

'THE LONGING' FOR BELONGING

Film captures the struggle of South Americans reaching back to their Jewish roots.

By **ROBERT W. BUTLER**
The Kansas City Star

Gabriela Bohm's plan was to make an academic-minded film about South American crypto-Jews — individuals whose Jewish ancestors converted to Roman Catholicism during the Spanish Inquisition.

But in the course of interviewing experts on the subject, she

came across Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn of Kansas City's New Reform Temple. Suddenly she had a much juicier, emotionally intense project on which to work.

"Some of my sources told me I needed to call Rabbi Cukierkorn, that he was helping people in South America convert to Judaism," Bohm said in a phone call from Los Angeles. "So I called, introduced myself, and he said, 'You must come down to Ecuador in a couple of weeks. I'm going to convert some people.'"



BOHM PRODUCTIONS

A mother and daughter travel by bus for three days from Colombia to attend a service that would make them Jews in "The Longing."

'the longing'

"The Longing" plays at 7:30 tonight at the Rio Theatre as part of the Kansas City Jewish Film Festival. Admission is \$7.

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The result is "The Longing," a film about religious yearning that plays tonight at the Rio Theatre as part of the Kansas City Jewish Film Festival.

Bohm's camera follows a half dozen individuals from several countries who want to get back in touch with their Jewish roots. Though raised Catholic, many said their parents maintained Jewish customs — refusing to eat pork and lighting candles on Friday night. All were determined to convert to Judaism.

communities in South America wanted nothing to do with these "new" Jews.

"I found this very upsetting," Bohm said. "I'm a Jew myself. Is this the way we want to treat other Jews?"

Bohm said she had several theories about why these Jewish communities refuse to open up to newcomers.

America come from Judaism's Conservative branch. The schism between Reform and Conservative is not unlike that between Catholics and Protestants in the Christian world.

"Making this film became very emotional in a way I wasn't expecting," Bohm said. "Initially I thought I'd use footage of the conversions to illustrate all the historic stuff. Instead, they became the movie's main theme."

"It was both moving and frustrating. These people feel they

are Jewish. And they feel that they're orphans — they want to be part of a community that can teach them how to be a Jew. They've learned all they can from books and the Internet. Now they need to live among other Jews, but that's being denied them."

"The Longing" has played successfully at many film fests around the country. Bohm said she was encouraged that her film was being embraced by non-Jewish audiences.

"All people long to feel part of a community. What surprised me was how many different groups relate to the movie. Gays, immigrants ... lots of people are on a quest for belonging."

And Cukierkorn — who was raised in Brazil — belongs to a Reform congregation. All the Jewish congregations in South

are Jewish. And they feel that they're orphans — they want to be part of a community that can teach them how to be a Jew. They've learned all they can from books and the Internet. Now they need to live among other Jews, but that's being denied them."

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