

With their new film about Irwin Cotler, married Montreal filmmakers make a stand for human rights

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Veteran Liberal MP and former minister of justice Irwin Cotler makes his way to the House of Commons on Parliament Hill in Ottawa on Wednesday, February 5, 2014.

SEAN KILPATRICK/COURTESY OF THE CANADIAN PRESS / DLI PRODUCTIONS

The new documentary *First to Stand* begins ominously. “We are witnessing a resurgent global authoritarianism, a massive assault on human rights, the retreat of democracies and the pain and plight of political prisoners as a looking glass into this historical inflection moment,” says Irwin Cotler, an international human rights lawyer and former minister of justice and attorney general of Canada.

His speech about oppressive regimes at Toronto’s annual Ideacity conference took place in 2019. Four years later, jackboots are still in fashion.

The full title of the documentary from Montreal-based husband-and-wife filmmakers Irene Lilienheim Angelico and Abbey Jack Neidik is *First to Stand: The Cases and Causes of Irwin Cotler*. The film, which has its Toronto premiere at the Hot Docs Ted Rogers Cinema on Feb. 5, follows Cotler and his young team at the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights in Montreal as they take on the cases and causes of political prisoners including Raif Badawi, the Saudi blogger who was arrested in 2012 and later sentenced to 10 years and a thousand lashes for “insulting Islam” by advocating for freedom of speech.

The case of the activist, whose wife and children took refuge in Quebec, attracted international attention in 2015 when he was whipped 50 times in public. While he was released from prison a year ago, he is unable to join his family in Canada because of a travel ban imposed upon him.

In *First to Stand*, a camera follows Cotler into the office of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to discuss the Badawi file. Some 40 years earlier, Cotler spoke to prime minister Pierre Trudeau in the exact same office about the case of Natan Sharansky, a Soviet dissident and prisoner of conscience who led the struggle of Soviet Jews wishing to immigrate to Israel.

History repeats itself, not even bothering to skip a generation.

“I wish I knew why there is this surge in authoritarianism, because it might help to solve it,” Angelico says, on the phone along with her long-time husband and collaborator. “But it’s frightening and it’s growing. That’s the whole point of the film – we have to stand up to it.”

Montreal filmmakers Irene Lilienheim Angelico and Abbey Jack Neidik.

COURTESY OF DLI PRODUCTIONS

Adds Neidik, “The struggle to fight this doesn’t ever end. There’s always a new day, a new struggle and a new awareness to fight.”

The filmmakers met more than 40 years ago as freelancers at the National Film Board, working in adjacent cutting rooms. “I asked her if I could borrow some splicing tape,” Neidik says. “Even though I already had some.”

The ruse worked and the editing tape took, personally and professionally. In 1980, Angelico and Neidik made *Dark Lullabies*, a well-regarded NFB documentary about the impact of the Holocaust on the children of concentration camp survivors as well as on the post-war generation of Germans. Angelico herself is the daughter of Holocaust survivors.

Her mother once took off her yellow star, left the Warsaw Ghetto and risked her life to find a doctor to set her father's leg, which had been crushed by a truck driven by a Nazi. On another occasion, Angelico's father erously searched for antibiotics for a sick friend, almost dying in the process himself.

"They were stand-up people," Angelico says. "I couldn't help but to stand up myself in the films that I did. I couldn't live with myself if I didn't."

Angelico went on to direct and write series including *Black Coffee* (about the history and social impact of coffee) and *The Cola Conquest* (with the "real thing" soft drink as a metaphor for America). Among Neidik's production-director credits are the documentary *She Got Game: Behind the Scenes of the Women's Tennis Tour* and *Canadaville, USA*, about Canadian auto magnate Frank Stronach's bold social experiment in rural, post-Katrina Louisiana.

What sparked Neidik's activist bent as a teenager was watching U.S. president John Kennedy deliver a speech in 1963, after Alabama governor George Wallace defiantly stood in front of the doors of University of Alabama auditorium to prevent Black students from enrolling. "This nation will not be fully free, until all its citizens are free," Kennedy said in a historic televised address to the nation about civil rights.

"I think it was his greatest speech," Neidik says.

In addition to Cotler and Badawi (and his wife Ensaf Haidar), *First to Stand* celebrates human rights advocates including the Russian 'refusenik' Sharansky, international barrister Amal Clooney, Canadian peacekeeper Romeo Dallaire, Iranian journalist Masih Alinejad and financier-activist Bill Browder, who had the borscht to take on Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Explaining that they each bring different strengths to the table, the married filmmakers say their collaborative efforts represent their finest work. Angelico is an interested interviewer who zeroes in on story points; Neidik is more conscious of themes and overall narrative.

“The films we make together are much better and richer than they would be if it was just one of us,” says Angelico. “The two of us come together to something more meaningful.”

Neidik says he concentrates on the interviewee’s emotions – “to get to the head of a documentary one must go through the heart” – and that the audience must feel the main character’s pain and joy to be able to walk in their footsteps.

“It’s not so much that we’re telling them what to think and what to believe in. It’s offering them someone else’s experience, and then letting them come to their own conclusions.”