize winner and human-rights champion, and has fought human rights abuses in Argentina and Chile during Augusto Pinochet’s regime. In the early 1990’s Waldman assisted in the resettlement of Muslim refugees from Bosnia to the San Francisco Bay Area. For her contributions toward the Middle Eastern Jewish-Refugee Justice Movement, Waldman was awarded a ‘Badge of Honor’ from the Coalition of Organizations of Jews from Arab and Islamic Countries in Israel in 2017. In 2002 Waldman founded JIMENA (Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa) together with her Egyptian friend Joseph Abdel Wahed. JIMENA’s core mission is to bear witness to the suffering of other Jewish refugees from Arab lands. —Michelle Shabtai & Karen Winokan*

**SVJFF:** Can you tell us a bit about your personal history and how you came to co-found JIMENA?

**WALDMAN:** 9/11 really propelled me to start JIMENA. There was talk about how people went to blow up planes and fly them into buildings out of desperation. I realized that it wasn't about being desperate, rather this was about a culture of hatred, against the Jews of Arab countries, that had been perpetuated for dozens and dozens of years, for decades. As a Libyan Jew, I was

a target of this hatred too. When I studied in school, in Madrasa, the teacher taught arithmetic by saying, "If you have 10 Jews, and you kill five, how many Jews are there left to kill?" I wanted to speak against intolerance, specifically in the Muslim society, and I decided to start the JIMENA organization with a man called Joseph Wahed who's from Egypt. Although my story is about how I escaped from Libya, I wanted it to be representative of every single Arab country with a Jewish presence.

For each war that took place, between the Arab countries and Israel, there was a huge exodus of refugees. In 1967, with the declaration of the Six-Day War, most Jews had to go into hiding, including my family. My British boss hid me in a garage, for over a month, until the government proclaimed that we had to be expelled from the country, with twenty dollars in pocket and one suitcase per person. I eventually rejoined my family, but on the way to the airport in Tripoli the bus driver siphoned off the gasoline, with the intention of burning the bus with everyone inside. My employer and his friend yanked my family out of the bus to safety. When we arrived at the airport, people spat on us and tried to trip us up. They shouted, "You're killing our brothers in Palestine!" and "Jews are the dogs of the Arabs!" Jews weren't permitted to have passports. We were given a one-way exit Visa. We finally boarded the plane. My British employer was best friends with the airline manager and managed to get us the last seats on that flight. The manager removed seven British engineers from the plane and put us in their place. That's how we got those seven seats. We landed on the island of Malta, relieved to be outside of Arab territory. From there we continued to Rome and were assisted by HIAS, the organization that helps bring refugees to the United States, Australia and so forth. My core family and I stayed in Rome for two years. Other family members immigrated to Israel. We were all split up. At twenty-one I made the difficult decision to move to the United States alone.

**SVJFF:** How did JIMENA come to grow as an organization in the USA?

**WALDMAN:** When I first came to the United States I worked for a bank. In my spare time I became very involved with Soviet Jewry issues and human rights organizations, like Amnesty and others, and soon became the director of the Bay Area Council of Soviet Jewry. A friend of mine said, "Wait a minute. You're doing all of this for Ashkenazi Jews and now the Ashkenazi Jews can leave Russia if they want to. Why don't you do something for your own people?" That's when I founded JIMENA. It hit me much stronger after 9/11 and the wave of terror attacks in Israel. Although I was the major pusher and instigator at the beginning, Sarah Levin, our director really grew the organization in every sense of the way.

**SVJFF:** What has JIMENA accomplished that you're particularly proud of?

**WALDMAN:** One thing I'm extremely proud of is how we've put our story into the narrative of the Middle East. It was practically non-existent beforehand. Most people familiar with the refugee story during that time, would refer only to Palestinian refugees, ignoring the fact that we Jews also have a narrative. Another thing that has happened is that we've pushed the Israeli government, which had completely neglected our narrative because they didn't see the importance of it. The Palestinian refugee issue needs to be addressed, but to recognize one and ignore ours is not right and not just. JIMENA uses education to create an awareness of these narratives. We're now partnering with Beit Ha'Tfutzot—the Museum of the Jewish People in Israel. All our data, stories, history and photographs are going to be included in their website. Every researcher, whether sitting in Timbuktu, Mali, Kenya or anywhere else, will be able to tap into the JIMENA story and learn about it. The Israeli government is also finally collaborating with us to collect hundreds of testimonies from Jews of Arab countries. Ben-Gurion University of the Negev has been curating JIMENA's oral history collection and students have written thesis. The main thing is, that if we once said that nobody knows our story, we can't say that anymore. We have an abundance of historical testimonies that are extremely powerful, so there's a lot we can be proud of.

**SVJFF:** What drew JIMENA to sponsor the screening of *"Remember Baghdad"*?

**WALDMAN:** Movies are an effective educational tool. It's important for the public to see how Jews lived in countries besides Poland or Russia, and how they co-existed in other places. Also, I'm totally sympathetic to some of the narratives that were relayed in the film. The lifestyle of the Iraqi Jews back then differs from the lifestyle Jews experienced in other Arab countries. Besides Moroccan Jews, who can visit Morocco if they choose to, no other Jews are allowed to visit in Arab countries, let alone live there or purchase property. It's part of the law—you were given an exit visa, you became a refugee, and you can't claim it back as your country, they will not take you back. If I were to go back to Libya, the first thing they would probably do is arrest me. Edwin Shuker, the protagonist in the film *"Remember Baghdad"* wanted to buy property in Baghdad, to hang onto that last remnant of his family history. I could really relate to how extremely nostalgic he was about his background and growing up in Iraq. Realistically speaking, Jews could not live in Iraq today. Antisemitism is even stronger today in the Arab countries than it was when Jews were living there. While JIMENA respects the hopes and aspirations of refugees from the Middle East and North Africa, as an institution we are committed to representing the greater interests of Jewish refugees from Arab countries. Of the one million Jews who fled or were ethnically cleansed from the region, 650,000 settled in Israel and are legally barred from entering the countries that exiled them - including Iraq. We confidently believe the vast majority of Jewish refugees and their descendants have no interest in returning to countries that violated their basic human rights and confiscated their assets and communal property as they fled or were expelled. Edwin is a friend of JIMENA and we appreciate his

advocacy—however, we view his desire for Iraqi Jews to buy property in Iraq as an anomaly opinion that we don't endorse.

**SVJFF:** What was especially meaningful for you in the film? What did you like about it? What do you think makes it significant today?

**WALDMAN:** I think that would be the part about identity, for better and worse. On the flip side, the film portrays very sad moments. Most of the people interviewed share the anguish of the Farhud, or pogrom, which also happened in Libya. I think it was 1945 when people in Libya took to the streets. People were murdered. My father was a young man at the time and volunteered to bury the severed bodies of his friends. This traumatized him for the rest of his life. My mother ran from rooftop to rooftop until she was saved by Christian woman who hid her in her house. All this came back to me when watching the film. Righteous Arabs, who saved the lives of Jews, should not be overlooked. When I was hiding with my family in the garage of my British employer there was a mob that came to burn down my parent's house. My Arab neighbor came out of his house and told them that there were no Jews living there, only him and his family. He said, "Do you want to kill your fellow Muslim? Go away from here, I'm an Egyptian!" He saved my family's lives, so I always mention him when give a presentation. Jews who left their houses were knifed to death.

On the other hand, Jews from the Arab countries identify very strongly with their own tradition and culture. In the film, it's when you see David Dangoor looking through the photo album at the wonderful, smiling faces of people who loved living in the community where they lived. There was a sense of belonging. In countries where Jews were oppressed, like in Arab countries, Jews stuck together in their insular communities. Since we couldn't afford to leave the walls of the community, we developed strong friendships, bonding closely with one another, embracing one another with love and affection, where we cared for and helped one another. This is an innate part of how I grew up. In the film, when David Dangoor shows the place where parties took place and people gathered together, whether it was for a Bar Mitzvah or any other event, there was this sense of harmony. When you leave a place, this is something you lose. My family, who stayed in Rome after we left Libya, are part of a community that really stick together. They have their own synagogue, marry members of the same community, continue traditions, they are very, very strongly tied together. When you come to the USA and scatter across the country you lose a lot of the sense of identity. I cook a couscous dish that is typical of Tripoli and I'm the only one who knows what that's all about because none of my friends would know.

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*Michelle Shabtai and Karen Winokan conducted the Q&A with Gina Waldman for the SVJFF. Michelle is a writer, translator and photographer, and works in marketing, publicity and social media for the SVJFF. Karen Winokan currently studies cinema at UC Berkeley, and works as Associate Program Manager for the SVJFF.*