

THE OPTIMISTS

A film by Jacky and Lisa Comforty (2000)

Named after the pre-war Sofia jazz band THE OPTIMISTS which delivers the film one of its key witnesses together with a musical exploration of the complex and cosmopolitan sephardic culture of the Balkans, the title refers obliquely to what might in earlier days have been called an Act of God, or even a miracle, namely the eleventh hour rescue of the Bulgarian Jews from transport to the Nazi death camps, a story this highly creative documentary delivers with a marriage of personal testimony and historical analysis without finally dispelling the inherent mystery of the outcome or the makers' underlying faith in human nature.

The film has the beguiling appeal of a family scrapbook, and one might almost miss the multiple layers of irony disguised in the title, lulled by the soft-spoken narrator introducing the lovingly restored snapshots of days-gone-by: "This is Rachamim ("mercy" in Hebrew, a pleasing leit-motif) Comforty and his two wives... they weren't married to each other at the same time" he reassures us with almost subliminal humour, "they were traditional, and they were also modern", before recounting how they were seized before dawn one morning in March 1943, destined for Treblinka, only to be released, inexplicably, the same evening.

Admitting that he is Rachamim's grand-son, the narrator reveals that only this quirk of history allowed him to be born or the film to be made, launching us on a political and metaphysical detective trail to piece together the causes of that reprieve and of his very existence, while simultaneously placing us within a Holocaust sub-genre of "second generation reconstruction"¹, in this case not of actual murder but of eight thousand five hundred murders narrowly averted (with more to follow).

From this moment the film faces all the challenges of proving a negative, for while mass murder can be pursued with the vengeance of the Furies, it is less clear how one should present or explain a last minute stay of execution, and though the filmmakers cover the ground with immense seriousness - tracing the centuries-old co-existence of the monotheisms in Bulgaria, the shared struggle against Ottoman oppression, the liberal Constitution, the growth of racist ideology under the pro-Nazi monarchy, the imposition of the Nuremberg-style "Law for the Defence of the

¹ "Holocaust Documentaries Move Towards the Personal", in FORWARD, Jan 11th 2002 "As in other films of return, a child of survivors journeys with a camera not only into Europe but into the past."

Nation”, and the naming of the genocidal collaborators as well as the political heroes who made a brave stand against the deportations – the prevailing tone, beyond all irony, remains that of stunned euphoria and tearful gratitude between friends, the solidarity of rescued and rescuer in the assertion of fundamental human values, rather than objective assessment or historical argument.

This is a very personal film, which took twelve years to plan, four months to shoot and four years to edit, using 200 hours of footage and a selection of 5,000 photographs of Bulgarian Jewish life (many discovered in shoeboxes in the family’s possession) now referred to by the US Holocaust Museum as the Comforty Collection², all condensed into eighty-two minutes of highly crafted montage which inevitably excludes as much as it contains.

Unsurprisingly, given the upbeat generosity of its title, *THE OPTIMISTS* doesn’t quite account for how such a well-integrated, multi-cultural society was so quickly derailed into anti-semitic fascism to become Hitler’s first ally, even if Germany was Bulgaria’s largest trading partner.

Equally, however, some critics³ have missed the cruel historical irony the film underlines so well: precisely because of its reliability as a willing cohort of the Nazis, Bulgaria was never occupied (and King Boris’s son Simeon Rilski pleads this as the political justification for the Three-Power Pact); the SS were *not* in charge in Sofia, and despite the secret protocol signed by Bulgaria to implement the Nazis’ Final Solution, the orders were issued not from Berlin but straight from the Royal Palace, orders which could be challenged, both in Parliament and on the streets, where the protests of ten thousand demonstrators persuaded King Boris to put his genocide on hold (exposing perhaps the inherent weaknesses and contradictions of monarchical fascism) before he was struck down by sudden death - another irony of divine mercy.

The film sees itself as a call to decent individuals everywhere to stand up and make a difference, and who could disagree? Bulgarians clearly did well in forcing their government to back down, though the possible inference that there were no sound friendships between Jews and Gentiles elsewhere in Europe, or that honest inter-cultural relationships can solve historical conflict, risks seeming simplistic. One might equally suppose that Boris simply had not the military resources to impose his will against

² <http://www.theoptimists.com/pdfs/press-kit-ny-all-web.pdf>

³ New York Times, Oct 21 2005: “occupied Bulgaria”; Pioneer Press: “courageous opposition to SS orders” etc

a substantial (but not overwhelming) section of his own people. “Theirs was the only Jewish community to survive intact in Nazi Europe”, states the Comforty Media website⁴, but a comparable if not better record can be claimed by Bulgaria’s Balkan neighbour Albania (which *was* occupied), where King Zog’s government refused to release even the names of the Jewish population and the German Foreign Office finally persuaded the SS to desist for fear of popular reprisals⁵.

In searching for direct links from personal initiative to political consequence, the narrative occasionally becomes unclear or tendentious, though the dates are scrupulously quoted and the order of events faithfully recounted. The personal archive of photographs is both informative and evocative, the presentation sustained by an excellent sense of rhythm assisted by ironical - sometimes sarcastic - musical interludes (both US jazz and sephardic, chromatic folk) and deft, assured picture edit from professionals who clearly know their *métier*.

However, in its search for the uplifting, the luminous, this inspiring film brushes with euphemism at several turns, and its resolutely upbeat narration sometimes jars with the remarkable new footage the authors unearthed in the Sofia archives (made newly available post-1989), which show, for instance, the embarkation of Jewish deportees on Danube paddle-boats bound for Vienna and oblivion (an unfamiliar variation on the railway motif); or the crammed transport trains shown in detail and worthy of close attention, including one of the few extant⁶ boxcar “interiors” of huddled inmates, footage whose significance one fears the makers may have underestimated in its emotional impact, which should preclude any “happy ending” for reasons of good taste. These people are about to die, at the hand of Bulgarians. Not just because they are Jews, but because they are non-Bulgarian Jews.

The film radically underestimates, in my judgement, the link between popular Bulgarian enthusiasm for Hitler’s gift of Thrace and Yugoslav Macedonia to a “Greater Bulgaria” and the resulting failure to defend the native Jews of that colonial annexation, eleven thousand of whom were transported (in those same cattle trucks) through Bulgaria to their deaths -

⁴ <http://www.theoptimists.com/pdfs/press-kit-ny-all-web.pdf>

⁵ Aus den Akten des Auswärtigen Amtes: Vortrags-Notiz 17ten Oktober 1943 zwischen LR von Thadden und Gruppenführer Müller “wegen der technischen Durchführung der Judenfrage in den neu besetzten Gebieten” Albanien: “Er (Müller) habe volles Verständnis für die Stellungnahme des Auswärtigen Amtes, daß eine gegen den Willen bzw ohne Wissen der Albanischen Regierung durchgeführte Aktion verletzend wirken würde und schwierige Komplikationen in Albanien hervorrufen könne.” Albanian State Archives

⁶ to this writer’s knowledge

a crime immortalized in the post-war East German/Bulgarian co-production *STERNE* or *ZVEZDI*⁷, which should be seen as a balancing pendant to *THE OPTIMISTS*, closing as it does with the transport train dispatched to Auschwitz by the fascist Bulgarian militias carrying the Ladino Ruth with it, despite the efforts of the decent German sergeant in league with the ineffectual local resistance.

Only the Jews of Bulgaria proper were saved, and though the distinction is acknowledged in this open, honest film – and a fact already admirable in view of Europe’s calamitous failure to protect its Jewish neighbours (Vichy willingly deported its own Jews) - in its tone and timbre *THE OPTIMISTS* nonetheless poses problems concerning the relative “status as witness” of the lucky survivor telling of his good fortune beside the eternally silent victim whose torment will never be heard.

Bulgaria was, after all, on the wrong side, and one wonders whether the filmmakers are entitled to congratulate all in sight with such affable aplomb. How does one know, for instance, that everyone interviewed is telling the truth, fifty years later? The film takes a great deal on trust, and its plaudits and commendations are sometimes too easily won.

Occasionally during this voyage of rediscovery one senses a hidden discomfort at this splendid reunion with the returning, filmmaking (grand-)son, which prompts one to wonder whether the filmmaker was always aware of his personal impact on his subject matter and his interviewees, a concern which the agenda surrounding the eulogized reception of the film does little to ease.

Of course it is right that Yad Vashem should recognize the Sofia baker who rescued his Jewish neighbours in his cavernous oven with such eery, almost biblical foreshadowing. But the posthumous awards to Bulgarian prelates at the New York première of *THE OPTIMISTS* in the presence of Bulgarian and Israeli dignitaries raises issues that go beyond the admirable resistance of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. Has Bulgaria yet joined Germany in public atonement for its role in the Holocaust? Can the historical record be wiped clean by the personal courage of the “Just Among the Nations”?

Perhaps the most painful irony of *THE OPTIMISTS* is the one the film conveys with perfect innocence: despite the solidarity of their neighbours and the mercy *Rachamim*’s name implored, after 1945 the rescueses

⁷ *STERNE* or *Звезди* (1959) Director: Konrad Wolf Writer: Angel Vagenshtain, Cast: Sasha Krusharska, Jürgen Frohriep, Erik S. Klein; Bulgaria 103 mins, Germany 92 mins, B&W, mono

nonetheless opted for *aliyah*, for emigration to Palestine, and they have not returned; Bulgaria's once proud Jewish community is drastically depleted; the Jewish witnesses in the film now testify from Israel, where the thriving Bulgarian culture of Jaffa is rapidly becoming a matter of distant memory.

Gareth Jones
September 21st 2006

Credits:

Director: Jacky Comforty

Producers: Jacky and Lisa Comforty

Writers: Jacky and Lisa Comforty

Awards:

The Peace Prize, Berlin International Film Festival 2001

First Prize for "Documenting the Jewish Experience",

Jerusalem International Film Festival 2000

CINE Golden Eagle 2000

Best Documentary, Hope and Dreams Film Festival 2001