# 'Why do they want to kill us?'

MILLS'S FILM 'Auf Wiedersehen 'Till We Meet Again' traces her mother's flight from Vienna in 1939 through the eyes of Mills's 10-year-old son, Ronnie.

## The 9/11 attack compelled a New York professor to trace her roots back to Austria and document that journey of discovery on film

• ILAN EVYATAR

When Linda Mills saw the first plane slam into the World Trade Center, she knew it was time to act, a lesson that had been imparted to her by her grandfather, a Jew who made it out of Nazi Austria at the last moment. When her son started asking her, "Why do they want to kill us?" she knew it was time to trace her roots and start asking some questions of her own.

Mills lives just a few blocks from the Twin Towers. Part of one of the planes was left embedded in the building across the street, the roof of her building was ripped open and with the area declared a no-go zone, her family was forced out of their home for a few weeks. Her son, who was five years old, was in his third day of elementary school right by the World Trade Center.

"We were in the schoolyard when the first plane hit," Mills recalls. "I said to myself, having been trained by my grandfather, 'Don't look. Get out. This is terrorism.'"

The experience led Mills, a professor of social work and law at New York University, who also teaches a course in activism and film, to make *Auf Wiedersehen 'Till We Meet Again*, a documentary that traces her mother's flight from Vienna in 1939 through the eyes of her 10-year-old son, Ronnie.

Here earlier this month for a screening at the Jerusalem Cinematheque's Jewish Film Festival, Mills met with *The Jerusalem Post*.

TO EXPLAIN 9/11 to her son, Linda Mills realized she had to delve into her own past.

Explaining why she had decided to make the film, Mills says that the questions asked by her son plagued her own childhood, but the answers she sought from her mother about the Holocaust were not forthcoming. She decided that if she was going to be able to talk to her son about 9/11, she needed to delve more deeply into her own past.

"I think I was initially motivated by the fact that we had experienced terrorism at such close range during 9/11, and my son started asking the question 'Why do they want to kill us?' So I felt as a therapist but also a scholar that I needed to understand the question why in the past people wanted to kill us, and particularly my family. What did that mean, and how did that history have relevance to my family's experience during the war?"

In the movie, Mills; her husband Peter Goodrich, a professor of law; her mother, Annie; her aunt Rita and her son Ronnie – who give the film a very human, light-hearted touch despite its oppressive subject matter – head to Vienna to retrace the family history. There they find more than they bargained for when they stumble upon the archival records kept by the Jewish community for Adolf Eichmann. The records told the history she "had not been told" and revealed a story of "heroism, deceit, collaboration and escape."

Mills discovers that her grandfather had concealed his assets from the community to avoid paying an exit tax that Jews had to pay to leave the country. Part of that money was used by the community to help Jews flee Austria. He managed to leave for the US, where he rebuilt his fashion business.

"My grandfather was very successful, and he gave much of whatever he got to Israel," says Mills. "Did he know that money would be used for Jews to leave Austria? I think the answer is ambiguous. I think he had good reason to believe that the money was being handed over to the Nazis. The equally interesting question is that he was willing to risk his life for it. When I look back with 20/20 hindsight, I think it's likely that he made a decision for his family as opposed to other Jews in Vienna. That said, his generosity for the rest of his life was really amazing."

That wasn't the only thing Mills found out. She also discovered that her grandmother's mother, her grandfather's mother-in-law, had written to him begging him to get her out of Austria, but he had been unable to do so because he lacked the funds. "The fact that we found the letter... was really shocking to all of us," she says, "knowing that she had died in that way and had pleaded for her life to my

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grandfather. That was hair-raising."

The Jewish community's work with Eichmann raises the dilemma of collaboration, a dilemma that Mills approaches historically and from the perspective of its contemporary relevance.

"For me the question of the whole notion of collaboration was a fascinating one," says Mills. "What I wanted to do was to ask a historical question and a contemporary question. A historical question is when you look back at what happened and why it happened and, as so many historians have said, were the Jews forced to cooperate? Otherwise, the Nazis would have punished the Jews in some way or another. But if they hadn't organized the paperwork, who would have? How would they have accessed that information?

"With hindsight, for Vienna it was the right decision. Two-thirds of Austria's Jews were saved. Did they know that the calculation would materialize that way? Maybe... In their calculation it was clear to them that, assuming they took the Nazis at their word which was just to get people out, they did a truly remarkable job of getting so many Austrian Jews out. It was a remarkable effort," she says.

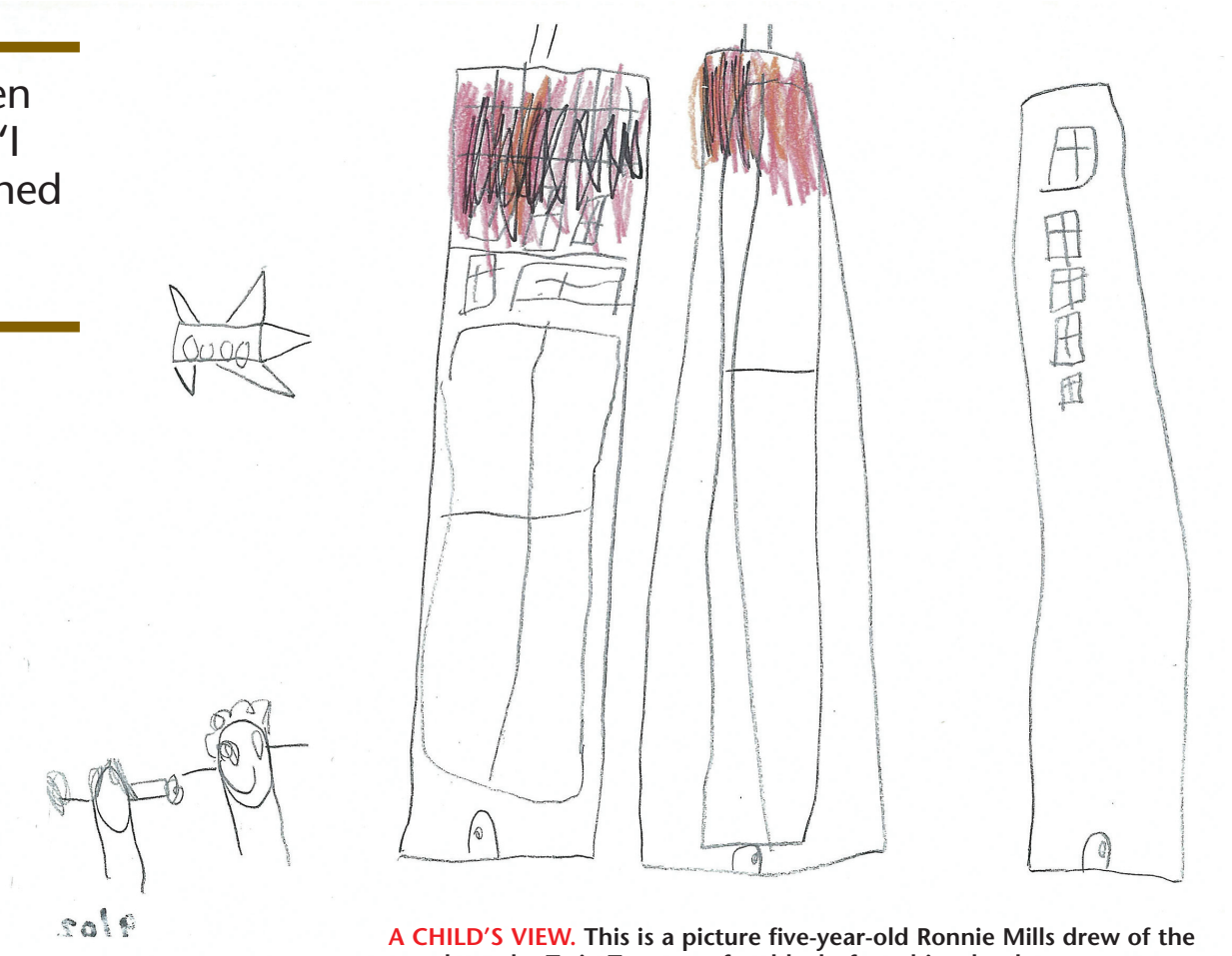
"As to the larger question, today looking back I think we have a responsibility to learn from history. How did such cooperation contribute to a negative outcome and a positive outcome? I think that we should examine its relevance for today. A few years ago I heard a South African judge ask, 'Where were the Jews during apartheid?' I think it's important for us to ask these questions every day of our lives."

While the film clearly touches on issues of Jewish identity, Mills's husband is not Jewish. How does their son identify and how was his identity affected by the process of making the film?

"When you are married to someone who isn't Jewish – and being Jewish is so important because it is so wrapped up with life and death questions – if you haven't resolved that before you have children, it will certainly arise when you do. The first question is How does your partner address that question? What's important is that because we have this history, the Holocaust history, as well as the 9/11 history, understanding our roots was absolutely crucial. For me, Ronnie's identity as a Jew is fundamental to who I want him to be, and he has a complicated history to that because it's not safe to be Jewish, so if you actually have to choose it, what does that mean? Why would I choose not to be in a safe place as a 10-year-old?"

Mills is at pains to make clear that she supports the Ground Zero mosque and that she is "not of that ilk."

"Having gone through 9/11 at such close range, I think it really raised the question, is it not safe? There was so much about killing Jews around 9/11, it really was as much about Jews as it was Americans. It did at least raise the specter that this is a new moment or threat to Jews. I don't feel personally threatened, but you can imagine how it might feel from a 10-year-old's perspective."



**A CHILD'S VIEW.** **This is a picture five-year-old Ronnie Mills drew of the attack on the Twin Towers, a few blocks from his school.**

While Mills has incurred a lot of criticism for involving her son in the film, she says that "On balance, it was clearly the right thing to do, to expose him to this history. I have been in many audiences where parents would say, 'I can't believe you told him all this.' I think I wanted to know, I wanted honesty, not people hiding things from me which just made me more curious, more uncomfortable. What were they hiding? What was there to be afraid of? So I think that's a source of comfort. But you know, the therapists will tell us in 20 years."

And for Mills herself, did the film provide a sense of closure?

"Yes, no question about it. I think that this sort of going back and recovering the history is crucial work for people who are unsettled. It doesn't answer every question. You think, 'I'll go and I'll finally put everything to rest,' but there are a million questions that still remain open. But I think for the most part, it is an affirming journey that makes you feel that you can find closure and a wholeness to the story that you never felt before." ■