

Getting the Killers' and Collaborators' Faces on Film

Lithuanian Filmmaker Saulius Berzinis Records Not the Victims for Posterity, but the Ones Who Pulled the Triggers

By BENJAMIN SMITH

In his small, brightly-lit living room in Vilnius, Lithuania, Saulius Berzinis takes a videotape from one of several stacks and inserts it into his VCR. With a quiet click, horrors begin to appear on the small TV screen. A Lithuanian woman in her 70s is shown pulling back her upper lip to reveal a gold cap on a front tooth.

"I needed a crown," she says in reply to the filmmaker's quiet question. "They told me I could buy a tooth from [a local woman], whose husband was a Jew-killer.... I bought one tooth, a gold one, and I didn't pay much." Mr. Berzinis leans in, his immense horn-rimmed glasses slipping down his nose, as his interviewee describes how the cap came attached to a tooth and bone and how she had to detach them before using it herself.

Amid the rush to save the stories of the Holocaust, the focus has been on the stories of the noble and the innocent — and less so on the stories of the killers and collaborators. The biggest documentation project, Steven Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, has filmed interviews with more than 50,000 survivors, liberators and rescuers. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1996 received a \$1 million grant for interviews with witnesses, bystanders and perpetrators across Europe, but only one participant in that project has managed to get

the voices and faces of killers on film — Mr. Berzinis.

Since first meeting a murderer in 1992, the soft-spoken, 50-year-old Lithuanian gentile has collected 18 interviews with killers. Six of them are sealed by contract for 50 years. The other 12, along with interviews with people who profited from the deaths of Jews, will become part of a film, "Ordinary Devils," to be released this fall in Vilnius by his production company, Kopa. The stories he records are harrowing: One includes the tale of a man who, as a 13-year-old outcast, thought shooting Jews would gain him the acceptance of a dandyish officer. The man recalls on film how, as his unit prepared to shoot her, he turned his back on a Jewish girl with whom he had had a romance just months before.

Mr. Berzinis's work involves long days and nights of cruising the rolling Lithuanian hills in his white Volkswagen. It takes months or even years to convince the average subject to go on camera and 10 hours of filming to record them. "You cannot come and say, 'Sir, tell us please how you murdered the Jews.' You get nothing," he told the Forward.

No European country has been eager to face the issue of local collaboration with Nazi crimes, and the truth of history has returned slowly to the former communist world. In Poland, Jan Gross's recent book "Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland" knocked the lid off a simmering national debate. The Jedwabne massacre came three weeks after pogroms broke out in Lithuania.

"The work that Berzinis is doing would be important no matter where he lived, but the fact that he does what he does in Lithuania makes his work incredibly courageous," said Efraim Zuroff, the chief of the Jerusalem office of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, which has met little success in its efforts to put Lithuanian collaborators on trial.

In the days after Nazi tanks rolled in on June 21, 1941, some bands of Lithuanian "freedom fighters" turned on their Jewish neighbors. Over the next year, the Nazis and their local collaborators killed all but 8,000 of the 220,000 Jews in Lithuania. "A lot of people do not know what their fathers and grandfathers did in 1941," Mr. Berzinis said. Estimates of the number of

Lithuanians who participated in the murders range from one thousand to tens of thousands. Soviet courts convicted some 50,000 of "war crimes," but 49,000 of those were later "rehabilitated" by independent Lithuania.

Mr. Berzinis's obsession with recording the history of the Holocaust was triggered by an insult: In 1990 he was at a film festival in Amsterdam, showing what is still his best-known work in Lithuania, a documentary on a Lithuanian recruit to the Soviet Army who went on a shooting spree. After the screening, a Dutch Jew approached him. "I am very moved by your film," Mr. Berzinis recalled being told, "but unfortunately I cannot shake your hand, because I promised my father that I would not shake hands with a Lithuanian."

The strange snub piqued the filmmaker's interest. He returned home and decided to find out for himself what, exactly, happened during World War II. He began by interviewing the few survivors of the Holocaust who remain in Lithuania. Their testimony confirmed his worst fears about his nation and made him intensely conscious of the country's Jewish heritage. His work with survivors turned into a calling, eventually expanding to work with Roma, or Gypsies, as well as Jews.

Mr. Berzinis's footage has been used by German production companies and by the BBC, but his own work has reached limited audiences. His early films on the Holocaust include an elegiac, sometimes sentimental treatment of the life and death of Lithuania's Jews, "Farewell, Yerushalayim de Lita," which has been shown in 28 countries but not yet in Lithuania.

As Mr. Berzinis's understanding of the Holocaust in Lithuania deepened, so did his interest in the killers — fellow Lithuanians — who had committed unthinkable crimes. The first killer Mr. Berzinis met was a jowly octogenarian with a broken nose and a red beret. Filmed at his home in northeast Lithuania, the man recounts to the camera how he served the S.S. in Belarus. Resignedly, the killer tells Mr. Berzinis how his squad operated: Victims lined up facing a pit, and an equal number of shooters lined up behind them, one killer for each victim. Sometimes, the man recalls, parents stood with their children beside them.

"Whom did you shoot first?" Mr. Berzinis asks.

"The first time I saw a man with a child beside him I had to decide," the killer tells the camera. "I put myself in the place of the victim: What would he feel if his child was shot? So I aimed first at the parent and then at the child because the child feels nothing."

The interviewee has already served a stiff sentence in the Soviet gulag for his crimes and is immune from further prosecution, but Mr. Berzinis will not release his subjects' names until his film appears.

Since Mr. Berzinis began his work a decade ago, a small, devoted group of Vilnius intellectuals have joined him in making Holocaust memory their cause. Most, like him, are ethnic Lithuanians, haunted by the guilt of their own people. One film critic, Linas Vildziunas, has founded a "House of Memory," a library, film studio and educational center that pushes to bring the Holocaust into the Lithuanian consciousness. The center sponsors projects, for example, that ask school children to record their grandparents' memories.

Thanks in large part to these efforts, politicians have for the first time openly condemned anti-Semitic statements and articles. Holocaust education is making its way into the schools. And this year, Mr. Berzinis said, Lithuanian National Television has signed a contract to show some of his films for the first time. Lithuania "has done a lot of homework in the last 10 years, a lot of very hard, very unpopular homework," said Emanuelis Zingeris, who served through the 1990s as Lithuania's only Jewish parliamentarian.

In the meantime, Mr. Berzinis continues to crisscross his country, driven by an overwhelming need to confront his nation's guilt. "If the next generation is not brave enough to talk about the guilt of their parents, then it shares responsibility for the crime," he said. "But if they tell the truth about the guilt of the parents, it washes the guilt from them."

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