The Diary of David Perlov

By: Talya Halkin

His voice on the phone is slow, hypnotizing, commanding. If you hear it once, you're bound to recognize it anywhere.

It is a voice that has clearly been born and bred elsewhere, yet it's difficult to know exactly where. Like the films with which it has come to be identified, it has been shaped by borders and border crossings, by cities and languages that kaleidoscope into one another.

I tell David Perlov I would like to meet him on the occasion of the exhibition of his work opening at the Tel Hai Museum of Photography. In addition to 200 color photographs taken over the past three years, it includes screenings of his most important documentaries. Among them are the films considered to be Perlov's greatest artistic achievement - his six-hour Personal Diary, which he began filming exactly 30 years ago, and its sequel - the three-hour Updated Diary 1990-1999. We set up an appointment at his apartment in one of Tel Aviv's first high-rises, at the intersection of Shaul Hamelech and Even Gevirol streets.

He is taller and thinner than I expected - a gaunt man with curly gray hair and blue eyes whose striking, strongly demarcated features could have been sculpted by Giacometti. Wearing khaki pants and a loose, sand-colored sports jacket, he is holding one of the long, slim Davidoff cigarettes that he lights and consumes in an endless succession. The 14th-floor apartment's living room looks out over the city to the sea - a narrow stretch of water coming up abruptly against the horizon. It is a spare, modernist apartment that Perlov bought more than 30 years ago while the building was still going up - before he knew that it would become the epicenter of his cinematic world.

Down below is the crossroads that appears repeatedly in his Diaries, like the X on the map according to which one navigates, and to which one always returns. Sitting across from him at the dining room table, I am suddenly overcome by the sensation that we are suspended in the cabin of an airship, hovering above the flaking whitewash and bony television antennas of the buildings below and looking for somewhere to land.

"This is my mask," he says, raising his silver Polaroid to his face as he takes my picture. We both hold our breath while the pale contours of a figure begin to form. Somehow, he manages to imbue this mundane moment with the kind of magical excitement that I imagine, as I watch him, Daguerre must have felt when the outline

of the Parisian Boulevard du Temple appeared out of nowhere on the surface of the first Daguerreotype more than 150 years ago.

Perlov was born in 1930 in Brazil. His wife Mira's family fled there from Poland when she was a young child, and the two met in the Jewish youth movement Dror. At 22, Perlov left to study painting in Paris, but quickly realized that cinema was his true vocation. Six years later, in 1958, he and Mira came to Israel together. Their twin daughters, Yael and Naomi, were born a year later.

Over the following decade, Perlov grew increasingly despairing of the Israeli world of feature films and institutional documentaries, and the limited economic and creative possibilities it offered. In 1973, he decided to make a drastic change. He turned his camera inward, and began filming his own family and the tiniest, most banal details of his everyday life - the apartment, the surrounding streets, visiting friends, his film students at Tel Aviv University. One of them, the critic Uri Klein, would define this moment years later as the beginning of "the most important creation in the history of Israeli cinema."

"I felt like I was leaving the cinema, that I would accumulate this material and that I might or might not edit it one day," he tells me. "Filming the first six chapters of the Diary wasn't easy. I constantly felt like an intruder. I told my wife and daughters that I would show them everything I shot, and they could veto anything they didn't like."

Economic constraints forced Perlov to work at a remarkably low ratio of filming to editing - only two or three hours of raw film for every hour of edited material. He managed, he says, because "I know the geographical and human landscapes I move in. I don't wander around waiting for something to happen."

Taken together, the chapters of the Diaries are at once a home movie and an intimate series of personal recollections and reflections interspersed with the recording of current events.

Although the geography of Perlov's films circumscribes only a small chunk of urban space - the immediate vicinity of Kikar Malchei Yisrael (now Kikar Rabin) - it allows him to take the country's political pulse at any given moment by sticking his head out the window to watch the rallies and demonstrations unfolding there. Often, he turns to the television screen as another window on the reality outside.

Perlov bought his first still camera 50 years ago when he arrived in Paris, so that he could practice viewing the world through a frame. In his latest film, My Stills 1952-2002, which premiered this past July at the Jerusalem Film Festival, he stunningly uses his earliest and most recent photographs to talk about his relationship to cinema and still photography. Like his films, his photographs are structured by his everyday

routines, and move between Tel Aviv and Paris. Many of the most recent were taken in the London Mini Store arcade below Perlov's home.

My Stills revolves around his studio - an airy, well-lit series of rooms located not far from his apartment. They contain thousands of Polaroid images carefully arranged according to subject - "security guards," "street," "self portraits in elevator and stairwell." The rest of the space is taken up by neatly stacked drawings, photographs, paintings, and books; Sartre's Anti Semite and Jew; Saint-Simon's Memoirs; the photographs of Jacques-Henri Lartigues (one of his favorite photographers).

He seems more in his element when we meet the following day in his beloved workspace. He shows me reproductions of paintings by Guignard, a mute alcoholic whose naive representations of the Brazilian town of Belo Horizonte (where Perlov grew up) are breathtaking celebrations of raw sensation and emotion. We look together at his sketchbooks, which are filled with improvised portraits and fragments of conversations and stories. They are jotted down in several languages, and he reads them out loud in a deliberate, charmingly pedantic manner.

It is only when we begin looking together through a pile of old photographs, however, that Perlov becomes truly animated.

"Here is my close friend, the poet Nathan Zach, whom I dragged onto my bed one night years ago, after he had too much to drink. And here is a photograph of my friend Irving Semel, who brought a sack of meat conserves to the apartment hotel I was living in on the Rue Bonaparte in 1952."

Perlov's paternal family, which hailed from a Hassidic dynasty in the Ukraine, immigrated to Palestine in the 1850s and settled in Safed. His father, Moses, was born there before the family left for Brazil in the 1920s. His mother's originally Besarabian family also settled there. After they married, his parents moved to Belo Horizonte in Brazil. His father left when Perlov was three, and his mother married a man whose terrible brutality she suffered for many years. When he was 10, Perlov's paternal grandfather rescued him and his younger brother, Aaron, taking them to live with him in Sáo Páulo.

"My grandfather was an incredible person - a wheeler and dealer who spoke Arabic, Yiddish, a little Portuguese. He was a kind of popular despot, but a good despot. My father and I each disappointed him in our own way."

Perlov's handsome father was a silent film actor and a well-known itinerant magician. In an old advertising brochure, he appears dressed in a black tuxedo under the caption "Professor Moysotto, Buyer and Seller of Magic Apparel and Books." His son only met him on rare occasions.

"He was a lonely man," Perlov says, his hand tightening into a fist, "who knew only one thing - his art. He always insisted that there is no such thing as real magic - that it was all about dexterity. Our relationship was very difficult. I have always had an aversion to magic."
Perlov's tone of voice - the same tone with which he narrates his films - is intimate and introspective, touchingly pained or angered one moment, joyfully warm the next. I am struck by the inverse connection between his own early family life, which he defines as "infernal," and the rather idealized portrayal of his family life as an adult. For despite the moments of personal and professional difficulty that Perlov relates, his films contain no scenes of discord or tension.

The Diaries can perhaps best be described in terms of movement - inside and outside his home and backwards and forwards in time; a planter on a Tel Aviv street resembles the children's coffins Perlov remembers from Brazil; the face of Dona Guillomard, the Protestant daughter of freed slaves from Bahia who read him the Bible in his childhood, briefly reappears in that immigrant woman on a Paris street; the "Ave Maria" he hears on a Lisbon tram reminds him of the Catholic litanies of his childhood.
"I knew 'Ave Maria' long before I learned yiskadal veyiskadash; I didn't have the appropriate governesses," he explains with a wry smile.
Perlov's film diaries have been praised for weaving together the vicissitudes of private and public life, of personal and collective identity. Yet one can equally point to the paradoxical sense of detachment they communicate. For while his voice is that of an Israeli filmmaker who identifies with, hurts for, and is angered and frustrated by the country he has chosen to make his home, it is simultaneously the voice of an intellectual artist with a dazzlingly rich inventory of associations, who has a difficult time finding his place in Israeli reality. More often than not he prefers to watch it from the security of his perch above the city, which he exchanges only for that of his hotel room in Paris.
Some critics have described Perlov's tone as nostalgic - a definition he does not agree with. Yet there is something elegiac about his imagery: the sense that the act of recording is itself the beginning of oblivion.
Several years ago, I came across a line of graffiti that had been sprayed onto the wall of a tunnel running below Allenby Street near the Carmel market. In sticky yellow letters that ran down the concrete like a melted Popsicle, it read: "Albertine Is Gone." There was something fabulous in the poetic pathos born of the contrast between the dingy underground passage and the title, referring to the disappearance of the

narrator's lover in Marcel Proust's majestic *Remembrance of Things Past*. I had made a point of looking for it on my way to Perlov's studio earlier that morning, because the last chapter of his Updated Diary - "Return to Brazil" - got me thinking about Proust. Not because of the similarity between them, but rather because of how different Perlov's attitude toward time was. For despite his constant preoccupation with memory, Perlov's return to Brazil is marked by no epiphany or illumination, no sudden resurgence of the past. There are only concrete buildings and churches, train stations, shoeshines, and hotel maids.

"There is no Proustian search for the past in my films," Perlov agrees emphatically. "Between Proust and Dickens, I feel closer to Dickens. I was recently reading his *Hard Times*, and was so moved by a certain passage that I photocopied the page to carry around with me.

"I am not looking for lost time," he adds. "When I go back to Brazil, I am there. Film is a document of the present."