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Bought a Film, Got a Cat in a Sack

by Daiva Bartikienė

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[photo caption] Saulius Beržinis, director of a documentary film about Jewish life in Jurbarkas, and Ona Biveinienė, director of the Kopa NGO Kopa films, have been criticized within the municipality for inciting ethnic discord. Photo by D. Bartkienė.

“We bought a film, and we got a cat in a sack,” concludes Daura Giedraitienė, director of the Culture Department, after viewing the film “When Jurbarkas Was Spoken of in Yiddish” commissioned by the Jurbarkas Regional Museum on March 9 with members of the commission in charge of maintaining the image of the regional administration. The film, financed by the Regional Culture Fund of the Ministry of Culture and the Jurbarkas municipality, not only does not encourage love of Lithuania, but is seriously out of step with the historical truth, according to those who have seen it.

Labeled Jew-Shooters

The NGO film company Kopa, which last year filmed the 400th anniversary of Jurbarkas's receiving the town's Magdeburg rights, was commissioned by the Regional Museum to commemorate the life of the Jurbarkas Jewish community in a project dedicated to [commemorating] the 70th anniversary of the Holocaust, but failed to fulfill the contract with the Jurbarkas Cultural Center to make the film. It took longer than had been agreed to carry out the museum's project as well: although what D. Giedraitienė characterized as "raw material" was screened at the end of September, the film wasn't finished by December, even though the contract was extended. It was only on the eve of March 11 that the clients received the work causing so much speculation and distress.

Cultural Department director D. Giedraitienė spoke last autumn about the film's not living up to the expectations of residents of Jurbarkas. After viewing the material supplied to the museum, Giedraitienė said she thought it was bad that the work commissioned had turned against the Jurbarkas community.

"In this film the Lithuanian nation are labeled Jew-shooters. Not directly, but by naming those who did the shooting, when the historical documents show that it was not the Jurbarkas police and not the Jurbarkas riflemen [Riflemen's Union] who organized the shooting of Jews but the Tilsit SS unit in Tauragė. This was the work of the Germans. Since the film was made using the state's money, it really wouldn't do, in my opinion, to show this film to the viewer, when it has already become an anti-state film," Giedraitienė said at the beginning of November.

Jurbarkas Regional Director Lilija Jakelaitienė wasn't completely satisfied either with what the film makers showed last September. She thought the film should show the resolve of the Lithuanian people to rescue Jewish families from destruction, and that's why there was a request to find a place in the film to name Jurbarkas residents who have been recognized as Righteous Gentiles.

Giedraitienė says there was a long consultation with regional directors on what criticisms to express to director Saulius Beržinis and how to express them, so that it was only in mid-October after going to Vilnius that the administration's preferences were presented to him.

Giedraitienė said at that time she recommended waiting until the film was finished and that she was convinced that Beržinis would correct his work so that at the very least it would conform to historical truth, and she expressed the opinion that if this didn't happen, the Ministry of Culture would pull funding for the film.

Demands Explanation

It took a lot of waiting, although at the beginning of December Jurbarkas Regional Museum museum specialist Adelija Meizeraitienė, responsible for the tax-payer financed project, also explained that the film was done but just hadn't been delivered yet, because the museum didn't yet need it.

“We'll need the film for the event on July 3, so we aren't in a hurry to get it,” Meizeraitienė was still saying at the beginning of March, although money for the film had already been transferred to Kopa in June of last year [2011].

Now one can only speculate why the museum didn't demand the film, and the film makers were in no hurry to meet their obligations. This was done to put off the scandal which had to happen when this work of the museum dedicated to educational activity was viewed. Although those who viewed the first version of the film gave assurances that the current version is as different as night and day, the essential parts which caused discussion in September have remained unchanged.

For instance, in the first version of the film it was not mentioned that Lithuania was occupied; that, in July of 1941 as the mass extermination of the Jewish people was happening, the Germans ruled the country and inspired universal fear, it is only briefly mentioned that the Nazis forced Jews to show where their compatriots lived, and marked the doors and windows of their homes with six-pointed stars, and later forced Jews to tear down the synagogue.

In this context, the names of Jurbarkas residents, intoned in the voice of Vladas Andrikas, the Communist Party activist and teacher during Soviet times, who shot Jews on July 3, 1941, echo very painfully. Especially because the commentator seems to be attempting to reduce the role of the

Germans intentionally: “But the Nazis didn’t shoot there anymore, they just filmed and photographed, they didn’t participate themselves. Here, Lithuanians, do it yourself already...”

Director Beržinis himself interrupts the tragic music accompanied by the barking of dogs and the echo of shooting, having decided to add to the film an interview with the regional administration’s Cultural Department director D. Giedraitienė. On the telephone Beržinis demands that the bureaucrat explain why she told Sviesa [the name of the newspaper carrying this article] that an anti-state film was being made and why she hadn’t retracted that statement. Although Giedraitienė does try to explain, attention is distracted to marginal matters, and she is forced to admit that “there were some parts there.”

“Really, because... I don’t know, I have to consult with my government. Because this isn’t my position alone, our mayor watched copies and our opinion was exactly the same, unified, but even so [?] need to a little with you... There were parts there, because the position of the government remains the same,” Giedraitienė says in the film “When Jurbarkas Was Spoken of in Yiddish.”

The interview fades out and is replaced by retellings by contemporaries about how greedily Jurbarkas residents divided up the property of murdered Jewish families: V. Andrikis says the farmers who arrived pushed each other and even fought over it, while Aldona Ogorodnikienė explained that police and the white armbanders who served them brought the Jewish goods to the Sukurys shop.

And for only a short second the cameraman’s glance happens upon images of Israel where, in the background, the names of Jurbarkas residents recognized at “Righteous Gentiles” are written. No commentary about how they risked their lives because they wanted to save Jewish families from the shooting and raised their orphans as their own children.

Forced to Feel Guilty

Saulius Beržinis, who is presenting the film “When Jurbarkas Was Spoken of in Yiddish” made using funds from the Ministry of Culture and the municipality, says this work of his has already received invitations to take

part in three international film festivals, that it will be shown on national television, and will be used by the presidential commission to judge the crimes of the Nazis and Soviets. He also promised to send the film to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D. C. “And, most likely, teachers—since we are talking about your region—will use this film in their lessons,” O. Biveinienė said.

Senior specialist at the Cultural Department Regina Kliukienė cautioned that the film makers had made a horrible error by ascribing the tutelary extermination of Jews by German SS on July 3, 1941, to Lithuanians.

“There are the reminiscences of Jewish Jurbarkas resident Chaim Yofe, he was a witness of those days, his relatives also suffered in the operation of July 3 when about 350 people were shot. It was horrible, but to say that Lithuanians did it, I wouldn’t say that. All of us say that Jews and Lithuanians got along well until the war and never would one have wiped out the other. When a completely different power came, that’s when the extermination began,” Kliukienė claimed, suggesting documents sent from Germany in 1975 be shown. But it seemed that Beržinis, jumping in front of her with a blinding camera, wasn’t interested in documents: he categorically demanded Kliukienė explain to whom the Germans showed how Jews ought to be exterminated. and who shot them, if it wasn’t Lithuanians.

“I’d like to make a correction regarding this operation and the argument over it. Yes, this unit came to show — Jurbarkas is not an exception and one shouldn’t think that someone wants to talk about Jurbarkas. Sadly that’s the way it is, and the whole world, if now the Holocaust is denied in one country, in one region, that will be interesting, truly. This was done by locals, just read Rūta Puišytė, from your region, read her academic work, where it is written very clearly from documents and the entire Jurbarkas unit is there with all their names, those who did this in Jurbarkas. There are 48 people and that’s how it is. How does historical research and historical truth differ from that which we read in certain places? ... Yofe was never an historian, he never researched documents. He wrote that the unit was there. But that doesn’t relieve responsibility from... And that needs to be admitted. If we name those who committed post-war crimes, we should name the crime against humanity by those who, however unpleasant it is to us, that they are our countrymen, but we have to support the historical truth. Otherwise we will be mankurts (original uncorrected – editor’s note) [“mankurt” is a term from Soviet/Russian fiction describing a dehumanized human with animal

skins grafted onto his skin – Trans],” Kopa film studio’s administrator Ona Biveinienė argued. Beržinis gave assurances that all the names of Jurbarkas residents who shot Jews have been confirmed in files at the Lithuanian Special Archive.

After the first mayor of the region, chairman of the Jurbarkas council of the Lithuanian Sajūdis and Sajūdis MP Stasys Makunas entered the conversation, it turned out that those who think the film is directed against the Lithuanian people are Holocaust deniers.

“You have made a horrible mistake. I can further comment upon why such an opinion has arisen. Because the film is tendentious, it takes facts about the Jews of Jurbarkas out of the general context. The Lithuanian nation cannot be accused directly as a whole. This is blowing out of the same horn as Zuroff, who portrays Lithuania to Americans as a nation of Jew-shooters. Is this historically accurate? Neither I, nor my parents, nor my grandparents shot, so that I as a Lithuanian cannot accept the guilt upon myself. But this film can only strengthen [the notion that] I am guilty. Your film is like an appendix to a general ideology,” Makunas said.

Director Beržinis tried to calm Makunas: “Even if the elders of your family had been tainted, that would not throw a shadow upon you. Each person is responsible for his actions, there is no collective responsibility, and that’s why we give out the names of the murderers in the film and say, these are the people who murdered.”

Commentators Selected with an End in Mind?

Makunas said he was most surprised by the commentators upon events selected for the film and said he believes the work would be different if more neutral people without a bias towards the historical events had shared their recollections.

“Commentary by a very well known person who has always worked against Lithuania was chosen... Doesn’t he stand ‘on a platform?’ [reference to Soviet anti-Lithuanian-independence activists] Can you deny this? According to the data of the history of Jurbarkas it seems like that to me. I should think someone from among neutral people could have commented on this matter,” the founder of Sajūdis said without hiding his thoughts, and

said with regret that that the film which the museum intends to use as an educational one does not inspire love of Lithuania, that on the contrary, it spreads discord between and divides peoples.

Who can deny that the film makers intentionally strove for this result?

A. Puskoriutė-Meizeraitienė, the coordinator of the project to commemorate the pre-war life of the Jewish community of Jurbarkas, was a card-carrying activist of the Communist Youth organization, and later of the Lithuanian Communist Party. Andrikis was well known for his thoroughness in Communistically indoctrinating the younger generation, and film producer Biveinienė, who constantly stresses that she has “a doctorate in history,” because of that well knows Lithuania’s past. In 1987 Biveinienė defended her dissertation “The Activity of Primary Party Organizations of Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic General Education Schools in Training Students Communistically.” Consider it however you like, but the thought that the film makers and commentators upon events might be connected by ideology arises in and of itself.

Unfortunately, neither organizers of international festivals nor Lithuanian Television viewers will ever find out about any of the controversial circumstances in the making of this film. Therefore Makunas is right in demanding that Lithuania and Jurbarkas speak out clearly against such films.

But Jurbarkas Regional Museum museum specialist A. Meizeraitienė says she doesn’t have any complaints about the film or its makers. “We signed the paper for accepting the film, the film is good, it’s very beautiful. The version the museum has isn’t the one in the interview with Giedraitienė, and we don’t need that one. Since the film is good, we will be able to use it at educational events on differences in ethnic culture, old architecture and other subjects. And we simply won’t show those portions where the Jurbarkas residents who shot Jews are named,” Meizeraitienė said.