



Ahead of her TIME

“ I always believed in what I was doing. I believed that it could make a difference in people’s lives, and journalism should make a difference in people’s lives. It should tell stories, and sometimes those stories show injustice. But we have to keep telling them. We have to let people know the truth.”

– Ruth Gruber

MYREEL REVIEW

by Tammie Dooley



The documentary, *Ahead of Time*, compresses a lifetime of inordinate achievement into an hour and fifteen minutes. Ruth Gruber, at age 97, comes across exactly as she must have over 60 years ago. She speaks with a matter-of-fact ease about becoming the youngest Ph.D. in the world at age 20 (she entered New York University at age 15). She tells of her journey, at age 23, to the Soviet Arctic reporting for the *New York Herald Tribune* as the first foreign correspondent to document the region and the Soviet pioneers living there. And she relates her singularly heroic efforts to escort 982 Jewish refugees on an Army troop transport ship to Ft. Ontario, N.Y. A survivor of that passage reminisces about Ruth: "It's like two people. One burns his hand and the other doesn't. You feel for this person who burned his hand, but you don't feel the burn. Ruth feels the burn." She felt the burn of the refugees and implored President Harry S. Truman not to send them back to their respective homelands after World War II.

"Journalism has changed over the years," Gruber said in a Skype interview following the movie's premiere at Tulsa's Circle Cinema. "I think we were more polite back then, but we still had to get the story. We did it with compassion though. We always cared about telling the truth, and we told the truth. But we still cared about the person at the same time."

When Gruber states she was "being squeezed at home like a sponge and would die if I didn't escape," I recalled my own "escape or die" sentiments growing up on the farm in small town Oklahoma. It's an inherent trait of

youth to feel the need to break free. But not every young person suffers a gnawing at the gut to such a degree that the only cure is to cross borders - most certainly not a female, Jewish teenager in the 1920s. In high school, she realized that the entire world was not from Brooklyn and Jewish and so she proceeded to set her own course to discover it. However, it was more than grit, zip, and courage that took Gruber around the world. She set sail with a camera, pen, paper, and a litany of attributes that defied gender - an almost impossibly difficult course in the early 1930s. Poise, eloquence, quiet confidence, and compassion gave her the ability to move impressively among the world of high-powered men, super charged politicos, and high-octane adventure in the egocentric corridor from Washington, D.C. to New York City. Gruber was extremely affable; she soundly strikes the likeable chord. When combined with the rest of her diplomatic gifts, she was destined to be an unstoppable force in history in any decade.

In 1947, Ruth was the only journalist allowed on a ship filled with 4,515 Jewish Displaced Persons. The ship, *Exodus 1947*, sought to deliver the refugees - most of them holocaust survivors - from France to British occupied Palestine. The British attacked the ship, redirecting it to the port at Haifa with the intention of sending the refugees back to Europe. Ruth met the ship there and was the only journalist allowed by the British to accompany the displaced Jews back to Europe. When the *Paris Herald Tribune* editor saw the developed photographs that Gruber took, he told her, "I never cry over pictures, but these made me weep."

In the film, Ruth is reunited with the ship's captain, Yitzhak "Ike" Aronowicz, who was 23 years old at the time. It is the first time they had seen each other in 60 years. The reunion reflects Gruber's skill in diplomacy and compassion as they realize they have differing opinions on political issues concerning Israel. But Gruber, when faced with the choice of voicing her opinion on politics or showing respect to an old friend, falls silent and only smiles. Keeping your mouth shut may be a lost art these days, but Ruth still lives by the rule that the person matters more than the politics or the story.

Ruth changed lives and those of generations to follow because she allowed no social lens to define her and never felt the need to apologize or explain. There is but one obvious observation to be made about Ruth Gruber today. She's 99 and still ahead of her time.

If the documentary piques your interest and you'd like to know more about Ruth Gruber, pick up any of her 19 books, or rent the CBS miniseries *Haven* starring Natasha Richardson. *Mia*