



Hotline

Silvina Landsmann

Producer Silvina Landsmann, Pierre-Olivier Bardet. **Production companies** Comino Films (Tel Aviv, Israel); Idéale Audience (Paris, France). **Director** Silvina Landsmann. **Screenplay** Silvina Landsmann. **Director of photography** Silvina Landsmann. **Sound** Guy Barkay. **Sound design** Yoss Apfelbaum. **Editor** Silvina Landsmann, Gil Schnaiderovich.

DCP, colour. 100 min. Hebrew, English, French.

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The women from the Tel Aviv hotline for refugees and migrants work around the clock. They look after the rights of people without papers, give legal advice, go to government offices on their behalf and do public relations for their cause.

The camera catapults us right into the midst of the action. Before an enraged crowd, a woman activist calls for the refugees from Sudan and Eritrea brought to Sinai by Egyptian traffickers and now stranded in Israel to be given residence permits. She is met with vehement resistance and is verbally and nearly physically attacked. But the organisation doesn't just have to fight the xenophobic mood in the population, but also a brand of legislation that treats any illegal border crossing as a criminal offence. The refugee prisons near the Egyptian border are constantly being expanded. The director is denied access. Silvina Landsmann takes the viewer along to the various settings – government offices, courts, the Knesset – and edits together her material in such a way that it becomes clear what the struggle for human rights consists of: talking, mobilising, documenting and persuading.

Anke Leweke

Asylum politics in Israel

I started shooting *Hotline* in September 2012, a couple of months after the third amendment of the Prevention of Infiltration Law came into force. Under it, asylum seekers who entered Israel were jailed for at least three years.

I followed the workers of the organisation Hotline for Refugees and Migrants in their daily routine: the young women informing asylum seekers about their rights, the lawyers fighting to free asylum seekers from prison, the public policy coordinator working at the parliament's Internal Affairs Committee and so on. *Hotline* is a live portrait of this organisation at a specific moment in time. A couple of months after shooting wrapped, the Israeli High Court of Justice ruled that this third amendment was unconstitutional and must be overturned, ruling that administrative detention of this sort violates the Israeli Basic Law of Human Dignity and Liberty.

The government then passed a fourth amendment to the Prevention of Infiltration Law: asylum seekers who enter Israel were to be jailed for one year, after which they were to be transferred to an 'open residential centre' named Holot (which means 'sands'), located on the other side of the road from the prisons for asylum seekers, on the border with Egypt.

The Supreme Court ruled that this fourth amendment was unconstitutional, and decided that Holot should close within ninety days. The policy toward asylum seekers can't be based solely on mass detention of innocent people.

Then the Israeli Knesset legislated a fifth amendment to the Prevention of Infiltration Law. The Hotline for Refugees and Migrants, together with other human rights organisations, has submitted yet another legal petition to the Supreme Court calling for its invalidation.

This petition is still pending, and the hotline's work is still never-ending.

Silvina Landsmann

"It's the battle of words"

Your last film, Bagrut Loachamim, was about a group of Israeli combat soldiers participating in a series of army-sponsored courses, including civic studies focusing on issues of human rights and democracy. Your film showed the difficulties those young men have with tolerance and acceptance in the country. Now you've again focused on a huge problem in Israel. What motivated you to make a film about the Hotline for Migrant Workers?

The issues of migration and of the role of NGOs in the political arena have interested me for many years. In 1998, I moved back to Tel Aviv after living in Paris for ten years, where I had just finished my first film, *Collège*. The massive presence of migrant workers from Bulgaria, Rumania, China, Thailand and the Philippines in Tel Aviv was something new to me. These people were brought to Israel by manpower companies in order to replace the traditional workforce of the Israeli economy, the Palestinians from the occupied territories.

The process started after the first Intifada (1987-1991), with state support, in a proudly neo-liberal environment. Fascinated by this phenomenon, I decided to make a film about a little NGO that gave legal assistance to those migrants. Much to my regret, the film never happened.

Hotline is a result of that regret: After finishing *Bagrut Loachamim*, I decided to go back to those issues, which had become bigger with time. Very quickly, I found myself swallowed by the activity of the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants, which opened its doors to my camera.

Who is the British ex-member of parliament visiting the hotline office? And what came out of this encounter?

This former member of parliament was brought to the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants by a member of the Israeli parliament, in order to meet with representatives of several human rights organisations fighting human trafficking and learn about this struggle in Israel. His name is not the issue. He reminds us, if needed, that migration is a global issue, and that NGOs play a central role in western democracies.

What came out of this encounter? It's difficult to determine. The goal of this kind of meeting is to inform influential people so they can 'spread the word' and speak with decision-makers and thus try to generate change. It's like advocacy, or lobbying.

Sigal Rozen, the public policy coordinator for the Hotline for Migrants, makes clear that the distinction between 'refugee' and 'infiltrator' is kept on a vague basis in Israel. But isn't there clear evidence of which countries are conflict areas?

The rate of recognition of Eritreans as refugees in Europe is close to eighty-two per cent, while in Israel only two Eritreans have been recognised as refugees and the rate is close to zero per cent. Recognising them as refugees would mean giving them legal status, and this is something Israel is trying to avoid. So it's not a matter of evidence. It's semantics. It's the battle of words, or a battle through words. It's one of the issues of the film.

We witness in your film scenes of public commotion and aggression. There are also situations in court or moments when you were only able to record sound. How did you plan shooting in terms of filming permits and unforeseeable situations?

When I knew beforehand that I would have to follow one of the hotline workers to the prison's gate or to the tribunal door – prison and court are two places where cameras are forbidden – I asked the prison spokesperson for permission to film outside the prison, and the tribunal spokesperson for permission to film inside the tribunal building, with a special permit to film inside the courtroom until the judge arrived. These permits were granted without any problem. But sometimes I had to ask for the permit while filming, regretting not having some help. Most of the time I was able to get permission to film at a moment's notice. But it did happen that I had to argue with a train guard, and had to claim I was just holding the camera. It's so simple to film everywhere with one's cell phone nowadays that most of these limitations feel somewhat absurd.

You show the daily work in the NGO's office. There are striking images of details like faded papers that form the legal basis for remaining in Israel for these people; faces and hands bearing the traces of their lives as refugees. You show people in distress. How was your relationship to the people frequenting the hotline office? And for how long did you accompany the work of the hotline?

I followed the everyday work of the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants for four months. I was there filming the hotline's work when the 'clients' arrived. I'd explain to them that I was doing

a film about the hotline, and I'd ask for permission to film them as well. Sometimes they agreed, sometimes not. Each one of them bears their own story, a story that we can only guess at. In another time, another place, it could be you, or me. I shot more than 300 hours of footage.

At the end of the film, Sigal receives a phone call from a photographer who wants to take pictures of tortured refugees. It seems odd, since there's the chance the photographer might use the photos in a lurid way for his own purposes. But is this still a legitimate way to draw attention to this problem?

The question you're asking is important. Furthermore, you could ask if this is a way to pay attention to this problem at all. It's a complex issue. Let me refer you to *The Tyrant's Bloody Robe*, the introduction of Slavoj Žižek's text *Violence – Six Sideways Reflections*. In this very concise text the question is brilliantly analysed.

But since the question is important, I sent it to Sigal Rozen. Here is her answer:

'As part of the efforts to raise awareness about the Sinai torture camps and the lack of rehabilitation services to about 7,000 survivors living in Israel, the hotline has brought the personal stories of survivors to the media, but of course, only with their consent. This first conversation with the photographer seemed as if no good could come from it, but I receive calls like that about once a day and sometimes they lead to a fruitful collaboration. Artists get to meet the hotline's clients only after several meetings with the staff members, who make sure of what their intentions are. That is why I did not want to dismiss him right away.'

Interview: Gabriela Seidel-Hollaender, January 2015



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Silvana Landsmann was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1965. Her family emigrated to Israel in 1976. She studied Film at Tel Aviv University. After graduating, she lived in Paris for ten years, where her first film, *Collège* (1997) was made. After returning to Israel, she started the Comino Films production company. In addition to working as a director, she also teaches Documentary Film at the Tel Aviv Cinémathèque.

Films

1997: *Collège* (133 min.). 2004: *Machleket Yoldot/Post Partum* (66 min.). 2007: *Avo Ba-Mechilot/Unto Thy Land* (60 min.). 2012: *Bagrut Lochamim/Soldier/Citizen* (Berlinale Forum 2012, 68 min.). 2015: *Hotline*.