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Sweden's premier party planner creates Holocaust legacy

PR guru Micael Bindefeld is tackling Swedish children's lack of knowledge about the Shoah head-on.

By Judy Maltz | Feb. 6, 2015 | 12:42 PM

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From left: Micael Bindefeld; Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven; and H.R.H Prince Daniel of Sweden, January 27, 2015. Photo by Karina Ljungdahl

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In Sweden, his name has long been associated with flashy parties and glittery events – not anything remotely connected to the Holocaust. But at the end of January, Micael Bindefeld made sure the heinous crimes committed against European Jewry during World War II would be very much on the minds of his fellow countrymen.

Among the more than 90 members of Sweden's crème de la crème who attended an International Holocaust Remembrance Day event organized by his recently launched foundation were Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven, His Royal Highness Prince Daniel, and leaders of seven of the eight political parties serving in parliament. More importantly, media coverage of the event was unsurpassed.

As Bindefeld presided over the ceremonies, certificates were presented to

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the first two grantees of his newly launched foundation (Micael Bindefeld's Foundation in Memory of the Holocaust), which supports writers and artists who share hitherto unknown stories of the Holocaust through their work. "It was a huge demonstration of force against anti-Semitism," said Bindefeld, in a telephone interview from his home in Stockholm.

Israel's ambassador to Sweden, Isaac Bachman, describes Bindefeld as a "public relations machine ... What he pulled off was truly amazing," he told Haaretz.

For the past 30 years, Bindefeld has been known throughout Sweden as one of its most high profile – not to mention flamboyant – public relations executives and event planners – with friends in the highest echelons of power. He is also one of his country's most recognizable Jews, even though he fills no official function in the 15,000-strong local Jewish community.

The seeds for his latest endeavor, he said, were planted about eight years ago, when he was part of a Swedish delegation visiting the death camps of Nazi-occupied Poland and the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto. "I began thinking that because I hold this unique position in Swedish society, I should be using my connections and my wealth to do something good," he said. "Kids know less and less about the Holocaust. We have almost no survivors left, and in a few years they will all be gone. That's why it is so important today to document their stories."

One of the recipients of the foundation's grants was a young woman who is preparing a documentary film about her grandmother, who survived Auschwitz and other camps, and was one of 30,000 Jews transported to Sweden after the war. The film is scheduled for broadcast on Swedish television in May.

The other recipient was a little-known Swedish photographer who gained access to rooms in Auschwitz never opened to the public before, and who took black and white photos of their walls. His photos ("both beautiful and shocking," as Bindefeld describes them) are to be showcased in a special exhibit in Stockholm over the next few months, before becoming part of a traveling exhibit around the country.

No children, one baby

Bindefeld set up his foundation with an endowment equivalent to about \$750,000. Each year, he said, grants will be awarded to one or two recipients. On the foundation's board of directors sit, among other big names, the editor-in-chief of Dagens Nyheter (Sweden's foremost morning newspaper) and the secretary-general of the Swedish Bar Association.

"The idea is for this to live on way after me," said Bindefeld. "I don't have any children of my own, so this is the baby I am leaving behind."

His paternal grandfather was one of 10 children from a prominent German-Jewish family. In 1932, he had the foresight to escape Germany and took up Swedish citizenship. In addition to his grandfather, only two of the other nine siblings survived the Holocaust. The family moved to Gothenburg, Sweden's second largest city, where Bindefeld lived until his mid-twenties.

As a child, Bindefeld recalled, he would often spend family holidays in Israel. But he started visiting more often as an adult, after his father had retired and relocated to Herzliya. It was then that he discovered an Israel he hadn't known before – especially Tel Aviv, with which he fell in love. Using his connections in the Swedish media, Bindefeld undertook to tell his fellow countrymen about the Israel they weren't hearing about in the news – particularly its food and culture – through various television programs he initiated.

In recent years, anti-Semitism has been on the rise in Sweden, particularly in Malmo, a southern city with a disproportionately large number of immigrants from the Middle East, as well as a small Jewish community. In

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a television news item that [made international headlines](#) recently, a non-Jewish Swedish television reporter who disguised himself as a Jew by wearing a skullcap found himself repeatedly assaulted.

Bindefeld said he wasn't shocked by the story. "The thing is, a few days later, the same reporter dressed as a Muslim and was also terrorized for that," he noted. "All I can say is that as a Swedish Jew who has never been afraid to talk about his Jewish background or about Israel, I have never had any problems. Never."

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