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Young Polish Jews in happier times: An image from Lukas Pribyl's "Forgotten Transports: To Poland."

New Holocaust documentary highlights the experiences of those in lesser-known transports.

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George Robinson
Special To The Jewish Week

Lukas Pribyl was looking for his grandfather. He knew the old man had been deported from Czechoslovakia in October 1939. He knew his grandfather had been taken to a camp whose name was all but forgotten, not one of the infamous extermination camps of Poland or the concentration camps for political prisoners like Dachau or Mauthausen. Just a small way station in the hell that was Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe, a siding to oblivion where his grandfather died.

He began researching that camp and hundreds more that were like blank spaces in the collective memory of humanity, the places where thousands of Czech Jews like most of Pribyl's family were murdered. But Lukas Pribyl wasn't just an ordinary citizen with a curiosity about his family history; he is a highly educated professional historian, a product of Brandeis, Columbia and Hebrew universities, and a filmmaker. Over the course of 10 years, he would conduct hundreds of interviews and sift through thousands of hours of film footage and photographs to document the story of the 300 Czech Jews who survived deportation, finally telling their stories in four 90-minute films, collectively titled "Forgotten Transports."



One would think that by now there are very few stories left untold from the Shoah. But "Forgotten Transports" touches on new ground, both in content and form. The four films, which form the core of the "Legacy of the Shoah Film Festival" taking place on March 27-28 at John Jay College, are brilliantly conceived. We hear only the voices of the survivors; background information is conveyed in title cards. We see only the survivors and footage and stills from the camps, the transports and the cities. And almost all of the interview subjects are telling their stories for the first time. By focusing his full attention on this small, un-mined sample, Pribyl has found material that will be unfamiliar to almost any viewer, no small achievement in an age in which Holocaust documentaries are plentiful.

Consider, for example, "Forgotten Transports: To Estonia." A thousand Czech Jews were transported to camps in Estonia in 1942; of their number 46, all women, survived. The Estonian experience was something of a sideshow to the horrific main event in the death camps in Poland, and the experiences recounted in "Transports" are unusual in many ways, not the least of them being the considerable interaction between the Jewish prisoners and Estonian and German civilians, who were frequently supportive of these women to the extent possible under the circumstances.

The most striking story told in the film, one that would make a great dramatic film were it not so downright unbelievable, is about the budding romance between a particularly vicious camp commandant and a stunningly beautiful Jewish prisoner; not only does he eventually throw away his career and life for her, she even manages to get him to stop beating the other prisoners. As the contemporary saying goes, "you can't make this stuff up." In addition, in this film Pribyl spends an unusual amount of time examining the aftermath of the liberation of the camps, a subject that has been insufficiently explored in films to date.

Even "Forgotten Transports: To Poland," which deals in large part with the death camps of Sobibor, Chelmno and Auschwitz, includes the stories of Czech survivors who were imprisoned in other little-known places like Piaski and Zamosc and dozens of other camps in the Lublin District of occupied Poland. The death rate of Czech Jews deported to that region was astronomical; as the film notes at its conclusion, "of the 13,989 Jews deported from Bohemia and Moravia to the Lublin District ... 50 survived."

At the film's outset we learn of families that were transported from Terezin. As one of the

survivors says, "We were told we were being sent to work in the east." Viewers expect the worst; after all, most of the transports from Terezin were destined for Auschwitz. But in the early stages of the Shoah, these people were actually sent to labor camps in Poland and to the Lublin Ghetto. There they would face starvation, typhus, dysentery and the inevitable "selections" until the Nazis began to liquidate these camps and ghettos and ship the Jews to be killed outright.

By focusing on the survivors alone, Pribyl shifts the discourse in his four films to the extraordinary circumstances and sheer ferocious will to live that made survival possible. As Lucie Pollakova quietly observes in "To Poland," "The human spirit is amazing." And that spirit is the true subject of "Forgotten Transports." n

"The Legacy of the Shoah Film Festival, featuring Lukas Pribyl's four-film series "Forgotten Transports" and other documentaries, will take place Saturday, March 27 and Sunday, March 28 at the Gerald W. Lynch Theater, John Jay College (Tenth Avenue and 59th Street). Saturday's program begins at 7 p.m. with "Forgotten Transports: To Estonia," which will be followed by a discussion with Pribyl and several of the women who appear in the film. Sunday's program, which includes his other three films, runs from 12:30 pm to 9:30 p.m. Admission is free. For information, call the theater at (212) 237-8005.

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