

Keeping their distance

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A conversation with Zsuzsanna Varga, film director (excerpts)

By Lóránt Stóhr

“Once They Were Neighbours,” shown at the 37th Hungarian Film Festival in the documentary film category, is a new look at the Holocaust in Hungary. Instead of focusing on the victims, it presents the Holocaust from the point of view of its witnesses: the recollections of the “neighbors” of Holocaust victims. In the following conversation, Zsuzsanna Varga, director of “Once They Were Neighbours,” comments on her film, on the documentary industries in Hungary and in the West, and on the importance of making contacts and identifying grants in the European film industry.

Your film was first shown in the spring, and Magyar Narancs ran an article about it then, but it didn't seem to inspire any particular debate. Do you worry that, given greater publicity through the Film Festival, the film's subject matter may cause a public uproar?

Not only do I not worry – I'd be frankly delighted if the film did lead to serious discussions and debates. Our primary goal in making the film was to make the issue of taking responsibility more widely discussed. We believe that Hungarian society has yet to have a thorough discussion of who did what during the Second World War, and what they might have done differently. The Germans have already talked it all out, they went through this process back in the 1960's and 1970's. But in Hungary, the older generation still maintains that the Germans are to blame for everything, because all the atrocities occurred while Hungary was under German occupation. As filmmakers, we wanted to find out how this generation, who lived these events, remembers them. And we undertook this project none too soon: these people are in their 70's and 80's and will not be around much longer. As far as we know, ours is the first Hungarian film about the Holocaust which gives voice not to the victims, but to their neighbors, who were witnesses to, and thereby participants in, these events.

Now that the film is finished, how would you characterize the reaction of these witnesses? After all, you took them to the scene of the atrocities, to the former labor camps and to the ghettos, and then proceeded to question them. Did they undergo some sort of catharsis as a result? Did they see the events in a new light?

Throughout the process, we had the feeling – and maybe the film makes this clear – that they did not go through any cathartic experience whatsoever. They recounted the events, but made sure to keep them at arm's length; their personal distancing comes through in every word. This is entirely understandable, of course; no one wants to associate themselves with such a horrible event. As creators, our basic attitude was that we ourselves didn't know how we would have behaved in that situation, and were curious about what these people did and what they saw. What we found was that even today, they were using the same expressions, exhibiting the same attitudes as 60 years ago. They will

still tell a Jewish joke, but with some trepidation and hesitation, while peering cautiously into the camera. This is probably the same attitude they had in 1944 and 1945, which is why the events were allowed to happen the way they did, even though these people were not in any position to resist carrying out orders.

Did everyone agree to do the interview? Did some of them resist the filming?

The first time we went to Kőszeg¹ for preliminary interviews, we found that everyone was very willing to tell us their stories. The only reluctant one was the guy who had been on guard duty as a Levente². In fact, it was mostly his wife who was trying to keep him away from us, but then, when he finally agreed to see us, we could tell that the experience was an enormous relief for him – to finally be able to get all those terrible memories off his chest. For him, our conversation must have been something like going to confession.

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Did you choose the town of Kőszeg because many people consider it a “guilty town?”

The original idea was to do a documentary about Kőszeg’s synagogue and its history. This 150 year-old building is standing there, falling into ruins, in the middle of town. Several entrepreneurs have purchased it, mortgaged it – but that’s another story and we’re doing a separate film about it. So this is how we came to focus on Kőszeg. Another reason for choosing Kőszeg is that it is the westernmost town in Hungary, and the Soviet forces did not reach it until March 27, 1945, by which time Kőszeg and the surrounding region was the only place left in Hungary where there were still labor camps. By then, the Jews had been deported from all the other parts of Hungary, and in fact the transports leaving Budapest toward the West ended up in Kőszeg. Another reason for choosing Kőszeg was the rumor of the gas chamber, as well as the fact that Szálasi’s³ bunker was built, using forced labor, in the forest next to Kőszeg: this is the place where Hungary’s Arrow-Cross regime⁴ had its last days. In addition, a few years ago, Kőszeg was the scene of an exhibit called “Hitler’s soldiers – Szálasi’s Arrow-Cross”, which took a close look at the Szálasi regime. The subjects we interviewed for our film rejected this association, too, saying they had nothing to do with that whole thing, but it is interesting that the exhibit did take place in Kőszeg. I do not consider Kőszeg to be a guilty town at all. Just that its inhabitants, given their geographical situation, ended up in an ambiguous situation during the Second World War.

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¹ Historic town on the western border of Hungary

² Member of a right-wing youth organization in Hungary, similar to the Hitlerjugend in the Nazi Germany

³ Ferenc Szálasi, head of Hungary’s extreme right-wing Arrow-Cross party, became Hungary’s leader in 1944, with the backing of Nazi forces occupying Hungary. Under Szálasi’s rule, the terrorization and deportation of Hungary’s Jewry intensified and continued at a massive pace until Soviet forces occupied Hungary in 1945. With the Soviets’ westward progress and the Nazis’ imminent defeat, Szálasi and his supporters were forced to retreat ever westward; their final headquarters was a bunker outside of Kőszeg. After the war in 1946, Szálasi was convicted and hanged as a war criminal.

⁴ An extreme right-wing, anti-Semitic party in Hungary, the Hungarian Nazi party.

How did the participants react to seeing the final film? Weren't they upset that it juxtaposes their past activities with their present-day explanations?

Not at all. They liked the film, and were happy that someone finally made a film about Kőszeg's history. They say we made a true film about them, because we did not add anything to what they said and did not try to influence the viewer's judgment in any direction.

Why do you think the participants allowed you, the filmmakers, to get so close to them? Why did they trust you, and why do they continue to keep in touch with you?

Maybe one reason was that there were only two of us doing the filming: Bori Kriza, the interviewer, and me. Moreover, we are young women, and for these 70-80 year olds, we probably just seemed like a couple of nice girls asking curious questions, and so it was easy to open up to us.

Working with such a small crew is unusual in Hungary. What's behind that?

In the U.S., I worked the same way: I was the director, cinematographer, reporter, light and sound technician all in one. After completing a dual degree in media studies and Hungarian studies from ELTE University in Budapest, I got a Fulbright scholarship to U.C. Berkeley to do a Master's degree in journalism, with an emphasis on documentary filmmaking. There, I learned everything that you can possibly learn about documentary films in 18 months: camera work, editing, sound mixing, creating a structure, figuring out the scenarios. And I learned everything hands-on. My first film, called "*Screw Your Courage*," is about disadvantaged local black youths in Oakland who perform Macbeth in the evenings as part of a program to get their high school equivalency credits, while they work on public works jobs during the day. This was a pretty successful film, it was shown on San Francisco's local public television station and made it to 11 U.S. film festivals, winning first prize at two of them. After graduate school, I worked for New York Times Television, first as production coordinator, and later as part of the film crew. This production company was among the first to use the "videojournalist" method, which basically means a one-person crew. Our assignment was to film the emergency rooms in several urban hospitals in the U.S. The idea for this project came from the popular TV series "*ER*": ours was the documentary version, and it too was a success— it ran for eight or nine seasons. Four of us worked on this project: one director and three videojournalists. Although we coordinated with each other, each of us filmed our own cast member: the doctor, the nurse, etc. The interviews, the video, sound, everything was in our own hands, and in time I got very adept at documentary filmmaking. All along, my colleagues helped me get a feel for the essence of this kind of work.

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What came next, after you came home from the States?

By an enormous stroke of luck I got to know Tamás Almási, whom I greatly respected, and whose films I really liked. “Valahol otthon lenni” (*From Home To Home*) was the first film he asked me to work on with him. Bori Kriza and I did the preliminary interviews, the research, the choice of participants. During the filming, I had the little DV camera, whose purpose was to show the relationship between the participants and the crew. Often, the participants’ best contributions came when the big camera stopped rolling, and only the little one was still filming. We worked together on another Almási film too, “Harmadik találkozás,” (*Take Three*) where I was the cinematographer and, in part, the editor.

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I’m sure you miss the working conditions and methods you experienced in the U.S. Couldn’t those things be introduced in Hungary too – so that film creators would have the time they need to do high quality work?

A year and a half ago I was in Romania to introduce the videojournalist method, and local filmmakers began using it to make hospital documentaries there. But while in the U.S. we did two episodes a month, in Romania we had 4-5 days to do the same! Hungary, too, is becoming familiar with the videojournalist technique. The commercial TV stations already use it. Among documentary filmmakers, I believe Artin Tóth was the one-person crew for “Érintettek.” (*The Parties Involved*) But everyone should do their documentary the way they feel most comfortable. – The difference in financial backing – now that’s a much bigger problem. Here in Hungary, we are at the mercy of the state-financed grant-making system. There are grants in the U.S., too – they’re financed not by the state, but by private foundations – but there you can make documentaries for TV stations too. I don’t expect any such developments in Hungary in the near future, since the U.S. market (plus Canada, Britain, etc.) is many times bigger. Documentary filmmaking will never be a profitable undertaking in Hungary.

Couldn’t the films be marketed to European TV stations?

One thing which is a barrier to European distribution is the language issue. A Hungarian film with English subtitles will only make it to a European film festival, or be purchased by a TV station, if it is very strong visually – the juries have trouble reading the English subtitles. In fact, most German TV stations simply will not show a subtitled film, since it’s hard enough to view a film on a small TV screen as compared to a movie screen. In “Once They were Neighbours,” the dialogue is essential, and so we had a lot of it translated, but then the non-Hungarian viewers told us that they had to watch the film twice before they could understand it.

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Getting back to the issue of profitability and foundation financing: aren’t there any documentary co-productions? Couldn’t filmmakers just work for a West European TV station and get beyond the limited Hungarian constraints?

Of course they could. But in Hungary, very few documentary film makers have any idea of how these things work in the rest of Europe. They don't go to workshops or festivals. Yet there are plenty of Media Program-sponsored grants for documentary filmmakers. In 2004, Bojana Papp, Sarolta Szily and I took part in ESoDoc (European Social Documentary), where we hit it off so well with the organizers that the second week-long ESoDoc session for 2005 was held in Hungary, and we organized it ourselves. But even though we advertised the event everywhere, a total of three Hungarian filmmakers applied, all of whom were eventually chosen to participate. Yet it would be worthwhile for documentary filmmakers to apply for ESoDoc: there's a lot to learn about European co-productions, cooperation opportunities, making valuable contacts (at the last session, 11 countries were represented), and at the end of the seminar there's a pitching forum. That simply means that you pitch your film to the commissioning editors of the TV stations, and if you do a good job, they give you money for your project. In Hungary, people are just starting to learn these things. They don't have contacts; few speak any foreign languages. Yet there are plenty of opportunities. For example, I was at the documentary film festival in Amsterdam, I saw the new trends and got to know lots of people. But who's got the money or the time to attend such functions?

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Here in Hungary, there aren't even any studios to back up the filmmakers.

The lack of a studio system and the producer system is a real drawback. In the West, the director doesn't have to spend time raising money or dealing with film festivals. Here, all I've done since the summer is send out my film to festivals; I fill out the forms myself, I make the DVDs, design the cover, the flyer, the website. And really, all that shouldn't be my job. And the results aren't even professional – you can tell they're done by an amateur. In Hungary, the filmmakers usually ask their friends in the media profession to do this or that design task as a favor. It's the same at TV stations and newspapers – they make interns do these things for a pittance or for free. But I don't want to have anyone work for free, just as I don't work for free either (though, on my own projects, I have no choice). In the U.S., they beat it into our heads: doing quality work has a price. Here in Hungary, we have a long way to go before this principle becomes standard practice.