

MONDAY OCT 11,1999
AFTERNOON SESSION A 14:00 to 15:30

Six Cities
by
Gideon Greif, Israel

Several days before the outbreak of World War II, a package holding six documentary short films was sent from Warsaw to New York, in order to be distributed there. The films were sent by the producing company *Sektor* owned by the two Jewish Polish brothers, Shaul and Yitzhak Goskind. The six films describe six large Jewish communities in Poland: Warsaw, Vilnius (Wilna), Cracow, Lvov (Lemberg), Bialystok and Lodz. The production of those films was just the beginning of a bigger project, planned by the brothers Goskind and initiated by the Zionist leader Zeev Wladimir Jabotinsky, aimed at commemorating and documenting Jewish life in the largest Jewish community in Europe. The brothers were influenced by Jabotinsky, who had then developed a tremendously pessimistic view of the future of the Polish Jewry, whom he desired to be evacuated from Poland within ten to fifteen years. The production of such documentaries describing Jewish life in Poland, was based on his nightmare that Polish Jewry was facing a huge catastrophe and would soon be destroyed.

The package with the final version of the films arrived in New York, but no one came to pick it up. The person who was supposed to pick it up at the post office never appeared. And so, the films describing the Jewish communities which were burnt and destroyed, were *buried* in the American post office until 1942. At this point nobody fully understood the value and importance of the filmed material. After an auction, which took place in New York, the films were sold and distributed to Jewish organisations. Thanks to the fact that the copies were sent to the US before the war it is possible today to watch those films and see a last view of these dying communities. The films of the Goskind brothers represent the last images of Polish Jewry.

Those films belong to a very short list of documentary films, which enable us to get a true impression of how Jews in Eastern Europe lived, their daily life, their relations with non-Jewish neighbours, how they spent their spare-time and how they felt as Polish citizens. It is clear that the films of the Goskind brothers are a historical treasure and unique documents. Only a few photographic documents exist today which depict Jewish life in Europe prior to the Shoah. Jewish life – its cultural, social and economical patterns -- completely disappeared, together with the Jews. The Goskind films depicts these patterns, which were previously described only in literature, arts, folklore and theatre.

The films present a plastic view of flourishing Jewish life: the different Jewish groups (religious, non-religious, Zionists and non-Zionists), Jewish institutions, Jewish living quarters, scenes of commerce, trade and industry. Since these are rare documents of the last days of Polish Jewry, it is important to use these films for educational purposes. During the rest of the article we will put forward ideas for use in the classroom. Sadly, only five out of the six films have survived. The sixth, dealing with the community of Lodz, has never been found.

Two versions of the films exist, one in Hebrew and one in English. It is important to point out, that the soundtrack of the films is relatively new and was prepared in the 80's by the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv. The narrated texts are similar to the original ones which were in Yiddish, with minor changes added in the new editions. The musical score is also modern and replaces the original piano accompaniment.

Introductory background

Two subjects can be discussed from the history of the Polish Jews in the 19th and 20th century as background material for the screening of the films. This period of history, which is portrayed in the films, and the history of the Jewish film industry in Poland, are relatively unknown.

The first subject includes: the growth of antisemitism in the late 1930's and the resultant feeling of many Jews that Poland could no longer be their homeland. This uncertainty was the background for Jabotinsky's call for the evacuation of the Jews and for a growing stream of emigration from Poland to other countries, including Palestine.

The second is that in the 20's, a large number of Polish Jews wished to be integrated into Polish society, to be accepted in its civil service, to enlist to the universities, and to take an active part in the social life of their country. These liberal circles, who are also portrayed in the films, differ from the religious and ultra-religious Jewish masses who were the majority in Polish Jewry.

In many cities of various sizes, the Jewish population played a significant role in the modernization process of Poland. Jewish entrepreneurs and manufacturers were responsible for turning Poland into a modern country. The main railroad lines were created by Jewish entrepreneurs, the textile industry was mainly in Jewish hands, the first taxis in Warsaw were introduced by Jews and the Jews were responsible for many Polish achievements in the fields of culture, law, music, theatre and the sciences.

The percentage of the Jews was, in many places in Poland, very high. In Warsaw, for instance, the Jews represented one third of the population. This means that every third person on the street was Jewish, statistically at least. In the Galician cities and villages the percentage was even higher. In the town of Tarnow the percentage reached 40 percent. In the small town Luboml, the Jews consisted of more than 94 percent of the population! The presence of the Jews in the big towns was so large that during the holidays of the Jews (Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Shabbat) large areas of the city were inactive and closed down.

These issues and similar ones should be used in the introduction to the films, in order to make them more understandable and to supply students with a historical background that will enable them to analyze and criticize them.

The development of the Jewish cinema in Poland is connected with the huge renaissance of the Jewish theatre. The first films were adaptations of famous theatrical plays like *The Dybbuk* and *Yiddel mit dem Fidel*. Later Jewish film developed independently and became a successful industry in which thousands of actors, technical experts, script authors, cameramen and directors were involved. The three years between 1936 and 1939 are considered *The Golden Era* of the Polish Jewish film industry, in which the biggest stars (Shimon Djigan, his partner Schuhmacher, Ida Kaminska, Menasche Oppenheim, Molly Pikkon and Sigmund

Turkow) and great producers like Joseph Green, Adolf Forbert and the brothers Goskind made their wonderful careers.

If the teacher wants to broaden this background section, he can make use of the numerous books and articles on the Jewish cinema in Poland, which appear in many languages.

Significant aspects of the films

- The intention of the director and producer of the film is to depict the various faces and wonderful richness of Polish Jewry. Jewish society is described in all its variety of beliefs, political tendencies and religious aspirations. Everybody who views the films can see that Polish Jewry is made up of different groups. The political scene consists of dozens of parties, from HaShomer haTzair, on the left, to Betar and the Revisionists on the right. The Zionists are also divided into several branches, each of them with its own youth organisation. It seems that the director made an effort to present the new image of the Jews of Poland, which contains not only religious and orthodox Jews. Parallel to the Jews with their kapotas and their traditional clothes, we see the modern Jew in Warsaw, Cracow and Bialystok, who is an industrialist, a journalist, a musician, an architect, an orchestra director etc. Goskind also points out how big the contribution of Polish Jews to their country was in many areas. It was a purely patriotic sentiment which characterized many of the Polish Jews. The films depict the cultural riches of Polish Jewry, which included numerous theatres, newspapers, cultural institutions and, of course, thousands of synagogues, yeshivas and *batei midrash*.
- Although the Goskinds wish to show us a realistic picture of the Jewish life in Poland, they try to avoid unpleasant situations. For this reason they scarcely mention antisemitic events, nor do they refer to the *Numerus Clausus* in the universities and so on. Nonetheless the films do hint at instances of Jewish hatred in Warsaw or difficulties elsewhere, in order to show us that not everything was perfect in Poland.
- The Jewish community, as it is shown in the films, was autonomous: it had hospitals of its own, a highly developed educational system, a splendid network of social institutions, a cultural, religious and economical world of its own.
- The films try to show us a healthy, strong, young Jewish generation in Poland. Polish-Jewish youth are active in sports and take part in sports league of the country (the haKoach and Maccabi of Cracow were the best in water sports in all Poland). Physical "proesspower" which for hundreds of years was not valued by Jews, now took on a growing importance.
- The spirit of the films is rather optimistic. The storm and clouds which await Polish Jews is completely absent from these films, which were made several months before the outbreak of World war II and the beginning of the Shoah. The tragic future of Polish Jewry is not seen or felt in the Goskind films. Viewers should remember that nine of ten of the figures who appear on the screen, will perish in the Shoah. Especially sad is the fate of the babies and children, which Goskinds show us playing, laughing and walking with their mothers in the famous parks of Warsaw and Lvuv. When this film was in the making, the fate of Polish Jewry had been decided and the only future these children would have was that of the ghettos and concentration camps.

Summing up

The miracle, which accompanies the rescue of the Goskind films, makes it possible to feel visually the tragedy of the Polish Jewry. Seeing the film visualizes the loss of the three and a half million Jews, a terrible loss, which includes not only human lives but also huge cultural and spiritual fortunes. Traditions of over thousand years were annihilated and wiped out. On one hand, it is very sad that today there are no Jews any more in Lemberg, Wilna, Lodz and other big Polish cities. On the other hand, we should be satisfied that Shaul and Yitzhak Goskind had the talents and vision to create such a precious project through which we can have a last look on a lost and destroyed Jewish world.