

## Film depicts priest caught between two worlds



Israeli filmmaker Ronit Kertsner, right, with Bildner Center associate director Karen Small following the showing of *Torn* at the Rutgers Jewish Film Festival. Photo by Debra Rubin

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November 28, 2011

For both professional and personal reasons, Israeli filmmaker Ronit Kertsner became fascinated by the story of a man caught between two religious worlds.

As an adopted child herself, she was drawn to the tale of Romuald Waszkinel, whose own Jewish parents — who died in the Shoa — gave him as an infant to a Polish couple to raise. She was intrigued by the dilemma of a man who found out about his Jewish heritage 12 years after becoming a Catholic priest and came to Israel to study the religion of his biological parents.

Kertsner's documentary *Torn* was one of 14 works shown as part of the annual Rutgers Jewish Film Festival. She spoke Nov. 8 at the Regal Cinema in North Brunswick after the screening of the film, which was nominated as best feature-length documentary at the 2011 Israeli Documentary Forum Awards.

She said her subject — who was born Jakub Weksler and now goes by the name Yaakov Weksler-Waszkinel — today considers himself an observant Jew, but remains a priest.

In the film he is shown at the Western Wall in Jerusalem wearing both a kipa and priest's collar. He is accompanied by Michael Schudrich, the American-born chief rabbi of Poland, who agreed to mediate between Weksler-Waszkinel and the Israelis.

Weksler-Waszkinel's attachment to both families and religions is evident throughout the film, which opens with him conducting Catholic mass in Poland and being serenaded by nuns as he prepares to leave for Israel. In Israel, sans collar, he is shown engaged in Jewish religious services. Wherever he lives, he takes with him the photos of his "Jewish mother" and his "Polish mother."

When he approaches a Catholic monastery in Israel in hopes of living and working with the clerics, he is rebuffed because of his mixed religious convictions.

“He really believed the church would help him in Israel,” said Kertsner, adding that the man who once conducted daily mass no longer attends Catholic church services. “He is very, very angry at the church,” she said, but “I think he still believes in Christianity and Jesus.”

By the same token, his application for Israeli citizenship was rejected, because, as someone practicing another religion, he was not covered under the Law of Return. Instead, he was granted temporary residency on a religious worker’s visa.

“He told them, ‘My parents were Jewish, my grandparents were Jewish,’” said Kertsner. “After my film came out and started getting press, they changed his status to permanent resident, but I don’t see them giving him citizenship, which I think is pretty sad.”

<http://njewishnews.com/article/middlesex/film-depicts-priest-caught-between-two-worlds>