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Powerful film at CIFF documents unknown Holocaust story

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"Sophie's Choice." "Schindler's List." "Life Is Beautiful." "The Pianist." "The Reader." The list of Holocaust-themed films extends to the Academy Awards' red carpet and beyond.

Not surprisingly, the 33rd Cleveland International Film Festival (CIFF), running through March 29, features its own Holocaust submission: "Forgotten Transports: To Estonia."

No Meryl Streep, Adrien Brody or Kate Winslet in sight, however. This is the "real deal." Factual human stories, never before told, recounted by the women who lived them. No pontificating historians or Holocaust experts in the mix.

"To Estonia" is one of four 90-minute "Forgotten Transport" films made by 36-year-old Czech filmmaker Lukás Pribyl. Each is based on the experiences of Jews deported to unknown camps and ghettos in Latvia, Estonia, Belarus and eastern Poland.

"To Estonia" begins with the events of Sept. 5, 1942. On that fateful day, a transport of 1,000 Czech Jews arrived in Estonia, on the Baltic Sea. Among them were 100 women between the ages of 19 and 25. This is their story.

Distraught at the prospect of being separated from their families, the young women were assured by their Nazi captors that their parents would be well cared for in a "heated" concentration camp. To reinforce the charade, relates one woman, "our parents left in great style on a bus." At war's end, those who survived would learn their parents' real fate.

Meanwhile, the young women were taken to Jagala, a labor camp surrounded by barbed wire and monitored by Estonian guards. "All the luggage came to us," including that of their now-absent parents, recounts one survivor. Naïvely, they never realized the implications.

One woman, whose job was to open the luggage and sort the contents, poignantly recalls stealing some of the food people had packed "so if my mom came, I'd have something to give her."

In dealing with adversity, the women proved enterprising. One describes how they made outfits (skirts, hats) out of blankets, and saved up their bread to make a bread birthday cake.

Most importantly, they intuitively understood they couldn't survive alone. "We stuck together (in small groups) to comfort each other." If someone stole or fell upon some extra food, she shared.

One of their group, the blond and beautiful Inge, caught the eye of an SS man and was installed in his quarters. According to one survivor, Inge secured better treatment not only for herself, but for the other women in the camp.

From Jagala, the young women were sent to the capital city of Tallinn, where "home" was a political prison, with 15 placed in a cell holding six beds. Tallinn had been bombed by the Russians, and the



Staying together to comfort and help each other enabled these Czech women to survive the Holocaust. "Forgotten Transports: To Estonia" is their story.

women were ordered to clear the rubble. Because the Nazis didn't want the Estonians to know that the women were slave laborers, they were told to remove the yellow stars from their clothing.

(While on a Baltic cruise a couple of years ago, I spent a day in picture postcard-perfect Tallinn. I remember our young guide going on at length about the Russians' bombing of the city as he showed us some of the remaining pockmarked buildings. Never once did he mention, or perhaps know, as I didn't then, that young Jewish women living on bare subsistence rations had done the heavy cleanup!)

At one point, Swedish soldiers stationed in Tallinn offered to free the women, but their guards warned if that happened, their parents would be shot. "So we never left."

The women interviewed concede there were some decent Estonians and Russians ... even some Germans whom they encountered, but for the most part, their life was hellish. When they were joined by other Jewish women deported from places like Poland and Lithuania, they naïvely refused to believe the latter's far more horrific tales of gas chambers and mass murder.

Between 2000 and 2006, filmmaker Pribyl, a Brandeis graduate, traveled to three continents and 20 countries to interview the women in "To Estonia." They were well into their 80s by then, but many had wonderful pictures of themselves and their families taken prior to the Holocaust. A powerful reminder of the ordinariness and innocence of their young lives. These snapshots are part of the film, as is footage "meticulously sourced everywhere from official archives to the garages of former SS men," notes the "Forgotten Transports" website.

The young Czech women would stay together until their final deportation to Bergen-Belsen in Germany, a place so horrible that even "children of 3 there were little old men," observes one survivor. But fortunately the camp was liberated soon after they arrived in April 1945.

Of the 1,000 Czech Jews transported to Estonia three years earlier, only 46 women would survive. To meet some of them in Pribyl's film is to be, briefly, in the presence of women who, by helping others survive physically and psychologically (even as a result of their naïveté), were also able to save themselves.

What: "Forgotten Transports: To Estonia" (Czech Republic, 2008)

Where: CIFF at Tower City Cinemas

When: Tues., March 24, at 7 p.m.

Thurs.: March 26, at 11:50 a.m.

Tickets & Schedule: 877-304-FILM or www.clevelandfilm.org

Other Jewish-themed films at CIFF through March 29

Antarctica is a comedic Israeli film about the strange and sexy world of gay Tel Aviv. Lemon Tree is the story of a Palestinian woman whose beloved lemon grove on the Green Line border is threatened when the new Israeli minister of defense moves to the grove's other side. Strangers, a film co-sponsored by the CJN, is the forbidden love story between an Israeli and a Palestinian who meet by chance in Berlin. French film Two Ladies tells of a bitter, aging Jewish woman's relationship with her Arab caretakers.

Films with tangential Jewish connections include Between the Folds, documentarian Vanessa Gould's study of the art of paper-folding. Documentary Herb and Dorothy examines the amazing art collection of Herb and Dorothy Vogel.

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