

# Unmasking the Dark Pages of History: Lithuania's Struggle with Truth

In the realm of documentary filmmaking, the pursuit of truth often comes with challenges and obstacles, but few stories mirror the tumultuous journey of Saulius Beržinis, a filmmaker determined (and destined, it seems) to bring history to light.

For over three decades, Saulius Beržinis has been steadfastly involved in documenting the Jewish community's wartime experiences in Lithuania. A non-Jewish renowned Lithuanian filmmaker, Beržinis has been exploring the Jewish community of his homeland during the Holocaust with a tenacity that belies his friendly laugh and approachable demeanor during a telephone interview from his home in Vilnius.

In 1988, with perestroika as a backdrop, he produced a compelling documentary that cast a spotlight on Lithuanian soldiers forced into service in the Soviet army, a production that garnered attention worldwide, earning him invitations to screenings on a global stage.

During one such screening in Amsterdam, an official from the municipality approached him with a confession: "I have very deep respect for you", he said to Beržinis, "but I cannot shake your hand. My father's last wish was never to shake hands with a Lithuanian." This unsettling moment stirred Beržinis's curiosity and compelled him to delve deeper into the history of his homeland.

A meeting with Dutch filmmaker, Philo Bregstein, proved to be fateful. "He asked me: 'Why should you as a Lithuanian filmmaker not make a film about how you murdered 95% of your Jewish neighbours?'" It struck a chord in Beržinis that tugged at his conscience and sparked his determination to research and confront his country's Holocaust past. And as providence would have it, an opportunity emerged in 1990.

Riva Lozansky Bogomolnaya, an elderly Jewish woman who, with her sister Tzipa were the sole survivors of the massacres in the Lithuanian shtetl

Butrimonys, had written a letter to the German magazine *Stern* recounting her story. In response, *Stern* dispatched German filmmakers to make a documentary based on her story. Beržinis lent his expertise to the research and production of the project. This is how he met Riva, whom he affectionately dubs the "Anne Frank of Lithuania".

After 3 months of communications in Russian, Riva cautiously began to speak to him in her native tongue for the first time – a gesture which moved him deeply. “It was the first time she spoke to me in Lithuanian, her mother tongue -- the language of the murderers of her family and community,” he recalls. The encounter with Riva and other eyewitnesses unveiled stories that transcended history books, a testimony to resilience, survival, and the unwavering human spirit. He felt compelled to embark on his own mission. He approached the filmmakers, forgoing an honorarium in exchange for the opportunity to create a film about Lithuania's Jewish heritage and the profound tragedy they endured during the Holocaust. A year later, in 1991, recognising the need to preserve untold narratives for posterity and the need to safeguard history, he founded the "Archive of Independent Holocaust Research" in Lithuania.

His documentary, “Petrified Time” was commissioned by the Šeduva Foundation and the Museum of the Lost Shtetl – a cultural and educational institution in Šeduva in northern Lithuania. Work on the project began in 2015 and the film was expected to be 30 minutes long. “However, soon into the editing, I realized that we had in our possession sensational material,” recalls Beržinis, “and, so, we received additional funding to continue with the project.” Beržinis and his crew were told that they could make the film as long as necessary. After four years of painstaking work, the documentary was completed in 2019. The final version of the film runs for 2 hours and 10 minutes.

“Petrified Time” features testimonies by the last surviving eyewitnesses to the massacre of the Jews of Šeduva. The minutiae of the destruction of the shtetl are spine chilling; the details are very graphic. They include the systematic rape of young girls, cruel and degrading treatment of the Jews and acts of savage violence perpetrated by the town’s Lithuanians against their Jewish neighbours. The orgy of violence culminates with the wholesale slaughter of the entire community in woodlands. In the aftermath of the massacre, a roaring trade sprang in the village, with the recycling of the victims’ clothing,

furniture, homes and gravestones, that continued right through the time of Beržinis's filming. An elderly woman interviewed, gestures toward a gold tooth nestled among her own teeth. It is a tooth which she had bought and had been extracted from a Jewish corpse. This is a documentary where truth and facts hit strong and hard.

But, as Beržinis was about to discover, truth often comes at a cost.

Without warning or explanation, the Šeduva Museum abruptly rejected the film and called for it to be banned from public release (citing commercial and financial rather than content-related reasons). An ultimatum was issued: Beržinis was instructed to surrender all copy and creative rights of the film, in addition to paying back the costs incurred in its production or face legal proceedings. At the same time, acclaimed Hollywood documentary film director Roberta Grossman was commissioned by the Museum to make a replacement film ([youtube teaser](#)).

Efforts to determine the cause for this volte face by the museum have been unsuccessful; it remains unclear what is being alleged against Beržinis. Off the record, those in the know say that the Lithuanians Lithuanian officials (and the town's municipality) were outraged at the assertion that their countrymen (indeed, neighbors) were responsible for the wholesale slaughter of their Jewish countrymen. And some of them continue today to trash the victims rather than the perpetrators, while still enjoying, in the 21st century, some of the spoils of the massacre.

“I can only speculate”, says Beržinis when asked. He suggests that the decision to censor him lies in current geopolitics and the Šeduva Foundation's alleged ties to the Putin regime. The involvement of South African billionaire Ivan Glasenberg, the museum's prime benefactor, added a new layer of complexity to the equation. He is the juggernaut bankrolling the legal suits against Beržinis, employing the services of one of Lithuania's top law firms. According to Beržinis, the legal costs incurred to the museum have long overshadowed the cost of making the film. So why is the museum so intent on silencing Beržinis's film? By some accounts, Glasenberg, who is the recipient of [a 2017 award from Russian President Putin](#), for “contribution to strengthening cooperation with Russia” is investing in Lithuania in a bid for public rehabilitation, with the Ukrainian conflict, providing the backdrop for a renewed effort to control the narrative surrounding Lithuania's history.

Viewed in a larger context, Lithuania's disputed history regarding participation in the persecution and murder of Jews remains a sorely contested narrative, with local involvement often downplayed or imputed to criminal fringe elements. Beržinis's film seeks to challenge this narrative and bring uncomfortable truths to the surface. "It is a mission that is meeting fierce resistance from those who prefer to preserve a sanitized version of history" he says.

The Brussels-based Executive Director of the Šėduva Museum issued a statement from the museum presenting their stand, but refused to be drawn into a discussion on the identity of the perpetrators or whether Lithuanian former war criminals are currently lionized as national heroes in the country (and in the very town where the museum is set to open next year).

The fight for the preservation of historical truth is no easy feat. For Beržinis, the ongoing financial and emotional strain of the ongoing legal battles have exacted their toll on his well-being. At the age of 74, this distinguished filmmaker confronts the looming spectre of his film studio's closure and a potential financial ruin, with his bank accounts frozen and his home at risk of seizure.

Once celebrated as a feted filmmaker and the recipient of the 2004 Man of Tolerance award in Lithuania, Beržinis now finds himself out of favor, out of pocket, marginalized and intimidated. His story serves as a stark reminder that the journey towards truth is fraught with challenges.

But he remains undeterred, driven by an unrelenting desire to set the historical record straight.

At present the film is currently confined to private, non-commercial viewings, its distribution is banned, and few have watched it. This poses a threat to the integrity of the historical record, as its capacity to alter history remains unquestionable. While the outcome of his legal battle remains uncertain, one thing is clear: his dedication to bringing the past to light will continue to shape the narrative of history for years to come.

**Saulius Beržinis was presented by B'nai Brith with a Lifetime Achievement Award, in 2023, in recognition of his outstanding contribution to the body of research, study, and documentation of Lithuania's Jewish population during the Holocaust.**