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Czech Filmmaker Lukas Pribyl on His Holocaust Documentary, "Forgotten Transports"

By Joan Brunwasser

My guest today is Czech filmmaker Lukas Pribyl. He directed and produced the four-part series, Forgotten Transports, about the Nazi deportation of Czech Jews during World War II. Welcome to OpEdNews, Lukas. Over the years, the Holocaust has been covered by hundreds of memoirs, historical accounts, books of fiction, as well as movies and documentaries in many languages. Some would say that the subject has been overdone and that it's time to move on already. What drew you to the subject and why did you spend so much time exploring and documenting it?



credit: Sarah Shatz

The fact that many consider the subject of the Holocaust "overdone" is something that actually drew me to it. It is true that some stories are repeated over and over and the same images recycled again and again. I have watched dozens of documentaries on the Holocaust and I am very aware that there must be a sort of "Holocaust documentary fatigue" because a lot of the films look alike. They show a few weeping survivors, the music is sad, with prominent violin" What has also always struck me is that while most documentary filmmakers attempt to depict the situation of the Jews in Europe during WWII, they are really showing us the perspective of the Nazis, or at best the view of the so-called "bystanders". What we see is not really the perspective of the Jews. Think of it: In how many documentaries have you seen footage from Nazi newsreels of Hitler's followers goose-stepping at a stadium with lit torches or images of Hitler shouting into a microphone? But Jews did not attend Nazi marches and certainly did not go out of their way to personally see and hear Hitler. They would have to be stupid or suicidal" Jews actually did not even see such footage that much because they were soon not allowed to go to movie theaters. And the oft-repeated images of children pulling their sleeves up in Auschwitz or of the huge piles of corpses in Bergen Belsen, that's post-Holocaust, liberation footage. It was filmed by the Allied armies, as they came across the concentration camps.

The fact that the Allies could film these things was because there was still something there in late 1944 or in 1945 the bodies, the crematoria, the piles of hair and looted things. Many of the places my films depict however ceased to exist, or better said, were liquidated by the Nazis already in 1942 or 1943. Very few people survived from there and most of them did not speak after the war. We generally associate the "survival story" with striped uniforms and "phone numbers to heaven" tattooed onto forearms. I however set out to document other, "untold" stories of the Holocaust that took place

in locations we have mostly not heard about Sawin or Maly Trostinetz, Jagalla or Kaiserwald. I was interested in depicting other "modes" of survival, not the Auschwitz one. That's why the films are designed the way they are: Each of the four films describes one geographic destination where deportation trains were dispatched to and focuses on a particular "mode" of survival, on one unique way people adjusted to their situation.

The film about deportations to eastern Poland is concerned with the psyche of people permanently on the run, constantly in hiding, who had to continually feign and change identities with a great deal of ingenuity and much humor. Forgotten Transports to Estonia is a film describing a fascinating story of a group of young women and girls who thanks to their youthful naivety and constant mutual help managed to pass through the Holocaust while remaining largely oblivious to the genocide raging around them. The segment about Belarus is devoted to resistance and armed struggle by Jewish escapees from camps, to people who were being killed but also killed. Latvia talks about the effort to preserve a semblance of normal life in the ghetto in Riga. Young people fell in love and organized parties (under the penalty of death), children attended school but on the way to it had to pass under the gallows.

And so while the film on "Poland" is really a story of the inner loneliness of individuals who joke to survive, "Latvia" is a story of families, "Belarus" of men and "Estonia" of women. Each of my films is designed to stand by itself and can be screened independently of others. However, when seen consecutively, a certain overarching idea becomes apparent. None of the information given in one film is repeated in another but there are these "horizontal" stories and themes and so in the film about Estonia you learn about what happens when you manage to protect your shoes from a kapo who wants to take them away. In Poland, you get to know what happens when they are stolen from you. In the film about Belarus shoes lead to a silly mistake, a killing and becoming a hero, the film about Latvia tells you how stealing shoes can help you survive.

And since I did not want to recycle the already told stories and known images, I ended up filming people from twenty countries on five continents. The visual material in my documentaries comes from over thirty countries. I wanted to tell the story only through the eyes and words of the survivors themselves, so there is no commentary, no present-day and make-believe footage, only true, time and place precise images. I wanted every word in the films to be substantiated by a true picture, so I have gone through several hundred hours of extant archival film in a number of countries to find the fragments I needed to illustrate particular events.

I managed to get pictures from the KGB archives, traded bottles of vodka for photos in Polish villages, incessantly pressed the doorbells of families of former SS men. Behind each of the authentic photos used, there is much travel, many meetings, hundreds of phone calls, as most of these snapshots do not originate in official archives but rather come from private sources (and from people often hostile to Jews). Each small detail mentioned by the witnesses is painstakingly documented, not only depicting their words, but also confirming them. Zuzana Justman, an Emmy-winning filmmaker and a Holocaust survivor herself incidentally, in the ghetto she worked as a nurse and was helping my Grandfather, who was a doctor there said that my films are the best documented Holocaust movies she has seen. I take this for a great compliment. To achieve that level of visual authenticity was my goal, that's why the films took ten years to make.

What a huge undertaking! When you began, did you ever imagine it would take you so long to complete it?

I knew it was going to be a long and difficult project but I have to admit that I had not expected it would take more than ten years. It took so long because it was difficult to find witnesses, find all the relevant visual material and last but not least, find finances to pay for all of it. Regarding witnesses, from the approximately 40.000 Czech and Moravian Jews deported to the places my films are about, i.e. Latvia, Estonia, Belarus and Poland, only about 270 survived the war. I found out the post-war fate of almost all of them. About seventy of them were still alive and we filmed them in twenty countries on five continents. First I focused on looking for all the people who would be under 100 years old at the time as I thought the chance of meeting someone older was quite slim. However, in Australia we

actually filmed a lady who was 103.

I started with German deportation records, which are quite precise, then consulted the lists of survivors people who came back from the war registered and looked for their relatives, if any of them survived. So these lists were also quite exact, even though I found a few people alive even though they were listed as having perished. I perused marriage records since women married and got new surnames, many people after the war also decided to change their German-sounding last names to Czech ones. To give you an example, I discovered that one man I was looking for changed his German name to Czech one. Then he immigrated to Israel, where he took a Hebrew name. In the end, he moved to the United States and anglicized his Hebrew name. It took me four years to find him.

I also searched emigration records. Czech Jews left to different parts of the world with each post-war emigration wave. Those who left already in 1945 or never went back home for example because they knew none of their relatives survived mostly went as far as possible, like to Australia. Those who left when the Communists took over Czechoslovakia in 1948 mostly went to North and South America. A few went to Israel but from the group of people I was looking for, relatively few did. They were often sole survivors from their transports and people who went to Israel often left in groups of friends. And finally, those who left after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 mostly left for European countries, more often than not to Germany. By then they already had new friends in Czechoslovakia and it is easier to keep in touch with someone beyond the Iron Curtain from Germany than from Australia.

They also knew the language; in Germany they got citizenship almost immediately, their sons as Jews did not have to go to the army, etc. I placed ads in the papers, inquired with Jewish communities and so on but found out the most useful way was actually calling people. At the time I was doing this only a few phone directories were listed on the internet, so I simply ordered phone books from the big cities in a country where I was searching Jews being city people and if the surname was not too common and there were not more than several hundred people of that last name in that country, I simply called them all. You always know whether you find the person you are looking for because when you ask: "Sorry for bothering you, but were you in Salaspils?", most people answer: "What?" If they answer: "Why do you ask?", you have found your survivor. Now you only have to convince that person to talk to you, which in some cases took up to two years. In the end we collected four hundred hours of raw footage.

With the visual material, it was the same. I believe there is a visual record of almost everything but it is usually not to be found in archives but rather in private hands. I have gone through hundreds of hours of footage, each photograph in the film has a story behind it. I got them from the families of SS men, traded them for bottles of vodka in Polish villages and so on. The visual material in my films comes from thirty countries. I had to work out my own method for looking for photographs, as well as for interviewing.

Finally, getting financing for all this was the most arduous task. I am not a filmmaker by training and when you look for funding, they always ask you: "So what films have you done?" You tell them that you had never held a camera in your hands but that you have a wonderful plan of making four feature-length films on the subject of the Holocaust but you plan to make them a bit differently from the hundreds of documentaries already out there. Of course, first they get a good laugh at you and then they show you the door. If it weren't for the support of my family and a few good friends who believed I could pull it off no matter my lack of experience, I would never have been able to finish these films. So it took a while but I don't regret it because I met so many interesting people and learned a lot along the way.

Wow. I can't even get my mind around the breadth of this project! Almost all of the interviewees had never talked to anyone before. If you hadn't come along, their stories would have gone to the grave with them. After they opened their hearts to you, were any of them sorry they did? How did their families react? Many of them had never known any details about this aspect of their parents' lives.

Indeed, sometimes children learned the fate of their parents through me. I think there were a number of reasons why so many of these survivors refused to talk for so long. First, they were dispersed all over the world and in a number of cases were not located even by the large interviewing schemes like Spielberg's Shoah Foundation, etc. And even when they were contacted, they often declined to speak because it is difficult to talk about the most difficult time in your life to people who just come with a camera, film for two hours, then say "thank you" and leave for good. It is understandable when you have a project of such tremendous scope but I could have a more focused approach.

In many cases I had to gain the trust of the interviewees over a period of time. But I think the main reason for their keeping silent was this sense of isolation they had. The places they survived were often completely "forgotten"; their survival experience quite different from the "usual" large camp survival story we are most familiar with and there were so few survivors from these places" They could not exchange their memories with others they simply had no other people to share their experience with. They felt isolated from the general society and other survivors as well. One man who survived a transport to Belarus told me he had tried to talk but that no one wanted to listen, so he withdrew into himself.

The general notion is that if something is really horrible, we hear about it. Auschwitz was an absolutely horrific place of death, that's why we know about it. But we haven't heard of Maly Trostenets, which means it could not have been as bad there, otherwise we would have heard about it. It seems logical, but for someone who survived Maly Trostenets it was just as bad of a camp as Auschwitz and the reason why no one knows about Maly Trostinets is that there are basically no survivors. Nonetheless, even some survivors share this notion that a place they haven't heard about could not have been as bad as Auschwitz, for example. So the people from the "forgotten" locations were sometimes intimidated into silence.

Once they did start to speak, however, though it often took a long time for me to persuade them, it was like opening up floodgates. None of the people who spoke to me expressed any regret, at least to me but I believe speaking was therapeutic for them. Naturally, I was awaiting the reaction of people who speak in my films with great anticipation, as it must be quite difficult to see oneself on the screen talking about your traumas. Yet all that lived to see the films reacted overwhelmingly positively and that's really the greatest reward I could hope for. Since every word of theirs is documented by authentic pictures and footage, they recognize themselves and their friends on photos from those times photos they of course have never seen before and tell me that this is how it really was.



credit: *Forgotten Transports* [website](#)

You had a strong personal connection to this project because of your grandfather's experience. It must have been incredibly difficult to handle the accumulated weight of these stories without getting overwhelmed by it all. Even when you weren't actually listening to survivors tell their tales, you were deeply involved: gathering documentation, or editing the hundreds of hours of material. And this went on for ten years. How did you keep yourself emotionally intact over the long haul?

I actually did not know much about my Grandfather's experience, or generally, my family's experience during the war. Most of my mother's family perished, my Grandmother died when I was a baby and my Grandfather died when I was ten years old. He never spoke about his years in camps to me. Of course, growing up I was surrounded by survivors but I started researching the camp my Grandfather was deported to more out of curiosity - since I could not find anything written on it rather than because I would actually know what he went through. Regarding the emotional impact of this work on me, it might be better to ask those around me.

But I think, I hope, am still pretty sane. Of course, some of the stories you hear are pretty heavy but people survive, except for luck which is most important - because of optimism, laughter, humor, love. And when you talk to these survivors, most of them are so full of joie de vivre that they actually give you energy instead of sapping it. But maybe I have changed a bit. The difference is that I now try to get less upset about minor problems because the only thing that really matters is life itself. So I have heard. However, it is much easier said than done, so I am not that good at it but at least I try to remind myself from time to time.

As far as working with the visual material is concerned, that can indeed be taxing. Some of the images one comes across are difficult to look at but such images actually do not appear in my films that much because my films are much more about life and surviving than about death. Death is the background but I would not know how to make a film about dead people. I guess the only way to deal with the gruesome images is the way physicians must deal with all the horror they encounter at, let's say, oncology ward. You do your very best and of course you invest your emotions, but in a way you also have to keep your distance otherwise your work would eat you up, destroy you and then you would not be able to do anything.

How has *Forgotten Transports* been received so far? Has it received much publicity in Europe? How about over here?

As I mentioned, these films took ten years to make and like everything else with these documentaries, getting them noticed was also long process. If you are a first time filmmaker without any connections in the film world whatsoever, you don't have the backing of a powerful producer who would care to promote the film, no agent and no money to compete with the big-budget PR machines, you simply have to rely on luck and the word of mouth. When the first film in the series was released in the Czech Republic, hardly anyone noticed. The fourth film of the *Forgotten Transports* series already got the two Czech Academy Awards it was eligible for, in the Best Documentary and in the Critics' choice categories and the films collected quite a few other awards. All the major Czech newspapers wrote about them extensively, there was TV coverage" But it was mostly through word of mouth that the films eventually "made it".

This all happened thanks to the response of audiences that has simply been fantastic. While most films "decline" over time, i.e. have the greatest number of people in the first weeks of screenings and then slowly disappear, for *Forgotten Transports* it has been the opposite. I am really happy because the interest in them is steadily growing. I had a fantastic team cameraman, editor, composer and soundman and last but not least, my sister who was the production manager of dreams. Had I had such a team for PR, festival management, etc. the moment they were released, the films could have reached the world faster and with a bigger splash.

But we are slowly getting there. You know, with festivals it is a business like with anything else. Many festivals vie for films from certain authors already before they are completed. If you are a no name and have no one to recommend you, it is quite understandable that you are not going to be picked by the big film festivals among the thousands of applications, particularly if your work is on the Holocaust. Let's face it, there is a certain amount of "Holocaust fatigue" with so many films on the topic out there. And it is hard to tell from a synopsis that yours might be a different one. So, for example, a director of one of the largest documentary film festivals actually apologized to me for not selecting it. He saw *Forgotten Transports* by chance and was shocked to learn his festival did not accept it but the big festivals only want premieres and by then I screened *Forgotten Transports* elsewhere. Anyway, I don't

want to sound like I am complaining because I am not. We had a wonderful response in Gothenburg at the largest film festival in Northern Europe, the first page of the cultural section of the *New York Times* carried a long and very favorable review of the films, soon all four will screen at the Denver festival as well as a number of other festivals around the world and *Forgotten Transports* are getting better and better known, so I am quite satisfied.

That sounds great, Lukas. Tell us more about the upcoming Denver film festival. I understand that you will be coming over for it.

Indeed, I will be going there in November. While the films are now playing from London to Hong Kong, I chose Denver. All four films will be screening there, I have a number of close friends in Colorado, many of whom supported the making of the film when no one yet thought much about this project and so this is a great occasion to show *Forgotten Transports* to them on a movie screen. The [Starz Denver Film Festival](#) is really giving my film quartet a lot of exposure and very good screening times, there is even a special event held there in the films' honor, so I am really looking forward to the experience.

How does it feel now that this project is "in the can" as they say? Are you having withdrawal pangs? Can you take a breath before you jump into something else?

I am happy the films are out and enjoying success but frankly, I don't have much time to suffer from any withdrawal, I hardly have the time to think about anything but work. In fact, sometimes I wish I had more time to go around the world with my films but I don't, since I am already working on a new project. Except for the fact that I began writing a script for a comedy and started preparatory work on a new documentary (not really Holocaust related) and now put both projects on ice, I got an offer from the Czech Foreign Ministry to build an Institute which would deal with all the unresolved questions stemming from WWII. It is a very challenging task, very stressful and more often than not overwhelmingly time demanding but it is something I believe in, something that came almost too late and is badly needed and it is a job that in a way combines all my various interests. The only disadvantage is than now when I basically live in my office, I have no time for filmmaking. That's however an incentive to get this Institute off the ground soon so I can take a break and make another film. I now know much better how to go about making movies, so the new one should not take as long as *Forgotten Transports* did.

You started because of your grandfather's experience at the hands of the Nazis. Did doing this documentary series give you any closure?

Since my Grandfather died [after the war] when I was only ten years old, I never got to ask him what he went through. I loved him very much so when I got older I naturally wondered what he experienced and that gradually led me to all this research. However, in general I did not do the films because of some need for personal closure, I did it because of pure fascination with the people I met. I was foremost interested in the people who survived these little known places and with how they survived them. One author I particularly is Isaak Babel. I also share his fascination with violence, but feel a bit like him in the story when he rides with the Red Cavalry but is unable to kill a goose. I find the topic of people stuck in senseless violence gripping but I vent it by telling stories. And the true stories I capture in *Forgotten Transports* are the quintessential stories of human survival, will to survive, hope and life. That's actually what I am interested in how people can laugh, love, hope and live despite being surrounded by complete horror.

Good luck with *Forgotten Transports* and your challenging new job. Thanks so much for talking with me, Lukas.

Forgotten Transports [website](#)

Author's Website: <http://www.opednews.com/author/author79.html>

Author's Bio: Joan Brunwasser is a co-founder of Citizens for Election Reform (CER) which since 2005 existed for the sole purpose of raising the public awareness of the critical need for election reform. Our goal: to restore fair, accurate, transparent, secure elections where votes are cast in private and counted in public. Because the problems with electronic (computerized) voting systems include a lack of transparency and the ability to accurately check and authenticate the vote cast, these systems can alter election results and therefore are simply antithetical to democratic principles and functioning. Since the pivotal 2004 Presidential election, Joan has come to see the connection between a broken election system, a dysfunctional, corporate media and a total lack of campaign finance reform. This has led her to enlarge the parameters of her writing to include interviews with whistle-blowers and articulate others who give a view quite different from that presented by the mainstream media. She also turns the spotlight on activists and ordinary folks who are striving to make a difference, to clean up and improve their corner of the world. By focusing on these intrepid individuals, she gives hope and inspiration to those who might otherwise be turned off and alienated. She also interviews people in the arts in all their variations - authors, journalists, filmmakers, actors, playwrights, and artists. Why? The bottom line: without art and inspiration, we lose one of the best parts of ourselves. And we're all in this together. If Joan can keep even one of her fellow citizens going another day, she considers her job well done. Joan has been Election Integrity Editor for OpEdNews since December, 2005. Her articles also appear at Huffington Post, RepublicMedia.TV and Scoop.co.nz.

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