

At the Last Minute

Interview with Zsuzsanna Varga

By Emese Szlanárs

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“Starting in late 1944, thousands of Jews were rounded up and brought to forced labor camps in Kőszeg and the surrounding area – all along the western border region. In the final months of the war, the battlefield between Soviet and Nazi forces swept ever westward through Hungary, and so the Jews in the Kőszeg labor camps were forced to dig trenches and tank traps in an attempt to halt the Soviet advance. Later on, it became clear that this whole project was totally pointless – the trench system, which cost several thousand human lives, delayed the Soviet advance by maybe half an hour.” – Zsuzsanna Varga’s documentary film recounts the tragedy through the eyes of the victims’ neighbors.

filmhu: Confronting the past is an essential process; we’ve seen a number of Holocaust films being made in recent years. Your work presents the Holocaust from the point of view of those who were neighbors of Kőszeg’s Jewish families. Why did you see a need for this angle?

Zsuzsanna Varga: Other Holocaust films have explored the experience of the Jewish survivors. “Once They Were Neighbours” is unique because we filmed the neighbors of those who were deported from Kőszeg, and the neighbors of the Jews who were later deported to Kőszeg. Together with sociologist Bori Kriza, the film’s reporter, we felt that it is important to finally hear what the “other” side has to say. Interestingly, in making the movie we found that the witnesses use the same phrases and expressions as they might have 60 years ago. New films about the Holocaust are important for another reason: the question of Hungary’s responsibility remains a taboo topic, and we have not confronted this part of our past the way, say, the Germans have, for whom confronting the issues of societal and individual responsibility was unavoidable. In Hungary, the general view is that the war crimes were the Germans’ responsibility, and Hungarians couldn’t do anything about them. Yet historians’ research makes clear that about 150 German soldiers (the “Eichmann commando”) were in charge of the deportations from Hungary in the summer of 1944. Clearly, this group would have been incapable of carrying this out on their own; they had to rely on the cooperation of 200,000 Hungarian soldiers, gendarmes, police, transport personnel, bureaucrats, doctors, nurses and others. These people were us: our parents and grandparents had a hand in the deportation of their own neighbors. It is worth asking them how they saw things then and what they thought. Moreover, it’s getting late: we’re talking about witnesses in their 70’s and 80’s, who will not be among us much longer. Our film does not form a judgment; we ourselves have no idea what we would have done if we had been in their position, no matter how clearly we may know the ideal, the laudable and humane course of action.

filmhu: Apart from the fact that this is an interesting topic, do you have any personal ties to Kőszeg?

Zs. V.: We could have done this film in any small town in the Hungarian countryside. And, in answer to the question “what happened to the local Jewish population?”, we would have gotten exactly the same answers. In all these places, the relationship between Jews and non-Jews was neighborly, and in all these places, no one cared much about what happened to the Jews after they “left.” Starting in late 1944, thousands of Jews were rounded up and brought to forced labor camps in Kőszeg and the surrounding area – all along the western border region. In the final months of the war, the battlefield between Soviet and Nazi forces swept ever westward through Hungary, and so the Jews in the Kőszeg labor camps were forced to dig trenches and tank traps in an attempt to halt the Soviet advance. Later on, it became clear that this whole project was totally pointless – the trench system, which cost several thousand human lives, delayed the Soviet advance by maybe half an hour.

filmhu: The film also makes mention of Kőszeg’s synagogue, which today stands empty and unused in the center of town; the film also raises the question of whether there was ever a gas chamber in Kőszeg.

Zs. V.: We were very interested in the history of that building, the abandoned synagogue, which is like a gaping sore in the town’s landscape. Though we would have liked to explore this issue in detail, it did not fit in the scope of the present film. As for the gas chamber, the witnesses always raised this issue themselves – we never asked, but they always volunteered the information that such a gas chamber never existed. The most interesting aspect, for us, was that the witnesses were arguing about semantics – not about the fact that during the final days of the war, the labor camp victims who were in the worst physical shape were simply gassed to death. Yet they continued to argue about whether an actual “gas chamber” existed, and what, really, constitutes a gas chamber. It was as if they considered the gassing as the shame of the town, and by denying the existence of a gas chamber, they were trying to blot out this shame. None of these neighbors had any connection whatsoever to this particular method of murder, yet it remains one of the most painful issues to this day.

filmhu: Your name is not yet widely known among Hungarian documentary filmmakers, partly because of your youth. Where did you study, where did you learn filmmaking, what projects have you worked on?

Zs. V.: I graduated from ELTE University in Budapest, with degrees in media studies and Hungarian studies. At first, I worked as a print journalist, then switched to television. After college I won a U.S. scholarship and went to the States for three years. During the first two years, I completed a Master’s degree in Journalism, with an emphasis on documentary filmmaking, at U.C. Berkeley. We learned everything you can possibly learn about this trade: camera work, sound, directing... at the end of the second year, each student created a 26-minute film which we filmed, edited and produced ourselves. After getting my Master’s degree, I spent an additional year in the U.S., working for New

York Times Television on a documentary series, called “Trauma”. It was like “ER”, only the real-life version: we filmed actual people and real events in hospitals, following doctors around during their day’s work. We each worked as a one-man film crew, each with a small digital camera, and each of us responsible for producing, filming and reporting: this is called “videojournalism.” Apart from learning to document events, I also learned how to structure and build up a storyline, what questions to ask and scenes to film in order to end up with a real film. After returning to Hungary, my goal was to continue working in the documentary field; as luck would have it, I met Tamás Almási, whose work and approach I really admire. I later worked with him on “From Home To Home” and “Take Three;” I learned a great deal from him.

filmhu: Do documentary filmmakers have an easier time in the U.S. or in Hungary?

Zs. V.: The U.S. and the English-speaking market are enormous; a documentary film can produce revenues. In Hungary, television stations rarely show documentaries; full-length movies get short shrift, and independent documentary films are even worse off. In the U.S., independent films are not financed by the government, but by grants from private foundations. If the foundation likes your idea, they’ll give you money. Here in Hungary, everyone wants to make a living off government grants. Each year, about 80-100 films get a few million forints each (about 10-20,000 USD), yet when public television finally shows a documentary, we’re all ecstatic. A large percentage of completed films is never shown, we never get to see them. What happens to those? Where do they disappear to?

Another, related difference between the two societies is that in Hungary, no one (with one or two exceptions) makes a living as a “full-time” documentary filmmaker. People make their documentaries as a side-line, while doing other paid work at their day jobs. As a result, the documentary profession is not exactly prestigious.

In the U.S., I learned to see documentary filmmaking as a profession in its own right. The big idea, the real talent can emerge only after you’ve learned the basics of the trade. I think that everyone who works in this field in Hungary – and this is true for TV as well – would do well to learn the basics of, say, cinematography or tape editing. If you don’t know how to film a particular scene, and from which angle, and you don’t have any idea of how the footage is going to fit together in the final cut, then your talent will not get you very far.