

Documentary

On the sidelines

Zsuzsanna Varga: *Once They Were Neighbours* by Erzsebet Bori [borie]

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Finally: a Hungarian version of *The Sorrow and the Pity*. – With this statement, by no means do I wish to subtly disparage Zsuzsanna Varga director-cinematographer and Bori Kriza reporter of *Once They Were Neighbours*. If another country has a similar history to ours, and has similarly failed to come to terms with it, then it makes sense – it gives us a measure of security and dignity – for us to use the tried-and-true route already taken by the other.

Once They Were Neighbours is both the counterpart and antithesis of such earlier films as the series *Private Hungary* by Péter Forgács, *True people* (András Sipos, 1993), *Dangerous land* (András Kisfaludy, 1998) or *Nice, flat stone* (Irén Kármán, 2004). In his 1971 film *The Sorrow and the Pity*, Marcel Ophüls cross-examines the eyewitnesses about their experiences in Clermont-Ferrand, an average town in Vichy France.

Once They Were Neighbours is set in Kőszeg, on Hungary's western border with Austria, where the fate of the Jews was both typical and extreme. Because Kőszeg is a border town, people remember two stories: one of the local Jews, whom they knew personally, and one of the anonymous masses who were brought here by train or death-marched from other parts of the country. The local Jews (including those from the surrounding villages) numbered no more than 120, and fit into a single house designated as the ghetto. Within a few weeks, they were taken away, never to be seen again. One witness says that 18 of them eventually returned – not a bad statistic, he says, attributing this to Horthy's efforts. – As for the other category of Jews, their number cannot even be estimated: tens of thousands? hundreds of thousands? In any case, uncounted numbers were crowded into two local concentration camps, at the brewery and the brick factory, while still others were sent into forced labor. They were treated like animals; many of them died of starvation, exposure, or were finished off by epidemics. To this day, thousands lie in unmarked mass graves in the surrounding woods.

These stories are told by people from Kőszeg who, to various extents, took part in these events. Among them: a former Levente¹ charged with patrolling the forced-labor gangs and death-march; a woman who as a young girl delivered lunch to Jews she knew; one person who lived near the brick factory; another who lived near the railway; yet another who was summoned to do electrical work in the camp.... They know that the homes and shops of the local Jews were robbed – of whatever was left after the official confiscation and unofficial

¹ Member of a right-wing youth organization in Hungary

distribution of the wealth, though naturally these witnesses did not take part in this. They saw the crushed bodies falling out of the jam-packed cattle cars after several days' travel, but they weren't the ones who rushed and robbed them on the order of the Hungarian Nazis.

The reminiscences of these now elderly people are juxtaposed with – and occasionally contradicted by – the testimony of Jewish survivors recorded in 1945-46. Not surprisingly, the reminiscences of the elderly witnesses sometimes contradict each other, too. The local old-timers get into a heated debate over whether a gas chamber ever existed in Kőszeg. (The question is not answered in the film – let's assume that it is unlikely.)

Understandably, as good patriots, the witnesses defend their town's reputation, but what is really striking is how the interviewed witnesses seem relieved at making their statements. At other times in their remembrances, they choose their words carefully, and only occasionally does a prejudiced remark slip out. They won't make eye contact; there are embarrassed half-smiles, unfinished sentences. They end their statements with a question seeking confirmation: "it's so, isn't it?" These people feel ashamed. Not for something that they did – they have no idea whether they even did anything, whether they are to blame for anything – since they were children or, at least, very young at the time. Their shame and embarrassment can only come from what they did not do. They just watched, or failed to notice, or considered the events inevitable; after all, it is not their fault that they were born during "that" time. They list all the usual excuses: Hitler, the Germans, the Hungarian Nazis, the life-threatening danger, "we didn't know". For their part, the filmmakers do not make judgments, do not rub the witnesses' noses into the inconsistencies, the euphemisms and the pious memories. Instead, they approach the witnesses with straightforward intentions. Many of the witnesses confess that they do not like to recollect those times; it is painful to remember and talk about. Yet they agreed to lend their voices and faces as testimony to what occurred in another era – inasmuch as it is possible to tell such things – for in retrospect, what they lived through seems almost inconceivable.