



March 27, 2010

Survival Tales Told in Snapshots: Czech Jews Enduring the Holocaust

By [JOSEPH BERGER](#)

We have seen these images before, wizened men and women recalling unspeakable events that occurred when they were teenagers, sometimes tartly mocking their own cluelessness.

In a series of four documentaries about the little-known ordeals of Czech Jews during World War II, for example, Anna Kraus Bauer looks back at her train journey to an Estonian labor camp. "I remember I kept looking at the moon, telling myself it is shining here, and it is shining at home too — the very same one," she says. "So maybe things won't be so bad."

But what makes "Forgotten Transports" stand out from the multitude of Holocaust documentaries is that its director, Lukas Pribyl, did more than track down survivors or burrow through film archives and deportation records.

Over 10 years and visits to 30 countries, he hunted down photographs of SS camp commanders and snapshots taken by local residents and workers who might have encountered inmates, sometimes trading bottles of vodka for the artifacts. The impression conveyed is that a photographer was along for the nightmare ride of the Czech Jews.

When Mrs. Bauer and friends who managed to stay together through the war speak of Aleksander Laak, their SS commander, there he is in his fearsome ramrod authority, and, at the film's end, there he is 15 years later in Canada, looking plump and content, surrounded by the kinds of relatives he never let his victims keep.

(When his crimes were revealed in 1960, he hanged himself.)

And when Jews at Salaspils, a Latvian camp, recall an Ernst Ballon who escaped and the retributive hanging that followed, there are photographs of Ballon; the SS commander, Otto Teckemeier, who ordered the hanging; the Jewish block elder, Siegfried Kaufmann, who chose the scapegoat; and Salaspils inmates watching a hanging.

"Behind every picture there is several hundred phone calls," Mr. Pribyl, a 36-year-old Czech Jewish historian who studied at Brandeis and Columbia, said in a telephone interview from Prague. "I decided everything people say will be documented with authentic pictures and footage from that time and place."

The full six-hour series will have its United States premiere on Saturday and Sunday at the Legacy of Shoah Film Festival at John Jay College in Manhattan. Four women featured in the film will attend in a reunion of sorts.

Together the films trace the experiences of 76 of the 270 survivors among the thousands of Czech Jews deported, not to the familiar Theresienstadt ghetto or to Auschwitz, but to less-well-known camps like Jagala and Kaiserwald. Mr. Pribyl chose that approach because his grandfather was sent to an obscure camp.

The films weave several strands in an approach echoing the chapter structure of Joyce's "[Ulysses](#)." Each film portrays different groups in different locations — single women in Estonia, men in Belarus, families in the Riga ghetto of Latvia, escapees from the Lublin region of Poland.

Each film also depicts a different mode of survival. The men from Belarus quickly grasped their fate and hatched ways to join partisan units. The Estonian women survived by naïve denial. Children in the Riga ghetto played soccer, walked to school past bodies strung from gallows, and later, in Kaiserwald, heard their parents make futile plans to hide them under barracks floorboards.

In each film well-dressed survivors sit in comfortable living rooms calmly recollecting without a narrator's intrusion. Mr. Pribyl also avoided standard historical footage of events like Nazi parades.

"You won't see [Hitler](#) in my films," he said. "What I'm interested in is when you take a person from a relatively normal life and suddenly throw them into completely apocalyptic conditions — how does that person react?"

Working with a cameraman and the financial backing of relatives and others, he pestered subjects for years to talk or hand over photographs. In one visit to an SS officer's kin, he pressed the doorbell insistently.

" 'Go to the garage,' " he recalled an exasperated relative's snapping. " 'Grandpa's suitcase is there. Take it and leave us alone.' "

The film about Estonia shows how women who grew close on the transport to Jagala made sure to buck each other up, sometimes dividing a cadged piece of bread.

"We tried to keep each other's head above water," one of them, Hana Fuchs-Klenk, said. "We were willing to give everything up if we could help somebody else or that she needed it more."

The films show heaps of fly-covered corpses and naked, frightened women waiting to be shot in a trench. But it also captures eruptions of human quirkiness — sometimes generous, sometimes cruel — that bring the Holocaust down to an earthly level.

Gisela Danziger Herzl recalls how she spotted the suit of her husband, Karel, on another man and "finally knew what I thought was going on." In the Kivioli camp, Mrs. Herzl was about to be shot when the German commandant interceded.

" 'Gisela, make this chicken for me — it tastes like my mother used to make it,' " Mrs. Herzl recalled his saying. "So the chicken saved my life."

One SS officer, Heinz Droshin, pulled off his insignia and fled the camp with a beautiful Jewish girl, Inge Sylten. Photographs of both are shown.

“It was like they forgot where they are completely,” Mrs. Danziger said.

In Riga an SS officer catches a young woman hiding red wool among clothes she was sorting for shipment to Germany and shoots not only her but also every fourth woman in her group. But at Kaiserwald in Latvia, another SS officer, after a trifling bribe, looks the other way while men dig a tunnel so women from the adjoining camp could sneak under the fence and spend the night.

The survivors sometimes chuckle as they look back in disbelief. Mr. Pribyl said he felt that survivors had a sense of humor and an optimistic outlook in common. But ultimately, Mr. Pribyl said, his research proved that “the only recipe for survival is to have a lot of good luck.”

Correction: March 27, 2010

An earlier version of this article said that the grandfather of Mr. Pribyl was killed in an obscure concentration camp. He was sent to an obscure camp, but he survived.

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