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A Convoy Leaving Paradise

“The Terezín ghetto resembled an ocean liner for three thousand people, but one sent out on the deep sea with twenty times as many passengers. It was a waiting room for death. Up to three hundred people a day died of natural causes, and in total, about one hundred and forty thousand passed through this city.”^[1]

In 1959, the First Czechoslovak Film Festival was held in Banská Bystrica. The emphasis was put on communist propaganda films as a model of the proper cinema. Social critiques such as *School of Fathers* (Škola otců, 1957), *Three Wishes* (Tři přání, 1958), and *Scars of the Past* (Zde jsou lvi, 1958) met with objections that they distorted reality, and were withdrawn from distribution. In the following years there was a renewed emphasis on socialist schematism and ideological “correctness” in all art forms.

Nevertheless, between Banská Bystrica and the advent of the new generation of authors (or the Czechoslovak New Wave), several timeless films were made, often offering a polemical, more psychological than political view of the war and the Protectorate; they were also often based on works of fiction and put a greater emphasis on the fate of the Jewish population.

Soviet director Stanislav Rostocki made *May Stars* (Mayskie zvyozdy, 1959) with Jana Brejchová based on Ludvík Ashkenazy’s short stories. Jiří Weiss succeeded with his adaptation of Jan Otčenášek’s novella *Romeo, Juliet and Darkness* (Romeo, Julie a tma, 1959). Jiří Krejčík shot *A Higher Principle* (Vyšší princip, 1960) based on a short story by Jan Drda. Tonda Majer, a boxer and the protagonist of Vojtěch Jasný’s drama *I Survived My Own Death* (Přežil jsem svou smrt, 1960), tries to survive in a concentration camp. In *A Convoy Leaving Paradise* (Transport z ráje, 1962), Zbyněk Brynych presented a naturalistic picture of everyday life in the Terezín ghetto as described four years earlier by Arnošt Lustig in *Night and Hope* (Noc a naděje), a

collection of shorter works of fiction.

Made fourteen years after *Distant Journey* (*Daleká cesta*, 1948), this was only the second Czech film to directly deal with the Holocaust. Brynych was inspired by Radok's presentation of the Terezín ghetto but at the same time defined himself against its expressionism and theatricality. Meanwhile, *The Last Stop* (*Ostatni etap*, 1948), *Fate of a Man* (*Sudba cheloveka*, 1959), and *Enclosure* (*L'Enclos*, 1961) were made abroad. All the films were also shown in Czech cinemas and were referred to in contemporary reviews of *A Convoy Leaving Paradise*. In the eyes of domestic critics, *A Convoy Leaving Paradise* stood up to the international competition.

According to the critics, Brynych conceived the story in an unorthodox way and noticed fates and details that had been overlooked until then. The quality of the film was also confirmed by the screenings and awards it got at many international shows. It was for example awarded the Golden Sail and diploma at the XVI. Locarno International Film Festival or the winning plaque at the Resistance Film Festival in Cuneo, Italy.

The film takes place in the autumn of 1944, shortly before the transport from Terezín to the Birkenau extermination camp. Due to the visit of an International Red Cross delegation and the propaganda film *The Fuhrer Gives a City to the Jews* (*Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt*, 1944) that was supposed to be made for the occasion, the Terezín ghetto is briefly transformed into a spa town for Jews. This tragicomic "alibi ghetto" was to be presented to the entire world as proof of the Nazis' exemplary care for the internees.

A Convoy Leaving Paradise begins with the arrival of the SS general;^[2] at the same time, a train with new prisoners arrives. Contrastingly, the film ends with the departure of both the satisfied general and the carriages full of Jews, heading in the opposite direction, though. The film presents one day in the life of Terezín, but it captures all the important aspects of the ghetto. The arrival of the Jews, the functioning of the Council of Elders, the illegal activities of the resistance, the preparation of the transport to the East.

Writing and rewriting the script for *A Convoy Leaving Paradise* took almost three years on and off. Lustig did write a film story fairly early on, based on several stories

from *Night and Hope* (the basis was the short story “The Bluish Flames” /Modravé plameny/), but then he and Brynych spent a long time looking for a way to translate it to the screen. In addition to Lustig’s personal memories, they were also inspired by written documents and authentic letters detailing the ghetto during World War II and by photographs from other European ghettos.

“A farmer wrote us a correspondence card wishing us good luck with the filming; a Terezín cook sent us a menu according to which a lunch was cooked for Adolf Eichmann during his inspection visit to the town. The former fire chief supplied accurate details, helping with the credibility of the film. The boiler operator from the former crematorium spent several days filming with us,” Brynych said.^[3]

The literary script with the working title *Transport* was finally approved for production after several modifications according to the instructions of the Artistic-Ideological Council. In November 1961, exploration of the sites began. Simultaneously, the study of historical materials continued. In February of the following year, castings were held. In addition to well-known actors, Brynych also cast non-actors in episodic roles, some of whom had themselves been interned in the ghetto during the war.

Filming began in Terezín in the spring of 1962. The local streets and houses were temporarily altered to look just like in the years of the Protectorate. Signs distinguishing the blocks of the ghetto were put up in accordance with period maps and photographs. The last shots were made in the summer of 1962 in the Hostivař studios.

In order to approximate the atmosphere of the town and the sense of fear and despair of the approaching transport as closely as possible, Brynych opted for an artificial quasi-documentary approach without the stylistic embellishments that critics had rebuked him for in his previous films, *Skid* (Smyk, 1960) and *Every Penny Counts* (Každá koruna dobrá, 1961).

The goal of cameraman Jan Čuřík was to achieve an authentic look of the period weeklies. During the filming of the scenes, he did not use reflectors and he let the actors play without make-up. His veristic shooting technique imitated war documentaries and reports. At the same time, Brynych was able to return to the format of a polyphonic collective drama made up of many individual stories, which he

had already used both in his debuting film *A Local Romance* (Žižkovská romance, 1958) and in his short story film *Five in a Million* (Pět z milionu, 1959).

The Terezín prisoners in the film do not represent a monotonous passive mass facing Nazi oppression. The overall picture of the ghetto is composed of character studies of individuals, both Jews and Nazis, who briefly stand out from the crowd. On both sides, Brynych avoids earlier stereotypes, pathos, and demonization. The characters are generally neither overall good nor overall bad.

The resistance on the part of Jews is symbolized, for example, by posters inciting them to sabotage the filming of the propaganda film. The Jewish self-government is represented by the characters of Löwenbach and Marmulstaub who co-determine the fate of the other Jews by having to sign the list of people destined for the transport. The SS soldier Binde is an ambiguous character since he reflects on the ethics of Nazi extermination and helps several Jews. The horror of Nazism does not stem from cruel scenes of torture, which the filmmakers tactfully avoided, but from the reduction of people to numbers, from the bureaucratic consistency with which people are counted and transported to death.

Despite its documentary sobriety, its focus on particular acts, and its adherence to the realistic basis, *A Convoy Leaving Paradise* is – just like Jan Němec's later *Diamonds of the Night* (Démanty noci, 1964) – an existential parable about a man in a liminal situation. Can we maintain our dignity and stay true to our moral principles when our lives are at stake? Is it possible to keep faith in humanity and love in the shadow of death?

Parallels to these motifs can also be found in other periods of human history. See, for example, the motif of propagandistic distortion of reality, of fiction masquerading as facts, which reflects the social reality of the 1950s Czechoslovakia, culminating in the choice of films presented in Banská Bystrica.

A Convoy Leaving Paradise (Czechoslovakia, 1962), director: Zbyněk Brynych, script: Arnošt Lustig, Zbyněk Brynych, cinematography: Jan Čuřík, music: Jiří Sternwald, cast: Zdeněk Štěpánek, Ilja Prachař, Ladislav Pešek, Jindřich Narenta, Vlastimil Brodský, Čestmír Řanda st., Jiří Vršťala, Jaroslav Raušer et al. Barrandov Film

Studios, 92 min.

Literature:

Zbyněk Brynych, Transport z ráje. *Kino 18*, 1963, no. 5 (28/ 02), p. 8.

Galina Kopaněvová, Zásah do času. *Film a doba 11*, 1965, no. 3, p. 136-139.

Jiří Pitterman, Transport z ráje. *Kino 18*, 1963, no. 7, p. 11.

Eva Strusková, Film Ghetto Theresienstadt 1942. *Illuminace 21*, 2009, no. 1, p. 5-36.

Ladislav Tunys, Transport z ráje. *Československý voják 11*, 1962, no. 13 (23/ 06), p. 22-23.

Jan Žalman, *Umlčený film*. Praha: Levné knihy 2008.

Notes:

[1] Zbyněk Brynych, Transport z ráje. *Kino 18*, 1963, no. 5 (28/ 02), p. 8.

[2] The character of the general was supposed to represent a compilation of the characteristics of Hitler, Himmler, von Neurath and others.

[3] Zbyněk Brynych, c. d., p. 8.