My Leftist

It's easy to disagree with some of the provocative ideas raised by Yulie Gerstel in her searching films, but hard not to admire the honesty and courage of her personal journey

Sara K. Eisen

FOR YULIE COHEN GERSTEL, asking questions is an art. Literally. "Tzion Admati" ("My Land Zion") is the second in her trilogy of deeply personal documentaries in which she probes herself and others about life and matters of national identity in Israel. The first film, the critically acclaimed "My Terrorist," winner of a Wolgin Prize at the Jerusalem Film Festival in 2002, dealt with Gerstel's provocative process of coming to terms with her history as a victim of Palestinian terror. Less dramatic, but no less challenging, "My Land Zion" asks questions such as the one heard in the opening voice-over: "What kind of mother returns to her homeland to give birth to her children, when in that home thousands of children have been killed... as soldiers, and as students going to school on a bus, or sitting in a café?.... That mother is me."

Funded by the Danish Film Institute and several European TV networks, including France's Arté and the BBC, on which the movie will air in the coming weeks, "My Land Zion" focuses on love of place and love of life. A sixth-generation Israeli (her great-grandfather immigrated to Jaffa from Algeria in 1836), and a peace activist since the early 80s, Gerstel, 48, sees those two loves as now being at odds in her native country.

Gerstel's camera looks both inward and out to find the reasons she stays in Israel to raise her two daughters, instead of, say, returning to New York, where she spent much of the 1980s earning a graduate degree in communications. She interviews her elderly parents, who fought with the pre-state Palmah militia, about the displacement of Arabs in 1948 ("We were fighting for our lives," her mother reminds her), and attends Israeli-Arab "Nakba" day activities in parallel with marking Israel's Independence Day. Gerstel's thesis is that increasing Israeli awareness of the Palestinian "other" and an acceptance of collective responsibility for Israel's part in the Palestinians' catastrophe, are the keys to life in this embattled land that she (sometimes apologetically) calls home.

"If everyone would look [only] at themselves, there would be hope and change. I [specifically] chose to deal only with ourselves... There is context, but it's not in the movie," she acknowledges in an interview. Nonetheless, she asserts that this land — at least within its pre-Six-Day War borders — belongs to Israel, and that she "would be willing to die" defending it. For that reason, she adds, she has no "fan club on the radical left" — she is "too Zionistic."

That will surprise some viewers, who may see her relentlessly critical questioning as "masochistic," as one member of the audience attending the film's premiere at the Jerusalem Cinémathèque put it. Gerstel, however, is certain that by showing the "compassionate side of Israelis," her movie is "good for the Jews." She insists in conversation that the fallout from the realization of the Zionist dream perpetuates Israel's problem, and she calls for Israeli Jews to face themselves, even if that is at times unpleasant — and even if it requires holding themselves to a higher standard than most nations do.

Facing ourselves is one thing, but I had to pause when I read an interview Gerstel gave recently to the BBC website, in which, quoting her friend, controversial Haifa University historian Motti Golani, she reframed the War of Independence as "the first war of the State of Israel against the Arabs."

Golani's person and philosophy both play an important part in "My Land Zion." In his view, the state's leadership, which has been based on "a culture of power" since Israel's creation in 1948, has "generally preferred to use force to solve problems, not all of which have been life-and-death issues." It came as something of a relief, then, when Golani told me, in a separate interview, that he would have fought in the 48 war had he been alive then; cited his great love for the Land of Israel, the Hebrew language and Jewish culture; and added he does not question Israel's right to exist as a state.

A "subplot" in the film has Gerstel traveling to Eastern Europe with Golani, whose mother is a Hungarian Holocaust survivor. There, he tries to visit the house that his mother grew up in, but the current owners refuse to let him in. The family's story of displacement and death is discussed in a subsequent scene with Golani's mother, who now lives near Modi'in, in central Israel. Asked to discuss how it feels to have, at least by proxy, displaced the Arab family whose old home still stands near hers, after having herself been displaced not too long before, she replies that she has reached the point where she can acknowledge the pain caused to the Palestinians by the founding of Israel, adding that these are the things that happen in wars. Motti replies that he understands that not every wrong can be righted, that he was only looking for that kind of acknowledgment and awareness from his mother, and that that's all he was seeking — and was refused — in Hungary.

But, will "acknowledgment" and "validation" of their displacement and pain suffice for those Palestinians calling for the "right of return" — or is it the keys to the country that they're after? Both Gerstel and Golani think that symbolic recognition — such as a well-worded public statement and perhaps reparations (Golani) — would go a long way toward mending the century-long conflict be-

COURTESY YULI COHEN GERSTEL

tween the two peoples; both think that Israel can take responsibility for its contribution to Palestinian suffering without giving up its moral claim to the land.

All of which made me wonder aloud why Gerstel seems to find it so difficult to extend this kind of generosity of spirit to the *other* "other" — Israeli Jews who live beyond the Green Line. When she talks about the settlers, Gerstel reveals an uncharacteristic pessimism and cynicism: Al-

IDEOLOGICAL GULF: Settler Ruti Gillis (left) realized her guest Gerstel 'would have been more comfortable in a Beduin tent than with us'

though she says she regards them as her "brothers and sisters," she is convinced they will precipitate a civil war if and when they are forced to move back inside sovereign Israel. "We will kill each other because we have no more external enemies," she predicts, contending that Israel is under no existential threat from the Palestinians, who, she believes, pursue terror out of desperation, rather than fundamentalism or an ideology of land over life.

THOSE ARE QUALITIES, IN FACT, that she associates with Gush Emunim loyalists. It is ironic, then, that "My Land Zion" was initially slated to be called "My Settler," and was to be based around Gerstel's dialogues with Ruti Gillis, widow of Dr. Shmuel Gillis, who was killed in February 2001 by Palestinian terrorists. The shooting took place not far from the Gillises' home, in Karmei Tzur, a settlement in Gush Etzion, in the West Bank south of Jerusalem.

The two first met during the blizzard of January 2000, when Gerstel and a European photography crew (she was, she laughs now, the Israeli "fixer" for the photo shoots of a Body Shop ad campaign that was intended to feature trendy human-rights images from hot spots around the world) got snowed in on the road in Gush Etzion. The English-born Shmuel, patrolling in an ambulance, found the frozen bunch and took them to his home, where they ended up "being stuck" for Shabbat.

Despite her family's best efforts to make Gerstel feel at home, the insightful Ruti Gillis picked up immediately the difficulty the fiercely secular filmmaker had with spending a Sabbath in the traditional way — with settlers, no less. "You would have been more comfortable in a Beduin tent than with us," she tells Gerstel in their on-screen conversation, and the Tel Aviv native admits that she's right.

Gerstel says that she was so shaken by her own resistance to the Gillis family that it took her two weeks to gather up the courage to call and thank them for their hospitality. Several years after that, some time after Shmuel's murder, Gerstel sent Ruti a copy of "My Terrorist," and the dialogue that ensued between the two women turned into what was supposed to be the basis for the next film. After the first half-day of filming, however, Ruti Gillis backed out of the project, for both personal and ideological reasons.

Today, the ideological gulf between the women remains great. Gerstel calls Gillis's on-screen assertion, as she gestures to the adjacent Arab village, that "there is room for everyone here," no less than an implicit acceptance of what, in Gerstel's opinion, would inevitably become apartheid.

Gillis, for her part, reveals in a phone interview that she was deeply hurt by the film, in which, for example, Golani proclaims that the settlers "have no God." (By this he means, he tells me later, that they are "desecrating Judaism and God" by giving preference, as he sees it, to land over life.) In Gillis's opinion, statements like that serve to tacitly dehumanize the entire settler population, and grant legitimacy to those who wish to do them physical harm. She adds that her hematologist husband worked hard to save Jews and Arabs alike; she feels that the movie is an affront to his memory.

Gillis was especially dismayed — and continues to be — that Gerstel's acceptance of her as a settler seemed on the same continuum as her forgiveness of the attacker who almost took her life. As documented in "My Terrorist," Gerstel, then a flight attendant, was shot and wounded in a 1978 attack on an El Al crew in London, in which a colleague, Irit Gidron, was killed. "My Terrorist" recounts Gerstel's process of "forgiving" the PFLP terrorist, Fahad Mihyi, who is still serving time in a British jail, but is now up for parole, thanks to his renunciation of violence and an appeal from Gerstel. In that earlier film, the viewer was given a glimpse only of the letters between Gerstel and "her terrorist"; Gerstel's actual visit to him in prison was not filmed.

Gerstel's psychological journey toward confronting her attacker in "My Terrorist," filmed mostly amid the intifada in 2001 but begun in better times, was inspired by her widening circle of Palestinian friends. What if, she once speculated at a gathering, my terrorist is in this room, and I don't even know it's him? The escalation in terror, as filming progresses, in Israel and worldwide, serve to undermine Gerstel's conviction that she is doing the right thing, giving the film an admirable candor and emotional complexity. Also central to the documentary are Gerstel's encounters with both a woman who lost a daughter in a bus bombing, who cannot comprehend the logic or morality of Gerstel's desire to forgive someone who sought her death, and a journalist on the hard left, who encourages her to continue on the path of personal reconciliation she has grown ambivalent about.

Gerstel comes to the conclusion, by the movie's end, that the struggle within her between forgiveness, on the one hand, and fear and hate, on the other, can be pursued only in her own life, and may have no larger effect: Closure with her past will not yield a terror-free future for humanity. Similarly, in "My Land Zion," she concludes that seeking a better life for her daughters — here in her homeland, she hopes — is largely an individual mission, but may be the best she can do.

In the third section of the trilogy, "My Brother," Gerstel will attempt to renew her relationship with her only brother, Gil Cohen, an ultra-Orthodox yeshivah student in Bnei Brak who, for more than 20 years, has had no contact with his intensely secular family. To date, however, although Gerstel says she has "reached out my hand in reconciliation," she has not received an answer from him.

One can only hope he acquiesces. Gerstel's celluloid inner-peace processes are unique and absorbing, I think, because they ask their questions so earnestly and reach so few resolutions. They have the vulnerable feel of therapy sessions — but it's often the whole State of Israel that is on the couch with the filmmaker. That may not be a comfortable place to lie, but — as with psychotherapy — the process itself can have its own rewards.