

Biography of Lukáš Přibyl



LUKÁŠ PŘIBYL (born 1973, Ostrava, Czech Republic) studied Politics and Near Eastern Studies at Brandeis University and at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Religion and Human Rights at SIPA at Columbia University in New York, History at Central European University in Budapest and Jewish religion and Philosophy in Sweden. Except for various politics-related projects (particularly in the U.S.) he has published on various aspects of Jewish history and curated exhibitions at the Jewish Museum in Prague. The Forgotten Transports series is his first film project.

Interview with the author

What was the initial impulse to start working on the Forgotten Transports series?

Initially I was driven by my desire to find out what happened to my family during WWII, and in particular to my Grandfather, who was carted off already in 1939, at the very start of the war. As I was reconstructing his fate and the history of the completely unknown camp he was taken to, I kept coming across many other obscure places where Czech Jews ended up in. I started collecting all this information, meeting people who survived these “forgotten” camps. Their stories were so radically different from what most of us associate with the common “survivor experience”, i.e. striped pajamas and phone numbers to heaven on the arms, that I told myself that I should not only record their words, but also their faces, gestures, the way they speak, how they managed to adapt and how they remember it all, that strength of theirs, their optimism and admirable sense of humor.

Why did you decide to make a documentary? Did you know from the start you were going to use film?

Yes. I did it because of these people. And stories. Except for literature, film is probably the best medium to tell stories of people’s lives. Of course, Forgotten Transports describe the fate of Jews during WWII, but foremost these are films about real, living human beings. They are not a catalogue of Nazi crimes, dwelling on how many people perished where. My films speak about life, death, family, love, betrayal, etc. These are universal topics, not unique to Jews only.

Many of the people spoke about their traumatic experiences for the first time. How did you manage to convince them to talk to you?

Ninety percent of all the people who speak in my films had never talked about their war-time experience to anyone, not even to their own children. Sometimes it took up to two years of persuasion to convince them to share their memories with me. Only a handful of them survived, they are dispersed all over the world, they mostly don’t know of each other and in their isolation

they had no one to compare their memories with. In many cases they don't even have much in common with other Holocaust survivors, since their experience was so different. They often have this subjective feeling they are being overlooked, since people have a tendency to disregard places they have not heard about as less horrible. Their logic is that were these camps really that terrible, they would be as notorious as Auschwitz or Dachau. Of course, this is nonsense, the survival rate in most of the places my films are concerned with was less than one in a hundred. Nonetheless, such attitudes also greatly contributed to the fact that "my" witnesses withdrew into silence. Furthermore, these camps are often unknown to expert historians and even the large interviewing schemes, like Spielberg's Shoah foundation, did not know about these people. And when they did approach them, they were mostly flatly refused. It is not possible to just come visit these people, record their memories of the most traumatic times in their lives and then say thank you, leave and never see them again. You have to develop a relationship with them. I am happy I can call many of them my friends now and I am in touch with absolute majority of them. Sadly, their number keeps dwindling though.

People in your films don't seem to ever cry. They even joke, smile...

In my films, people indeed don't cry. I have interviewed hundreds of people and came to the realization that only people who had spoken about their experience before tear up. The more often you share your memories, the more emotional you can get about yourself, since you are gaining distance from your story, you start to see it from a certain perspective. And you also start to "polish" your story because you are already aware what the listener's response is likely to be, what they are interested in hearing and what less so. The paradox thus is that the most articulate witnesses, who show greatest amount of emotion, often tend to be, factographically, less reliable, they have already shaped their story too much. When you are speaking for the first time, it is so difficult to break that shell of silence kept for over sixty years that there is no strength left for tears. But the people who speak in my films possess a tremendous energy. Without optimism and humor, survival is very difficult. If you mourn too much over your situation in the camp, eventually it will kill you. And these people are truly fantastic witnesses. Since there is no available literature on these camps, no documentaries, they answer many questions with: "I don't know". That's an answer I actually like to hear because it is clear that they did not integrate any postwar knowledge, gained elsewhere, into their memory.

How did you find these people, since you filmed in twenty countries of the world?

Searching for the survivors took a really long time. I started with various databases, deportation lists, lists of survivors, perused marriage records, since women changed their surnames when they got married, went through emigration records, because most emigrated. Phone books became my favorite read. If the name wasn't too common and I knew that the person I was looking for left for the US, for example, I simply called all the people of that name in the US, several hundred of them. If you ask: "Were you in Salaspils?" and the answer is "What?", you know you have to keep phoning. When the answer is: "Why do you ask? Who are you?" you know you have found your person. Then all that remains is to convince him or her to talk to you. I even had to develop my very own interviewing technique, my own way to ask questions. It was a true race against time. I also interviewed local Jews or Jews from other European countries deported to these camps, former Nazis and perpetrators, the so-called bystanders, i.e. civilians living close by. We also filmed the locations of these completely forgotten ghettos and camps as they look like now, etc. We documented it even though I knew I was not going to use such

footage, but the last traces are disappearing so fast and the number of eyewitnesses is decreasing at such a pace that I felt it was important to capture as much on camera as possible.

Collecting documentary visual material was surely no less demanding. Where did you find it?

I believe there is a visual record of almost everything. The only problem is to find that particular photo or film fragment. I was determined to illustrate each word in the film with authentic, time and place precise materials. And so when the people speaking in the film mention something, you see it on the screen. For example, when the ladies deported to Estonia mention that while put to forced labor at the Tallinn port, they made fun of a diver, I search the archives, find the list of all divers working in the Baltic area between 1941 and 1943. Then I search for their children or families because they themselves are mostly no longer alive and then I find the picture, on which you see the Jewish women helping him onto a boat. In Poland, I was literally exchanging bottles of vodka for photographs. Polish villagers rarely had cameras, but for example the Ukrainian camp guards had their photos taken with their Polish girlfriends and their prisoners, with cameras illegally brought by the Jews. Those snapshots were often left behind in the village houses when the Germans had to hastily retreat. In Germany, I kept pestering the families of SS men mentioned in the films till they told me: “Here is the key from the garage. Grandpa’s suitcase with documents and pictures should be there, somewhere. If you find it, take what you want.” For each minute of archival footage used in the film, I had to watch twenty, thirty hours of old newsreels, military films, etc. For the few authentic minutes that would precisely correspond to the time and place described, I went through 600 hours of footage, in the Hungarian archives alone. That’s why this work took ten years.

Why did you choose such a minimalist way of making your films, without commentary, present-day footage, etc.?

From the beginning it was clear to me that I cannot take these fragile old people and bring them to Poland, for example, that I will necessarily have to use the “talking head” format and won’t be able to be “visually inventive”. Instead, I was striving for complete minimalism, return to the most “basic” documentary, purity of form. That’s why I got rid of all commentary. Some documentaries should employ it, of course, but when films describing the Holocaust are concerned, I sometimes feel that they don’t really tell the story of the survivors themselves, don’t give them enough space. They are often put into the position of certain commentators, who are there only to confirm what has been told to the audience by the narrator, in some learned, all-inclusive commentary. I didn’t want to present a “bird’s eye-view” of the Holocaust, but wanted to compose the overall picture from very narrow, personal perspectives. That’s why I also did not want to use any present-day or make-believe shots. All materials had to be authentic, the way the people saw things then. I always found it strange, for example, when films that are allegedly about the Jewish perspective, contain footage of Nazis marching with torches at some stadium. Maybe there were a few Jews who went to see them, but most would have to be crazy or suicidal to participate in such events. Furthermore, the footage is from newsreels – but Jews could not attend cinemas. Their world was absolutely claustrophobic, they were totally isolated. And so, you won’t see Hitler in my films. Though he caused their suffering, he was very distant from their immediate situation.

What was the biggest obstacle you encountered when making these documentaries?

Except for finding the witnesses and persuading them to talk, making and raising enough money for it all was probably the hardest task. If you are not a filmmaker by training, you have no previous film work to show and all you have is your claim that you want to film four documentaries about the Holocaust (adding onto the hundreds of them that are already available) and that you want to do it differently, people will laugh at you. That's actually another reason, why this whole enterprise took so long.