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Polish Museum Conjures Jewish Life Before the Holocaust

By Marjorie Backman



Courtesy, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York

Images from the 1920-1930 home movies from YIVO collection used by Peter Forgács in his installation at the Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

The Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw opened last month to great fanfare but no exhibitions for visitors to see. That all changed yesterday with the launch of its first temporary exhibition.

“Letters to Afar” is no typical history museum show. It is not designed as a literal chronology of, say, Jewish life before World War II. There’s no didactic retelling of a chronology of events.

Instead, the exhibition resembles a modern art installation: Renowned video artist Péter Forgács of Budapest created a dozen audiovisual orchestrations out of rare home movies of Polish Jews in the 1920s and ’30s paired with new original music by the Grammy-award winning Klezmatics of New York.

“The visitor can see something, a world that has been destroyed,” Forgács says. “We’re not showing at all the events that came afterward.”

“We want to be the museum of life,” says the exhibition’s curator, Tamara Sztyma, a Polish Jew and part of new generation of young Polish museum professionals brimming with energy and ideas. “We want to invite people to travel into the past and to not just to watch those films as historical documents, not just to be the witnesses of history, but to be its participants.”

As some Jewish immigrants in the 1920s and early ’30s ventured back to their Polish homeland to visit relatives, they packed the personal technology of the day, portable movie cameras. (Not everyone could: A new Cine-Kodak in the early ’20s totaled half cost of a Model T, writes Jeffrey Shandler in the show catalog.) The resulting home movies served as a kind of visual postcard, a communique between those who traveled and their circle back in the States.

The amateur footage traces quotidian events, Forgács says: Family members smile into the camera. “They have a personal relation with the person behind the camera. ... They’re showing the family outside; they’re walking to the places; they’re showing their neighbor; they’re showing their daily life,” the shops of the shtetl, the synagogue, their marketplace. “Something that doesn’t exist anymore—even in film.”

“So the miracle is that these were saved because they were sent back, brought back to the U.S.A.,” Forgács says of the movies.

This exhibition represents a concrete outcome of a year-old partnership between the Warsaw museum and YIVO, the Jewish Institute for Research in New York, which holds the films in its collection. This relationship retraces the historic links between YIVO with the Polish community it sprang from. In 1925, scholars founded YIVO in Vilna, Poland, then the intellectual capital of the Jewish community of Eastern Europe.

The Nazi invasion of Vilna, with its destruction and plundering, forced YIVO staff to seek refuge and relocate its treasures of Yiddish literature and Jewish folklore in New York.

Forgács created his artwork carefully and slowly. He selected some clips from travelogues specially commissioned by members of landsman groups such as *Alexander Harkavy's* of Navaredok. By showing the tough living conditions in Poland after World War I and in the Depression, they raised funds for their kinsmen.

But Forgács did not necessarily choose frames because of *who* the people were. Rather, he selected certain scenes for their gestures as people went about daily activities and cut the footage to deliver a different kind of message to a contemporary museum audience. He isolated moments in these private movies, playing them at different speeds so viewers will gaze at these Polish Jewish faces.

Visitors encounter the exhibition in a giant space of 12 audiovisual orchestrations—each with two to three or four screens set close together. Sometimes the cluster of screens displays the same footage but runs it at a different speed or angle.

Museumgoers may find the footage mesmerizing to watch as if they were privy to conversations between families as people over “there” in Poland were photographed, their images conveyed and shown by the traveler to family “here” in America.

“We are reading not only the facial expression but we read the body language,” says Forgács. “We read how these different generations appear before the camera. You see how the old Orthodox women with wigs, and you see their sons and daughters in modern clothes. You see the schools, the Yiddish school and the Hebrew school, and you see a lot of things that we can read that are extremely important and only like [Isaac Bashevis] Singer could write about it. But now we can see it with our eyes.”

“Art is a sensitive matter,” says Forgács who represented Hungary at the Venice Biennale four years ago. “It is a language that can translate, transmit, mediate message in a very specific way that is not science, not historical document but something that is touching you—emotional, sensitive, musical. And then you get into the feeling, ... Oh I can even can touch them. Oh, look at that face... Oh, look at the kids! Oh, lovely.”

Forgács sees the power of the films in their “innocence” and “naïveté” about the future, “much as you and I don’t know what is our future, what comes in two years, five years,” he says.

For Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, a senior adviser of the project, the artwork’s magic lies in the fact that visitors can enter the exhibition space and be surrounded by scenes from a time when Poland had many

vibrant Jewish communities and cities where Jews comprised a large sector of the population—a dramatic effect in a country where most of the Jews are now gone.

To provide context, Forgács added clips from a 1935 historical film “The Banner of Freedom” (about the Second Polish Republic) and from a 1937 movie adaptation of S. Ansky’s famous Yiddish play “The Dybbuk” as well as occasional captions with snippets of letters and Jewish literature of the day.

The Klezmatiks were challenged by Forgács to develop a score that would be “neutral,” says trumpeter Frank London. “Given the intensively charged nature of the content of the images, he really didn’t want the music to sort of telegraph emotions or tell people what to think or how to interpret the images.”

Forgács’ works rely on music with a “minimal” affect, “which is lovely and amazing and we understand it,” London says, adding that this is “unrelated to what the Klezmatiks normally do.”

Viewers of all religions and backgrounds are the right audience for the show, says Forgács, a child of Holocaust survivors: “When I’m making a film, I’m not a Jew; I’m an artist. My call is universal.”

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