

["Forgotten Transports" – Lukas Pribyl Talks With Elisabeth Weber About His Acclaimed Holocaust Documentary](#)



Film & Screen Media

Elisabeth Weber (Santa Barbara)

Friday, 14 August 2009 11:46



Lukas Pribyl studied at Brandeis University, Hebrew University, and Columbia University, among others. He has published on various aspects of Jewish history and curated exhibitions at the Jewish Museum in Prague. *Forgotten Transports* - Pribyl's first film project- is a series of four feature-length documentaries about the remarkable strategies people used to survive during the Holocaust.

Elisabeth Weber: *Forgotten Transports to Estonia* is one of four feature length documentary films about the fate of fewer than three hundred Czech Jews who survived their deportation to virtually unknown concentration camps and ghettos in four Eastern European countries.

Tens of thousands of Czech Jews were deported by the Nazis. The web site [ForgottenTransports.com](http://www.forgottentransports.com) gives some helpful background information on your film.([http://www.forgottentransports.com/.](http://www.forgottentransports.com/)) For example, the reader learns that your own family “was devastated by the Holocaust” and that you have spent eight years “researching, photographing and collecting archive material” to document the stories of the fewer than three hundred survivors. The reader also learns that it sometimes took a “lengthy period of persuasion” to convince those who were still alive to “share their experiences”, and that many of the survivors “had not told even their families and close friends.” How did you succeed in persuading the survivors to participate? What motivated you to make four films?

Lukas Pribyl: The idea to make the films gradually developed while researching my family's history. I wanted to find out what happened to my ancestors during WWII and to learn a bit more about the fate of my grandfather in particular. He was deported in October 1939, right after the outbreak of the war, in what was Adolph Eichmann's first deportation scheme. He was taken to one of the camps that I would now label “forgotten.” There was almost nothing about it in the scholarly literature, the camp was barely mentioned even in the most detailed encyclopedias and books on the Holocaust. So I decided to find the missing information myself. And while I was pursuing this research on my “Grandfather's camp,” I realized there were many more places Czech Jews were deported to and no one knew anything about. I started collecting every piece of information, photograph or document I could find and began meeting some of the people who managed to emerge from those “forgotten” camps and ghettos alive. Their stories were so radically different from what we came to associate with the typical survival story – i.e., the striped uniforms and phone numbers to heaven tattooed onto forearms – that I felt, though I published some works on the topic, that these people and their memories deserved more than just another written study. I became convinced that I should not only capture the words of those men and women, but also their faces, gestures, the tone of their speech, the ways they adjusted to their situation, how they remembered the past, how they managed to keep their remarkable optimism and tremendous sense of humor.

I decided to make a series of documentaries about all these little-known locations and unfamiliar modes of survival. That's also the reason why I made four films, because each describes a different deportation destination, a different direction in which transports of Czech Jews left. Chronologically taken – in sequence in which the transports left and in which we finished the films – the film *Forgotten Transports to Latvia* tells the story of families who were trying to preserve a semblance of “normalcy” in the atrocious conditions of

the Riga ghetto. Children went to school, but on their way had to pass by a gallows with a swinging body. One day young men and girls organized a clandestine dance party. The next day the very same young men were shot, since an uprising they were preparing was discovered. All this stands in contrast with the nearby concentration camp Salaspils where the conditions were so desperate that there was little solidarity with one with another.



Forgotten Transports to Belarus is a film about men who never showed emotion, who were being killed but who also killed themselves, about escapes from extermination camps and ghettos, armed resistance in partisan units, about individualism. *Forgotten Transports to Estonia* is a film about women who survived thanks to their unbelievably firm collective, in which they constantly helped and protected each other. Focused only on their group, they to a large extent managed to ignore the horror surrounding them. In a way they gave up their individual thinking and this helped them – in that particular case – to survive. The last film in the documentary series, *Forgotten Transports to Poland*, examines human loneliness and changes of identity, what it was like to be constantly on the run, under a different name and with a different life story, in hiding, to always have a mask on.

The individual films are built to work on their own, independently of the other ones. However, if you see all of them consecutively, I believe they have a certain overarching logical “superstructure” which connects the four films, presenting other, “forgotten” stories of survival during the Holocaust, a picture of the Holocaust “as we don’t know it.” And so, for instance, facts are never repeated from one film to another but rather complement each other and the music in each film gives prominence to a different instrument.

The individual themes of the movies crystallized during the interviewing process when I realized that in each of these destinations to which Czech Jews were deported, survival had certain common elements, certain characteristics. This does not mean there were no other attempts to survive in different ways, but we only learn what worked best in a particular place and situation -- the success stories. Nonetheless, since in Belarus, for example, only twenty two Jews survived out of seven thousand deported from Theresienstadt, that success is relative too.

Regarding convincing survivors to talk: when I approached the subjects of my film, their response was of course individual, but about ninety percent of people who testify in my documentaries had never talked about their experience before. Sometimes it took up to two years to convince them to talk to me. In some cases I had to befriend all their friends and acquaintances so that they could “recommend” me. And indeed, many times their own children did not know anything about their parents’ past. The survivors never told them, and so their children had to learn about their parents’ fate from me. The survivors now live dispersed all over the world and mostly don’t know about each other. If you are this isolated, you don’t have anyone with whom you could exchange and compare your recollections, share the same past. Furthermore, they often do not discuss their personal histories even with other survivors from the large, “better known” camps, since their experience is so different that they have little in common. A few even told me that they have a subjective feeling of being “left out,” that their war-time experience is somehow deemed “less worthy” by people around them. It is because many who know about camps like Auschwitz or Dachau think that if they haven’t ever heard the name of some camp or ghetto, it means it could not have been “as bad” there, otherwise they would have surely heard about the place. Of course, this logic is completely twisted since the

survival rate in places my films describe was – at least in terms of percentage, not overall numbers – much lower than even in Auschwitz. But this is how many people think and such attitudes made “my” subjects even more withdrawn.

E. W.: At the end of the film, the viewer learns that the interviews with the Czech women were filmed from 2000 to 2006, in six different countries (Czech Republic, Switzerland, Great Britain, Israel, Australia and the United States). On the film’s web site, the viewer reads that for the series of four films, you recorded “more than 260 hours of interviews, collected in about twenty countries on three continents. It is this wealth of unique first-hand accounts which underpins the whole series.”

What were your guiding principles in selecting which interviews to keep? What happened to the rest of the footage? How do you see your project related to video-testimonies such as the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University, a collection of over 4,300 videotaped interviews with witnesses and survivors of the Holocaust?

L. P.: I should actually correct the number of continents – we did film in twenty countries, but on four or five continents, depending whether you count Americas the European or American way: Australia, North and South America, Europe and Asia. The number of hours of footage you mention refers only to interviews with the Jewish survivors, but in total we filmed a lot more hours.

We also interviewed the so-called “bystanders” who witnessed what was happening to the Jews, and in a number of cases I even talked to the perpetrators. And though I was sure I would not employ any location and present-day footage in my films, the traces of these camps, of this whole history are disappearing so fast that we filmed whatever we could.

I decided not to use the other interviews as I did not want to fragment the “Jewish perspective.” Furthermore, since a lot of the perpetrators were already in their thirties and forties at the time they committed their crimes, there were not many of them left and I could not “provide” such an account in each of the films. That would have meant breaking the form, the design of the films and I was not willing to do that.

I kept the interviews that best helped me to tell the story. Of course, if you have to edit over 260 hours down to six, the decisions are not easy to make. If you search for a particular photo for several years, spend months persuading a survivor to talk to you, then you fly to the other end of the world to meet this person, you have to pay for it all -- it is not so simple to discard so much work. But you can’t allow this to influence you. You have to keep only what you feel is best for the film, for telling the story. But I don’t regret any of the decisions, I would now make them again and in any case, they are irreversible. The leftover footage is still here and I plan to use it in my other projects, though in a different way.

Regarding the Fortunoff archive – mine is a “one-man show” and I cannot compare my collection with such a vast number of interviews. However, as I mentioned earlier, most of “my” witnesses did not participate in these large interviewing projects. Firstly, sometimes they “fell through the cracks,” as the camps and ghettos they survived are at times not known even to historians of the Holocaust. I myself spent hundreds of hours searching for these survivors – I started with deportation lists, postwar lists of survivors, I went through marriage records, since women when they married changed their names, as well as emigration records, since most left the country. Phone books became my favorite reading (that was still before most of them became available on the net) and if some surname was not too common, I simply called all the people of that name in a particular country, often several hundred of them. With experience you learn the emigration patterns of Czech Jews and so you can sometimes estimate what country they went to, depending on the year they left. So you start calling and keep asking: “Excuse me, were you in Salaspils?” If the answer is “What?” you have to keep calling. If the answer is: “Why do you ask? Who are you?” you know you have found the person you

were looking for.

But even if their whereabouts were known, they often refused to be interviewed by the large organizations, for reasons I outlined earlier. And a handful only agreed to speak to them after being interviewed by me first, after breaking their silence. If you are putting together a collection of several thousand interviews, you understandably cannot build a relationship with the interviewed individuals. You cannot simply arrive, record the memories of these deeply wounded people, asking them about their worst traumas and then thank them, leave and never see them again. I can say that after this long period of persuasion, I formed a certain bond with the survivors. I keep in touch with most of them and in many cases I am proud to be able to call them my friends, despite the age difference between us. I am only very sad that their number keeps dwindling.

I also use a different interviewing technique than Spielberg's *Shoah* project, for example, and other such interviewing designs which have a somewhat pre-set questionnaire. I have read much of the available literature on the topics of oral history, interviewing, and psychology of survivors, but I have to say that my own method has served me well. When the people I am trying to convince finally agree to be interviewed, they prepare for the talk. In their minds they prepare what they are going to tell you and what they are not going to tell you – those are mostly things they are ashamed of, they consider most private, that are most traumatic or things they simply do not consider important. Those are however often the most interesting pieces of information. I let them narrate their story as they see fit, which is mostly in chronological order. After some time, when they have already told me some or much of their pre-prepared story, I interrupt them with a series of very detailed questions that completely break that chronology. By then the interviewees are mostly no longer so nervous, they forget about the camera and the lights shining into their eyes. By then they also feel that they can trust me, that I am not there only seeking sensation but that I am really interested in them, that I care. Answering those detailed queries which I present to them in a seemingly completely chaotic order – but with which I aim to arrive at things I suspect they left out – leads to a lot of other memories originally omitted or forgotten. Thanks to these associations we eventually come to talk about things they had not planned to tell me. Finally, sometimes appearing a bit slow-witted, I tell them that now I am a bit confused, if they could tell me some parts of their story again, including the extra information. This method also has an added benefit from the filmmaking point of view, since you have more material to edit from – for example, if teenagers were playing basketball in front of the building where you were filming and the sound is far from perfect, you have more footage to choose from.



One advantage I have over the other interviewing projects is that I have visual documentation for almost every word these witnesses are saying. In my film, when the women talk about being put to forced labor in the Tallinn port, you really see them working in the dockyard, recognize their faces. I work exclusively with authentic, time-and-place precise photographs and footage. And so when the ladies mention that in Estonia they made fun of a diver for having put his helmet on in a crooked way, I search the archives for all German divers who were deployed to the Baltics, then trace all of their families since they themselves are mostly no longer alive – until I find the right family and the right photograph, on which you see the deported Czech women helping the diver in his heavy suit onto a boat. In the Polish countryside, I exchanged bottles of vodka for photos, literally.

The Polish villagers did not have cameras then, but the German Nazis who lived in their houses did, as did

some Ukrainian guards who took them from the Jews who brought them, even though they were forbidden to do so. The photos taken by the guards were often left behind when the front and the Russians approached. I have photos from the KGB archives. In Germany I kept bothering the families of SS men who I knew served in the camps I was documenting so long that they finally gave up, gave me the key from their garage and told me: "Grandpa's suitcase should be somewhere there, if you find it, you can take whatever you want." To find time-and-place precise footage, I went over 900 hours of extant films in archives all over the world, just to find a few minutes in total. That's why the project altogether took over ten years of my life. But I believe this approach gives the testimonies of survivors another dimension because all this documentation verifies their words and brings their experience alive.



E. W.: *Forgotten Transports to Estonia* is a film about the deportation of a group of Czech girls and very young women to lesser known camps in Estonia, such as Jägala, Ereda, and Kivioli. The girls had been part of a transport of 1,000 Jews deported from the ghetto Theresienstadt in Nazi-occupied Bohemia and Moravia on September 1, 1942. Most people of this transport, and all the parents of the girls, were shot only four days after their departure, a fact the girls acknowledge only in 1945, after their liberation and safe arrival in Sweden.

This film is however also about the girls' mothers. We see this early in the film through your use of archival photos of the parents and especially the mothers of the interviewed women, and at the end of the film, where you include archival photos of the murdered women of the Theresienstadt transport. The interviewed women also mention their lost mothers noticeably more frequently than other murdered family members. Could you comment on this particular attention given to the loss of the mother?

L. P.: The interviewed women kept invoking their mothers because their mothers were the ones they thought about most in the camp, back then. I think it is our human instinct to cling to our mothers, run to them in times of danger and loneliness. For another project, I interviewed dozens of veterans who fought on the Eastern front in the Czech battalion, alongside the Soviet army. They all told me that when you are terrified, or dying, you always cry for your mother, not anyone else. This particularly holds true for young people who don't yet have families of their own. These women were young girls then, unmarried, so naturally they were closest to their mothers. And they did not know, they did not want to know that their mothers and families were murdered. That is in fact what kept them alive, this delusion that their mothers and families were still alive somewhere.

Nowadays, the traditional gender roles are breaking down so I should stress that we are talking about the first half of the 20th century. At that time, the fathers were the providers who made a living for the family, while their wives stayed home with their children. The father embodied authority, the mother represented love. The fathers were often quite a bit older than their wives. Of course, I am generalizing, but I believe these aspects often played a role, also contributing to the fact that the girls felt closer to their mothers.



E. W.: The title of your film, *Forgotten Transports to Estonia* refers to deportations to lesser known camps. However, one can also hear in this title a reference to “forgotten transports” in the sense of an emotional transformation, as for example in the story of the prisoner Inge Syltenová and the SS commander Heinz Drosihn, who fell in love with each other.

In Ruth Morgensternová-Kopečková’s words (one of the women interviewed for the film), “Inge made a human being” out of this commander who, before meeting Inge, had been a brutal SS-man of whom “everybody was terrified.” This is an extraordinary story: The prisoner, who is supposed to be seen as less human by the perpetrator, transforms the latter’s brutality into humanity, to the point that Drosihn allows Inge to take his whip away at roll-call, after which he no longer beats any prisoner.



Another example of a “forgotten transport” in this sense is the SS officer Schnabel who threatens to kill Gisela Danzigerová-Herzl for not giving him information about the whereabouts of Inge and Heinz, after the latter’s escape from the camp. When Schnabel threatens to shoot Danzigerová-Herzl, she asks him to please do it. He reacts with respect for her fearlessness.

Some women thus testify to instances of resistance that actually transformed the SS men to such a degree that they abandoned their roles (in Drosihn’s case for ever: he rips his SS epaulettes off and, as one reviewer of your film writes, “eventually throw[s] away his career and life” for Inge; (http://www.thejewishweek.com/viewArticle/c344_a14519/The_Arts/Film.html (cf. http://www.forgottentransports.com/05_press_reviews.html)).) in Schnabel’s case at least temporarily: he offers Gisela a cigarette, but also never mentions the fugitives in her presence again).

What was your motivation in choosing to include, from the huge amount of material at your disposition, the testimonies of these particular instances in the film?

L. P.: I felt I had to include Inge’s story because it was one that all the interviewed women remembered vividly and both Inge and her fate left a large mark on all of them. She actually also left an indelible impression on a number of other prisoners of Ereda I talked to, outside of this group of girls, so I have the story confirmed from a lot of sources. It was a crucial episode on the journey of these Czech Jewish women from deportation to eventual liberation and as such I could not leave it out. And of course, I incorporated it because the story is fantastic movie material, a true Hollywood drama, a Romeo and Juliet romance set in a concentration camp. The fact that you are asking about it means that it caught your interest, and that’s what all movies, including documentaries, should do.

Inge's resistance was really in manipulating Drosihn, who fell madly in love with her, to help herself and her group of friends. But then she fell in love with him, separated from the group and perished.

The case of Gisela Herzl was a different one – Gisela was an exceptionally strong woman, a true lady with a tremendous personality. I know from other prisoners that SS men – at least the absolute majority of them – addressed her with the polite form of "Sie" instead of the familiar "Du" they employed when talking to all the other prisoners. In the battles of will and charisma she fought with the SS men, Gisela clearly often prevailed. She had natural authority that even armed men yielded to.

I consider using such incidents and episodes in the films important because they show both Jews and the SS men as people. That is what my films are about. I am interested in people, their reactions, their decisions. And people are complicated creatures and sometimes you cannot fully explain why they decide to do or not do certain things. I did not want to make yet another Holocaust documentary where the Jews are cast into the role of victims only and the Germans or SS represent utter evil. People's actions are not just black and white. There are always shades of gray. Even the most beastly of SS men can have a "weak" spot. In the four films there are many incidents that represent a whole scale of human behavior, from its worst to its best: of Jews, their tormentors as well as others.

E. W.: The film is a testimony to the power of friendship. Just as Primo Levi writes in *Se questo è un uomo* (*If this is a man*) (Translated as "Surviving in Auschwitz," translated by Stuart Woolf, New York: Simon & Schuster, Touchstone 1996.) that it was his friendship with Alberto and Lorenzo that saved him, in your film, several of the women testify to the crucial role of friendship as an "enormous source of strength." The fact that they can speak their common language, and, related to this linguistic intimacy, that they know and call each other by their names, is here crucial. Levi describes the difficulty, if not impossibility, of remembering and asserting one's own name, when it has been taken away and substituted by a number, and when nobody mentions it anymore. According to the psychiatrist Dori Laub, himself a child survivor of the Shoah, without the address and affirmation of another, the victim loses the ability to be a witness to him- or herself: "This loss of capacity to be a witness to oneself and thus to witness from the inside is perhaps the true meaning of annihilation, for when one's history is abolished, one's identity ceases to exist as well." (Dori Laub, "Truth and testimony: The process and the struggle", in: Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1995, 67.) The Czech girls, through witnessing for each other, allow each other to preserve their history, their identity, and thus, their "witness from within." This togetherness, as Ruth Morgensternová-Kopečková put it, was an "enormous source of strength that really helped save our lives."

In their testimony for your film, some of the women remember also the utter ignorance and naiveté of the group. For example, in the context of their refusal to believe the Polish and Lithuanian Jews' stories about mass killings, ghettos and death camps, Erna Frischmannová-Meissnerová even describes herself and her friends as an "isolated group of foolish girls."

What are your thoughts on this togetherness in its relation to the described naiveté, isolation and ignorance? Was it precisely this togetherness that made it possible to refuse to believe the reports they girls heard from different sources about their families' death?

Was it because of the life-affirming experience of friendship in the midst of brutality that the girls, consciously or unconsciously, chose ignorance over knowledge about their families' death, even when faced with evidence?

L. P.: These are really interesting questions. but I am afraid I will not be able to reply to them in full, since we are only discussing one of my four films here and the other three actually might be providing all the

answers, and far better than my words.

Yes, in this particular case, friendship was key to survival. Though I have to stress the words: “in this particular case.” These young women created a sort of a bubble around themselves. Focused only on each other, they ignored everything around them. There were exceptions, like the previously mentioned Gisela Herzl, individuals who saw through this self-protective communal shell and were very aware of what was going on. But they were strong enough never to tell the other girls, their friends, so as not to undermine their naivety, their blind hope of being reunited with their families... and thus their will and strength to live. What Dori Laub says is true for this group of women – it particularly holds true for their interaction inside, WITHIN that bubble. Their survival however, I think, was mostly due to the fact that they largely gave up individual thinking and individual identity. They all refer to themselves as “We.” All of them acted as one large organism, in unison, one would never do anything without the other ones. And those who did act as individuals, died. All those young women who separated from the “core” group, either were split away by force or left voluntarily, all perished. Inge is a perfect example. This togetherness was certainly a great source of strength because it formed a safety net – in the words of Hana Fuchsova-Klenkova: “One would never allow the others fall” and at the same time allowed them not to think as individuals. Words of Edita Heilig-Hoenig sum it up: when their whole camp was being evacuated, Polish women were going mad with fear that they were being taken away to be killed but she herself “did not care,” “we were going away so we were going away.”

Protected by her micro-world, she did not bother to ponder the future. This lack of analytical contemplation really protected the women from a major shock that would most certainly, to at least some extent, undercut their capacity to survive. But as I mentioned early on, my films are about a certain set of conditions meeting a particular response (one of many different attempted), yielding the desired result: survival. Dori Laub’s sentence you quoted in the context of survival of this group of women in Estonia would however be far less applicable to the survival of Czech Jews in Belarus and even less to those who made it in the Lublin region in Poland. In Belarus friendship and love could even be a hindrance, preventing one from individual action – out of consideration for the other, one could easily miss an opportunity to save oneself. There, everyone was really for himself. And in the film on Poland, the actual abolishing of oneself, of one’s history was the only way to live. You had to take on another identity, or multiple identities (one man was for example locked up in the same prison three times, each time under a different name and different life story, once as a Czech, once as a Pole, once as a German). Yet he did not lose the sense of himself, though he was terrified of someone calling him by his true name.

Regarding the statement by Primo Levi about the difficulty, or rather impossibility, of asserting one’s name when it has been taken away and replaced by a number -- my films are really about another world than the “planet Auschwitz” Levi refers to, about this other, “lesser” known Holocaust. My documentaries mostly describe places where there were no numbers and no names, or names only, like in Estonia (the film documents this – the authentic lists of prisoners are shown. Even when being transferred to Bergen-Belsen, there was a name list, not just a listing of numbers). On the other hand, two survivors from Belarus, when they got into a “regular” concentration camp, actually marveled at being issued a prisoner’s number. Of their own identity, they were sure - but for others they were nothing, so expendable they were. For them, a number was a step up because they knew they were counted – if it is worth for anyone to count you, you matter somewhat – at least a little bit. They both told me that after what they had gone through before, they thought of the “regular” concentration camp, in their words, as a spa.

To sum it up, I think regarding these issues, there will always be more questions than answers. And we can only draw some conclusions about a certain place and a certain set of conditions, an overall generalization is in my opinion impossible. But even survivors from the same place can strongly disagree, as Primo Levi’s discussion with Jean Améry on the nature of survival and resistance shows.

And though I voraciously read all the discussions, memoirs and works by survivors, in my work I am after something else: Testimonies told for the very first time, in their most pristine form. To give you an example – unlike in a lot of Holocaust documentaries, in my films people never cry. In the film about Estonia there is only one moment when one of the women slightly tears up – but that's not when she is describing the worst horrors she went through, but when talking about the humanity of Swedish nurses. The reason why people don't weep in my films is exactly because they are speaking for the first time. I have conducted interviews with over four hundred survivors from various camps and I have realized that the more often people tell their story, the more they are prone to cry. It is natural. The more you share your traumatic reminiscences, the more pity you can feel for yourself because by talking you are creating a distance between yourself and your story, it becomes both history and narrative. You are starting to see your own past in perspective and you also begin to "shape" the story – you already know the reaction of your audience, know which parts of it create the greatest response (emotional or otherwise) and you start to leave out details that "don't work" with the listeners, that they find too confusing or uninteresting. You verbalize it, better and better with each telling. It is a paradox, but those people who can articulate their recollections best and show the most emotion are not necessarily the best witnesses from the factual point of view. They have already told their story too many times and by doing so, molded it. When you are speaking for the very first time, it is so difficult to break out of the shell of over sixty years of silence that there is no strength left for tears, as you grapple for words.

The overall number of those who survived the "forgotten transports" is so small that they (with the exception of the women from Estonia) mostly don't know about each other. They don't have the opportunity to discuss their memories in an attempt to "fill in" the gaps and answer their own questions. If you are the only person who survived from your particular transport, there is no one to confer with. That's the reason why their answer to many of my questions is simple: "I don't know." I actually like to hear such an answer because it is clear that they do not suffer from the integration of post-war knowledge into their memories. With no books or documentaries on the subject they can really only tell what they remember. When I ask people who survived Auschwitz, for example, and I interviewed a lot of them too, I almost never get a similar response. There is simply too much readily available information and the respondents, in a sincere attempt to help me, supply me with information they could not have known then or lived through personally. Their personal story is absolutely true, so is the emotion, but the supportive, explanatory details can be bothersome for a filmmaker/historian like me. To give you an example: When I ask people who survived Auschwitz what happened upon their arrival, they mostly tell me that there was Mengele standing there, sending people left and right. They rarely say: "Some Nazi officer stood there." Yet, the number of officers who performed selections was quite large and they surely did not introduce themselves to the newly arrived. But Mengele has become a symbol, the name is so widely known, that the witnesses assign this name to any officer who "admitted" them into the camp. The need to name things, people is natural, human. You want to name the nameless evil that met you on the ramp and sent your family to the gas chamber. And if others say that was the name, you fill it in.

E. W.: Towards the end of the film, you include archival photographs of the mass shooting in Kalevi-Liiva on September 5, 1942, the mass murder that took the lives of the parents of the girls interviewed in their later years in the film, a mass murder of which the girls only learned after their liberation and arrival in Sweden in May 1945.

You chose to include archival photos only of women, undressing, naked, and walking to their death, with German soldiers shouldering rifles at their sides, as well as photos of piles of naked murdered women. The photos are examples of how the Nazis themselves documented their crimes, when, at the same time, they tried to erase any traces of memory. In other words, we see these women through the lens of German soldiers photographing them. We see them through the lens of the perpetrators. And in some instances we see the utter beauty of these naked bodies. The second last photo before the screen goes black for almost ten seconds, a photo showing a woman's beautiful body on top of a pile of corpses, looks almost staged. The

black screen is then pierced by the statement that “of the 1,000 Jews deported in 1942 from Bohemia and Moravia to Estonia, 46 women survived.”

What motivated your choice to include these pictures of the women’s nakedness, and why did you include only pictures of women?

L. P.: I did not choose to include pictures of women only, rather, I used all the photographs of that massacre I managed to find. And they are indeed only of women - the lone men who appear in the pictures are a few of the perpetrators and if you look carefully, some of the bodies in the pit on one of the photographs are male. However, in that snapshot the singularity and beauty of the female body lying on the very top of the pile of corpses sets it apart so much that it fully engages one’s eyes, it overcomes everything else.

I know from a guard who participated in the mass murder in Kalevi Liiva that those were the pictures that were taken, then and there. He unfortunately could not remember whether there were any pictures of men – who were shot separately from women – whether any were taken at all. The pictures are really voyeuristic, they are pornographic. I knew I had to include them nonetheless, because they are an integral part of the story, without them the chronicle would be incomplete. The shock we experience upon seeing the photos is necessary.

The challenge was how to work with these photographs delicately, tastefully, in a way that would tell you more about what kind of people the perpetrators were and would not make you focus on the nakedness only, but on the event. I could not leave the photos out, because this is how it was, this is what the deaths of those people looked like. We have, in a way, sanitized death, made it into an abstract concept, we almost prefer to cloak death in numbers and statistics because it is easier for us than to be forced to face such pictures.

I hope these photos - the way I used them - return individuality to the victims. When you see the photographs, you simply have to ask: Why, what for? Why did these people have to die? I wish I succeeded but of course, this is up to the viewers to judge. So far I have not heard any negative comments. I discussed the topic at length with the ladies who survived, and what matters most to me is their reaction -- because it is their families who are depicted on those photographs, in their last moments. They all told me that as painful it is for them to look at the photographs, they absolutely had to be in the film.

E. W.: The archival photos of the naked and shot women in Kalevi-Liiva are accompanied by a Swedish folk song, *Jag vet en dejlig rosa* (*I know a lovely rose...*) both a mournful love song and a lullaby, that assures the beloved that “in my heart, you are forever close to me,” and that at the end bids “farewell” to the beloved, and “a thousand times good night.” Would you comment on the jarring juxtaposition of the simplicity and sweetness of the folksong’s melody and the harrowing pictures? Does the song represent the murdered mothers’ lullabies?

Does the fact that it is a Swedish song try to convey that the mourning for the girls’ loss becomes possible only in the safety of the country of welcome, and perhaps even only in a different language? Do the first caring, and thus maternal figures that the girls encounter after their terrible odyssey of almost three years, the Danish and Swedish nurses, make the realization and the mourning of the loss possible, and is the song a tribute to these new maternal figures as well?

Why did you choose this particular song, and why did you choose not to include subtitles? Was the song meant to remain foreign, as if, for the surviving girls, any lullaby could be bearable only in the foreignness of a language and of a melody?

L. P.: The primary reason why the song was used was the juxtaposition of the beautiful melody and the shock of the pictures. I really owe Petr Ostrouchov, who composed the music for my films, for finding and

including it. It encompasses all the symbolism you mention, but that was not our only goal since few people are able to read so much into it and it can be difficult to decipher all the meanings during the first viewing. First and foremost, the final song had to “work” with the photographs, creating just the right emotions, to work as cinema. That was most important.

As I said answering your previous question, we needed to find a way to use the controversial pictures so that they would not be perceived as demeaning to the people depicted in them, quite the opposite. I think the song enabled us to do so and the fact that there is so much symbolism that can be found in the song is an added value. The song is so beautiful that even when we don’t understand the lyrics, we understand it through the feeling that it inspires.

Subtitling the song would in fact destroy its impact – there is only a limited amount of information the human brain is able to process at the same time. If the subtitles were there, people would focus on reading them and that would mitigate the impact of the melody itself and take the attention away from the photographs. But I generally don’t subtitle songs. In this film on Estonia, the introductory song is left without translation too. It is by the pair of famous Czech actors and comedians Voskovec and Werich, who were extremely popular before the war with young Czech audiences, and the girls often sang their songs in the camps. The intro song’s lyrics say that nothing can be taken for granted, that nothing is definitive. The cheerful playfulness of it creates the feeling of going on a trip and that is enough for me. Understanding the words is a bonus. Subtitling it would break what I wanted to achieve – minimalism and a certain purity of form. Though songs are used in every film of the series and sometimes are even sung directly by the survivors speaking in the film, I only made one exception. I subtitled a song in the film on Poland, since the text was integral to moving the plot further.



Elisabeth Weber teaches at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her research interests and publications include French philosophy and theory; psychoanalysis and trauma-studies; German Judaism of the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries; nineteenth- and twentieth century German literature.