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The Bloody History of the Jews: Like Salt on Wounds

by Erika Baronaitė

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Director Saulius Beržinis's newly made documentary film "When Jurbarkas Was Talked About in Yiddish" has raised a tempest in Jurbarkas. The film-makers accused of blackening the reputation of Lithuanians counter that they showed the truth, and aren't about to be censored.

The NGO Kopa film studio made the film about the life of the Jewish community, commissioned by the Jurbarkas Regional Museum.

The Jurbarkas municipality, which contributed 1,800 litas to the project, said they had bought a film which had turned upon the local community.

After a screening the regional administration asked for corrections to the film: not to present the names of Jurbarkas residents who collaborated with the Nazis, to change the heroes and to include people who risked their lives to rescue Jews.

Kopa films didn't consent to do that, and 61-year-old director Beržinis threatened to take the municipal administration to court for trying to censor the film.

About the Massacres, from the Lips of Others

The film, almost 40 minutes long, begins with a recounting of how Jurbarkas is a corner of Lithuania well disposed for trade, and the daily life and trades of Jews are shown.

Also shown is a photograph recording six surviving Jews standing next to a grave where 1,222 of their compatriots lie. The names and family portraits of Jurbarkas residents who rescued Jews during World War II fly across the screen.

A scene on the arrival of the war in Lithuania in 1941 shows how the Germans were met with flowers. The smiles are quickly replaced with images of the extermination of Jews.

“The Jurbarkas death squad, composed of white armbanders, riflemen and police, which was led by Jurbarkas gymnasium physical education teacher Mykolas Levickas, my former teacher, carried out the rounding up, arrest and mass murder of Jews and other condemned people, “ Vldas Andrikis, 88, says in the film.

The retired mathematics teacher recalls how he taught a girl from Jurbarkas and heard how her brother who had murdered Jews explained to his mother: “Be quiet, mom, the Jews need to be exterminated because Christ was murdered through them.”

Naming those of his neighbors who shot Jews and displaying old photographs, Andrikis said that the Nazis didn't shoot, they merely filmed and photographed the mass murder, and when it was over the Jurbarkas residents divided up the property of the murdered Jewish families.

At this point he explains that he didn't see Jews shot himself, and learned the names of the murderers from the recollections of other people.

Museum Property

After presentation of the film, upset museum staff spoke to the audience in the small hall of the Jurbarkas Regional Museum.

“Whether someone likes it or not, this film will be kept along with other exhibit items. Museum staff do not belong to any party and don’t carry out political orders.

“If we continue to be accused of commissioning a film against Lithuania, we will ask the Ministry of Culture to judge the contents and artistic merit of this film,” museum worker Aida Drejerienė said.

V. Grybas Memorial Museum director Rasa Grybaitė said she was convinced there was no reason to fear that future generations will learn the truth, thanks to this film. Her father, the sculptor Vincas Grybas, was shot in Jurbarkas with other genocide victims.

Worried About Divisiveness

“We aren’t saying there shouldn’t be a film about the murder of Jews in Jurbarkas, but this film isn’t objective, it is distorting history because the emphases aren’t placed where they need to be.

“Seeing the film one gets the impression that only Jurbarkas residents shot Jews, but it isn’t explained who organized the massacres.

“The names of the people mentioned will cause unnecessary stress and pain to their children who are not guilty that their parents behaved this way. We want the young generation to be able to watch this film without feeling enmity towards anyone.

“There was coordination with regional administration leaders on what criticisms should be leveled at the film-makers, and how to make those criticisms.

“We presented them a list of ideas and asked them to correct the film. But the director didn’t consider our criticisms, and museum staff got angry,” Daura Giedraitienė, director of the Culture Department of the regional administration, explained.

Lacks Comment by Historian

“Watching the film, one gets the impression that Lithuanians happily took part in the massacre of Jews because it isn’t explained how they became murderers.

“In the film, the tragedy of the Jews is only portrayed through reminiscences and emotions. What is missing is a comment by an historian on how Lithuania was occupied by two big occupiers, the Russians and Germans.

“The Nazis carried out their ideology, and several retarded Lithuanians who cooperated with the occupiers are not the Lithuanian nation,” historian and Jurbarkas resident Jonas Rekešius explained.

Andrikis was surprised that he was accused because of his words in the film of distorting the facts and destroying trust between Lithuanians and Jews.

The former teacher said he suggested to the director to tell of the events of July 3, 1941, in Jurbarkas: “On that day the 200 Jews and 100 Lithuanians condemned to death were lined up on K. Donelaičio street where I lived. The Lithuanians were shot summarily. They included my brother.

“Nazis arriving from Tilsit carried out this massacre, and Lithuanians—police, riflemen, white armbanders—were guards. The Nazis taught them how to murder. After this practice session, it wasn’t Germans who shot the Jews of Jurbarkas anymore.

“The film doesn’t make this clear, so it is possible to get the impression that all Lithuania was predisposed against Jews.”

Won’t Shake Mayor’s Hand

“What did you feel when you learned Jurbarkas residents made a controversy out of the film you directed?” *Lietuvos Rytas* asked Beržinis.

“In 1990 the world-renowned film magazine *Cahiers du Cinema* made a list of 40 directors whose films contributed to the downfall of the Soviet Union. I was on that list, too.

“Now for the first time I am being called an enemy of Lithuania. That’s a challenge.

“When I brought the film to the Jurbarkas administration, mayor Ričardas Juška put his hand out to congratulate me, but I didn’t shake his hand.

“If we had followed the demands of the regional administration, there wouldn’t have been a scandal. But I have never allowed any of my films to be censored.

“We will make the position of the Jurbarkas municipality known to world Jewish organizations. We will see how this all ends.”

“Does the film perhaps really lack information about Jurbarkas residents who rescued Jewish families from being shot?”

“I would call this a matter of perspective. Only Lithuanians speak in this film about the Jews of Jurbarkas. This film is about the feelings of Lithuanians, about how the honest people of the elderly generation experienced this tragedy that unfolded in front of them.

“In making the film we went specially to the Yad Vashem Holocaust victims memorial in Jerusalem and filmed the names of rescuers of the Jews of Jurbarkas.

“But the film also frankly admits which deviants of the Lithuanian people became murderers. Their names which feature are contained in the case files of the Special Lithuanian Archives.”

The Mission: Not to Convict, But to Remember

Ona Biveinienė, executive director of the film studio Kopa:

“This film is part of a large educational project on the tragedy of the Jews of Lithuania in 1941. A film about the Jews of Joniškis was made several years ago and we will make a film about the history of the Ninth Fort of Kaunas.

“It is in the nature of documentary films not to convict but to perpetuate that which should not be forgotten.

“In the films of director Saulius Beržinis it is not said that the people of Lithuania are guilty of the tragedy of the Jews. Only primitive provincials who again are sticking their heads in the sand think this.

“The attempt by the Jurbarkas regional administration, which is not a partner on this project, to censor the creation of the film is offensive and appalling. The elderly people who helped in the creation of this film are upset, they feel sick and are taking pharmaceuticals because of this.”