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Recounting the Past of a Witness to History

By JOHN ANDERSON

“YOU have to understand the feelings of the people you’re interviewing,” the veteran journalist Ruth Gruber said recently. Which sounds simple enough, unless the person you’re interviewing is Ruth Gruber.

After all, her own subjects have included Holocaust survivors, Arctic explorers, inmates of Stalin’s gulags and [Virginia Woolf](#). The precocious product of “a shtetl called Brooklyn,” Ms. Gruber made headlines in 1931 when, at 20, she earned a doctorate in literature from the University of Cologne in Germany. She journeyed to the Soviet Arctic in 1935 while reporting for The New York Herald Tribune; was a special assistant to Interior Secretary Harold Ickes during World War II; escorted 1,000 Jewish refugees to Oswego, N.Y., during the war; covered the Nuremberg war-crimes trials; and accompanied the globe-trotting Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry as it examined the question of Jewish refugees and [Palestine](#).

“She’s inspiring the minute you meet her,” said Bob Richman, who is the cinematographer turned director behind “[Ahead of Time](#),” a documentary portrait of Ms. Gruber that opens on Friday in New York. “She’s just this wonderful person who’d done all these amazing things. We’re both from Brooklyn — at different times — but her whole story of wanting to get out of Brooklyn and do something in the world, I related to that.”

That a nonfiction film about Ms. Gruber hasn’t been made before is surprising. A narrative feature, “[Haven](#),” starring [Natasha Richardson](#), was broadcast on television in 2001. But as a directorial debut for Mr. Richman, it made constitutional and emotional sense.

“I think the most important part of being a documentary cameraman is being empathetic,” Mr. Richman said from Memphis, where he was shooting “Paradise Lost 3” for the directors [Joe Berlinger](#) and [Bruce Sinofsky](#). (His other recent films include “[The September Issue](#),” “[My Architect](#),” the Oscar-winning “[An Inconvenient Truth](#)” and the coming “[Waiting for Superman](#).”) “I’m not a real technical guy. It’s not about the great shot, although you love to get the great shot. It’s about the empathy with your character. For me the biggest

compliment I get is: 'You know what? You listen.' ”

Ms. Gruber, who turns 99 this month, has spent her professional life listening — to world leaders, displaced persons, dubious politicians and, once, when she was on the fellowship that led to her doctorate, [Hitler](#). “My mother became slightly hysterical” about her going to Europe, Ms. Gruber recalled. “She thought Hitler was going to shoot me. But I needed to understand what was going on there.”

It was that hunger for clarity, Ms. Gruber agreed, that dictated the course of her life. That, and an apparent immunity to obstacles. “Whenever an opportunity opened for her,” Mr. Richman said, “she would step right through it. So I said, ‘O.K., I’m going to take her lead and direct this film.’ ”

In the rambling Art Deco-era apartment on Central Park West where Ms. Gruber has lived since 1954 (“It was \$250 a month. My husband said, ‘We can’t afford it!’ ”) she recalled names and dates with a precision that would elude people half her age. She also laughed frequently, especially about the making of “[Ahead of Time](#).”

“They didn’t know anything about making movies,” she said with a smile, in a room boasting eastern, western and northern views of Manhattan as well as hundreds of books, awards and portraits of David Ben-Gurion, Golda Meir and other luminaries with whom she crossed paths (or swords). One of the would-be filmmakers was Doris Schechter, the restaurateur behind My Most Favorite Food, whose family had been among the Oswego refugees. Another was Patti Kenner and a third was Denise Benmosche, all friends of Ms. Gruber’s and now executive producers on “Ahead of Time.”

Zeva Oelbaum, a photographer who became the film’s producer, was the one member of the team with movie connections: she had produced “René and I” (2005), a Holocaust documentary, and she lived in Montclair, N.J., the same town as Mr. Richman. Their fateful meeting occurred, Mr. Richman said, as he was “coming out of the dry cleaners.”

“Zeva told me, ‘I’m involved in a documentary’ and started telling me about this Ruth Gruber film,” he said. “They couldn’t get it off the ground. Finally, she said, ‘Do you want to direct it?’ ”

His was not an impulse decision. He said he liked the idea of directing but didn’t know who Ruth Gruber was. So Ms. Oelbaum arranged a meeting, and Mr. Richman was immediately persuaded.

Ms. Gruber was quite pleased with her biographer. “He’s so understanding,” she said. “And guess what? He even read my books. Whoever heard of that?”

Ms. Oelbaum had already done six months’ research and had the benefit of Ms. Gruber’s curatorial instincts. “She saved absolutely everything,” Ms. Oelbaum said. “She’s had this fabulous life. But when you’ve also got the photos, and letters, and ID cards, then you’ve got something that’s special.”

Sabine Krayenbuhl, the film’s editor, said she appreciated Mr. Richman’s ability to capture a subject.

“Take Ruth,” Ms. Krayenbuhl said. “She does so many interviews and has been on camera so many times, you can see she’s very aware of, let’s say, her presentation. But in certain scenes Ruth forgets who Ruth is. Bob gets her at the moment when she’s losing herself.”

For Mr. Richman, Ms. Gruber’s life presented a challenge of compression. “This was obviously going to be a past-tense story,” he said. “But the present-day Ruth was so fascinating. I wanted to do a film that showed both Ruths, present day and past.”

To avoid making a four-hour movie, he ended the past-tense part of “Ahead of Time” in 1947. Ms. Gruber was 36. “It’s not really a life story,” Mr. Richman said. “I left out 50 years.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: September 12, 2010

An article last Sunday about “Ahead of Time,” a documentary portrait of the journalist Ruth Gruber, misstated the name of a restaurant and misidentified its owner, who is an executive producer of the film. The restaurant is My Most Favorite Food — not My Most Favorite Dessert Company — and it is owned by Doris Schechter, not Patti Kenner, who is another executive producer.