

The film commemorates, preserves, tells stories and becomes their witness

We are talking to Erik Bednarski, the author of the documentary “Warsaw: a City Divided”, about the invaluable film material found in the attic of the Warsaw Ghetto by a motorcycle master, being an “out-of-town” from Canada and the feeling that one has the whole world under one’s feet.

The discovery by you of archival materials of great significance – a previously unknown film made in the Warsaw Ghetto by Alfons Ziółkowski – is the dream of every historian, especially a historian of the closed district of Warsaw. Without a lucky combination of circumstances and your contacts, this would not have been possible – they would still have been buried in the attic...

That’s true. It was then that I graduated from film school and started to be interested in the occupation history of Poland and Warsaw, as well as the common fate of Poles and Jews. I was very surprised when I found Ziółkowski’s materials. I was wondering: why me? I guess it was supposed to be this way.

Did you reconstruct the film you made on the 8mm tape yourself?

Yes. It was very damaged. I had to clean it and reconstruct it digitally. You can see how well this turned out when you compare the two versions. There are no scratches or dirt on the cleaned surface, you can see more details.

I get the impression that when we are dealing with a reconstructed version of an image, our distance to the story is reduced. It looks as if it happened recently, not in distant times... Especially when the tape is colored.

I agree.

How did you feel about watching Ziolkowski's film for the first time?

I didn't know much about the Warsaw ghetto at that time. I did not know the history of the Jewish cemetery on Okopowa Street. I thought it was completely destroyed. I was surprised that it was actually intact – only very overgrown. After meeting with experts and Holocaust Survivors, I realized that Ziolkowski's film material is very valuable and unique. The first time I watched it, I was very worried. So did the other people who later watched it with me. I felt that I had a huge responsibility.

Such a material is a dream come true for a documentary filmmaker.

Yes. Of course, the subject matter is very tragic, very painful. I still carry it inside. The uniqueness of Ziolkowski's material is due to the fact that it was not filmed by the German Nazis for propaganda purposes. It was created between March and November 1941, as evidenced by the number and route of the tram we see in one of the scenes.

What usually amazes people who are not familiar with the photographs or propaganda materials from the ghetto is the overcrowding. Almost half a million people were imprisoned within this largest prison in Europe. On Ziolkowski's tape we see these masses of people marching around in different directions.

Yes. This is very impressive.

On Ziolkowski's tape, we see a policeman beating up children smuggling – I think – leeks into the ghetto...

It's probably rhubarb. For me, this scene was the most difficult to watch, the strongest, the most moving and shocking. An innocent child beaten by a brutal, navy blue policeman for wanting to

help his starving family, blood flowing down his face... Child smuggling was, of course, a small percentage of all the smuggling that took place in the ghetto. Under the eyes of the often paid-off police.

When you came to Warsaw after having watched the film, were you shocked to see that the pre-war and war surroundings in the capital was no longer there? Contemporary Warsaw does not resemble the one from, let us say, 80 years ago. It's a completely different city...

I have to say that I have come to Warsaw many times before. I moved here in connection with the film, but my family lived here before the war. So I wasn't very much surprised by the contemporary image of the city. I knew that the ghetto area had been levelled to the ground, so what surprised me were the traces that were left – a fragment of a wall, the tenement house on Waliców Street or the cemetery on Okopowa Street with tens of thousands of graves. Being there, you get the impression that you have the whole world under your feet. All the people buried there had families, worked in various professions and, above all, were Warsaw residents. When you're in Muranów, you can try to imagine what was there before, but it's not there anymore. I went to the crossroads of Chłodna and Żelazna Streets and was shocked to see that everything looks almost like it did on the archive film. I am also very impressed, whenever I see them, by the monuments of the ghetto borders built into the sidewalks, reminding me which way the ghetto walls ran. We edited half of the film in the tenement house where Adam Czerniakow lived. To sum up, I was most impressed by the remains of the ghetto – which in its initial phase was very extensive – the remains of the former Warsaw. That touches me the most.

You seem to have an interest in architecture in your genes. Your father is an architect.

Yes, and that is why my film refers to it. It is a documentary which has many layers. One is the archival material, the other are the statements of the Survivors, the third is Warsaw itself. It is a film about a city and decisions made about it in dramatic circumstances. I am thinking of the Nazi administration and bureaucracy and its activities, which are unprecedented in history. Let's take, for example, "Gęsiówka" (Waffen-SSS Konzentrationslager Warschau – editorial note), which was a concentration camp, a labor camp in the very heart of the city, established

after the suppression of the ghetto uprising. This has not happened anywhere in the world.

Before the war, Warsaw was a city inhabited in one third by Poles of Jewish descent. This culture was so lively, so colourful, it contributed so much to the common Polish-Jewish life... And now so many people don't remember it, they're not interested, they don't care...

They don't care, or maybe they don't know about it? I think that ignorance is to blame. Many people living in Warsaw are not Warsaw-born residents. When I came to live in Warsaw, I knew nothing about it. I can see a big difference in terms of knowledge about this city between people from families who have lived in Warsaw for generations and visitors. I myself am a "visitor" from Canada. Fortunately, some of these people are very eager to learn about the history, to learn something new.

Was it difficult for you to find the Survivors to take part in the film? Did you first contact the Jewish community?

Yes. There are few Survivors left in the world. I was able to make contact with some of them and meet these extraordinary people in person. One person we see in the film, Israel Gutman, is dead now (historian, ŻOB fighter, participant in the ghetto uprising, witness in the trial of Adolf Eichmann – editorial note). I had an amazing conversation with him in Warsaw. After the war, he left Poland for Israel. People still living in Warsaw were most important for me – like Krystyna Budnicka and Agata Bołdok – born and raised here, who survived the ghetto, World War II and 1968, and whose ancestors rest in the cemetery on Okopowa Street. This is very important to me, even if their fate is only a drop in the ocean of Jewish history.

How to commemorate the people who almost completely disappeared from the map of the city? When there are no more buildings in which they lived, there are no more walls, there is almost nothing left...

That is a good question. I think people are still thinking about the answer.

I think that filmmakers can try to accomplish this.

The film itself commemorates, preserves, tells stories and becomes their witness. Ziolkowski's ten-minute material makes us think about the times he recorded, the people we see in it.

Will you return to the subject of World War II in any of your forthcoming projects?

I live in Warsaw, so I think about World War II every day. All I have to do is to open up the curtains in the morning and I can see the bullet hole from the Warsaw Uprising in the wall of the tenement house opposite. That is why in my work as a documentary filmmaker I need to rest from this subject.

Interview by Anna Kilian