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# Holocaust in Slovak Film: From Amnesia to Memory. The Forgotten, Invisible Fates of the "Others"

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**Abstract:** Dealing with the past and accepting responsibility for the Holocaust has a long and difficult trajectory in Slovakia. Critical self-reflection was prevented first by the communist regime, after the fall of the Iron Curtain by the rise of nationalism and the cult of the war criminal, President Jozef Tiso. Despite the fact that the first compilation film dealing with the Holocaust was made immediately after the war, the right time for other films came only during the period of liberalization of the 1960s. Causing this deficit was not a lack of interest in researching one's own history, but instead politics and communist anti-Zionism. There was plenty of material, for example the testimony of the escape of Alfréd Wetzler and Rudolf Vrba from Auschwitz. My paper aims to present little-known Slovak documentary films and contribute to the discussion about the media representation of the Holocaust in East Central Europe. It follows on from several years of research on the reflection of World War II and the Slovak National Uprising in Slovak documentary films after 1945 (Filová, Eva, and Eva Vženteková. 2020. *Slovenský štát vo filme: dokumentárna a hraná tvorba po roku 1945*. Bratislava: Vlna, Drewo a srd.).

**Keywords:** Slovak cinema; documentary films; holocaust; labour camps; Romani people; Jewish women

## 1 History as a Political and Cinematic Battlefield

In Slovak cinematography, in fiction and documentary films, we can find quite a few examples of failing collective memory, a false image of the past and efforts to reconstruct it again. An example can be (anti)war films, which before the 1989 Velvet Revolution constituted a large (and obligatory) part of film production. War dramas accounted for 15 % of over 290 feature-length films produced for cinemas, and 3 % of

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the almost 3,500 non-fiction productions were documentaries. It is problematic to determine their exact number for the simple reason that war and insurrection themes were purposefully associated with the post-war reconstruction and building of Slovakia, with the history of the labour movement and the communist party, etc.[1] However, we are interested in films that deviate from political propaganda and try to represent the trauma associated with the "final solution" through specific stylistic procedures or authorial approach.

Problematic historical events and names that had to be forgotten for political reasons were removed from history, books and films: politicians and diplomats of the first Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938), war heroes in domestic and foreign resistance, fascist collaborators and the president of the wartime Slovak state Jozef Tiso, faces of the Prague Spring in 1968, emigrants, etc. The Jewish question – a phrase that sounds like a euphemism, much like the women issue or the Hungarian card – was still present in Slovakia long after the war. Antisemitism, deep-rooted prejudices and the return of the Holocaust survivors invoked tensions and led to bloody anti-Jewish pogroms and demonstrations in several Slovak cities.[2] Behind the fear of Jews stood our own guilty consciences and issues about how to deal with traitors, murderers and thieves of Jewish property. The short compilation film *Sú osobne zodpovední za zločiny proti ľudskosti!* (*They are personally responsible: for crimes against humanity!,* 1946)[3] will long remain the most powerful accusation. Director Ján Kadár used the new definition of the crime as an appeal,[4] and also identified the main victims of the Holocaust: Jews. Kadár personally lived through the hardships of a labour camp, and from his immediate family, only his brother Štefan survived until the end of the war. Inspired by Soviet montage (editing) theory, he combined foreign and Slovak war materials, stop-frames, slow-motion scenes, repetition and an emotional commentary. The visual material (the Jewish Code and anti-Jewish bills, newspaper titles, photographs and footage from Slovak labour camps and the transports) used by Kadár would be reused in upcoming decades in numerous news journals and documentary films, but without any explicit connection to the Jewish genocide.

A reversal in attitude toward Jews was not brought about by the Communist coup of 1948 but by the political developments in Israel, where the January 1949

**1** Newsreels and TV films are not included in this summary and they require separate research.

**2** Topoľčany, Nitra, Kolbasov, Ulič, Bardejov, Prešov (1945), Bratislava (1946, 1948) and more. See Apor et al. (2019); Kubátová (2016).

**3** In the text, I will use the original movie title and the English translation in parentheses. Translations of movie titles are from official sources. Other Slovak to English translations are by the author.

**4** The International Military Tribunal defined crimes against humanity as "murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation… or persecutions on political, racial, or religious grounds." (The Nuremberg Trials).

parliamentary elections signified its move away from pro-Soviet politics and a new inclination towards the West. This resulted in negative, even malevolent, propaganda against Zionism and cosmopolitanism, and also during the process of "de-Jewification" (together with post-war "de-Germanization" and "de-Magyarization"[5]) (Zemko 2006, 32). Communist ideals preaching equality among men were left at the level of grandiose planning. Both politicians and entrepreneurs of Jewish descent became the victims of fabricated political trials in the 1950s.[6] Not only the Jewish community but the whole of society inclined towards a "conspiracy of silence" – the Holocaust was not talked about and it became a taboo subject.

The Holocaust is a trauma of Slovak history as it is of every other European country; it was not only the tragedy of the victims but also the tragedy of all their contemporaries and participants. The trauma of the Holocaust in Slovakia, as in any other communist country, is also exacerbated by the fact that for ideological and political reasons this issue was circumvented, distorted and hushed up for more than 40 years (Kamenec 2009, 61). Visual testimony was considered to be stronger and more authentic than pathetic, docile commentary (voice over). From a great tragedy, only sporadically dispersed references, symbols and metaphors remained. The filmmakers deemed footage from concentration camps, mass graves or the "Arbeit macht frei" inscription as sufficiently eloquent, and did not feel the need to talk more deeply about the events. The commentaries of the voice over tended to generalise the massacres, the annihilation of nations and of both Slovak and foreign citizens, and to docilely glorify certain groups – Communists, partisans, anti-fascist fighters and the underground resistance. The Jewish genocide was re-classified as an annihilation of the enemies of fascism.

During the 1960s, the situation changed due to the influence of political liberalization. New court trials of war criminals, former Nazi commanders and concentration camp employees were held throughout the world. The Frankfurt Auschwitz trials (1963–1965) were attended by Alfréd Wetzler as a witness. In April 1944, Wetzler fled from Auschwitz with Rudolf Vrba. Together, they wrote *The Auschwitz Protocol*, a testimony about the death camp. Vrba, who emigrated from Czechoslovakia in 1958, wrote the book *I Cannot Forgive (1963)* with the Irish journalist, Alan Bestic. In 1964 (Obzor), the book *Čo Dante nevidel* (*What Dante Did*

**5** Czechoslovak citizens of German and Hungarian nationality were deprived of Czechoslovak citizenship by Decree 33/1945, which led to their forced removal from the country. This and other decrees are known as the Beneš decrees – after President Eduard Beneš.

**6** For example, the goldsmith Izidor Frostig was executed in October 1952 for alleged financial criminality, with his court trial recorded in the propagandistic document *Triedny nepriateľ* (*Class Enemy*, dir. Vlado Kubenko, 1952).

*Not See*) was published, in which Wetzler (under the pseudonym Jozef Lánik) described in detail their escape. In the 1960s, several monographs were also published that opened a new discussion on the topic of the Slovak National Uprising. Historians and filmmakers felt freer, as did a large part of society.

In the ambitious one-hour anti-war film *65,000,000* (dir. Miroslav Horňák, 1961) which stood somewhere between experiment, editing collage, documentary and fiction, the theatrically pathetic scene with the Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves in Verdi's opera Nabucco turns into a montage of authentic footage from concentration camps with corpses, cremation ovens and piles of women's hair. The fictional micro-story about the Jewish woman with the brooch thus directly refers to the "final solution of the Jewish question". The documentary film *Príbehy z Roháčov* (*Stories from Roháče,* dir. Karol Skřipský, 1965) deals with the sense of guilt towards fellow Jewish citizens for the very first time some 20 years after the end of the war. Two feature films from 1965 serve as a direct accusation of anti-Jewish repressions and the transports during the Slovak State: *Námestie svätej Alžbety* (*St. Elizabeth Square*, dir. Vladimír Bahna, 1965) is a tragic love-story between a Jewish girl and a Slovak boy. The Oscar-winning *Obchod na korze* (*The Shop on Main Street*, dir. Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos, 1965) tells the tragic tale of the Aryanizator of a Jewish shop and the shop's rightful owner, an old Jewish woman.

The overturning of the Prague Spring's democratizing ideals following the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops in August 1968 resulted in a return to the pro-Soviet proven strategy of dodging and distorting historical facts. In the 1980s, Western scientific discourse on the Holocaust expanded to include the term *Shoah*, which also appears in the several-hours-long documentary film *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann (1985). At that time, two films by Miroslav Cimerman were made with the same setting and with the same theme. The first film is a newsreel *Kinožurnál* (*Cinema Newsreel* 19/1985) with the subtitle *Osvienčimské memento* (*Auschwitz Memento*), which was created for the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the liberation of the largest concentration camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau (27.1.1945).

The second film is the documentary *"Es ist Dunkel in meiner Erinnerung…" – "Je temno v mojej pamäti…"* (*"It's Dark in My Memory…"*, 1986), which wasn't released for distribution until 1988. The narrator's voice fades out to give space for the memories of survivors who talk about the atrocities they had lived through. One of these, retrieved from oblivion for the first time in years, features Alfréd Wetzler. Neither his heroic escape from Auschwitz nor the deportations from Slovakia are, however, mentioned in the film, while the original screenplay contains more than what was found in the film. In spite of that, several never-before-mentioned topics are discussed in the film: the killing of women with phenol heart injections,

sterilization experiments and secret abortions. The presence of women's testimonies is not new for the topic of war, but radically different.[7] The female perspective only seconded the male testimony and dominated only in gender-specific areas: on the occasion of International Women's Day, in medical films that focused on women's health, pregnancy and child upbringing, reports from textile factories etc. Female characters in feature films – in the case of war victims – were usually innocent, passive victims, such as in the films *St. Elizabeth Square* and *The Shop on Main Street.* The opposite case was represented by the fallen women, collaborators or mistresses of Nazi commanders, who profited from confiscated Jewish property in the films *Polnočná omša* (*The midnight Mass*, dir. Jiří Krejčík, 1962), *Obchod na korze* (*The Shop on Main Street*, dir. Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos, 1965), *Naši pred bránami* (*In front of the gate*, dir. Ľudovít Filan, 1970), *Veľká noc a veľký deň* (*Great night and great day*, dir. Štefan Uher, 1974). In both cases, however, victims and collaborators usually end tragically or are punished.

Even though it was not possible at that stage to talk about a turn towards micro-history, invisible characters and minorities, a shift is evident in the film *It's Dark in My Memory*…. In 1987, a samizdat document was created, in which 24 publicly known artists and intellectuals (the writers Dominik Tatarka, Hana Ponická and Milan Rúfus, the painter Vincent Hložník, the Catholic dissidents Ján Čarnogurský, František Mikloško) expressed their attitudes towards the Holocaust, expressed regret for the victims and stated the need for a dignified memorial (Vyhlásenie k deportáciám židov zo Slovenska).[8] This was the first expression of remorse, of an act of apology, but also of defiance against a Communist regime that destroyed synagogues and left Jewish cemeteries squalid (Filová and Vženteková 2020).[9]

## 2 Revision of History After 1989

The fall of the Communist regime brought with it new challenges for historians and filmmakers as well. Films suddenly ceased to be ideological tools. A new history of Slovakia – as well as new literature and textbooks – was needed, that would bring

**7** It is interesting to observe the differences between the film explication, the script and the finished film. The director's idea was more spectacular, he asked for colour material, which he did not receive, he planned to use samples from foreign films (*Night and Fog, Ordinary Fascism, Shoah*…). The director was aware of the uniqueness and unrepeatability of the obtained testimonies, but for political or other reasons they did not make it to the movie. See Slovak Film Institute, National Film Archive, Studio of Short Films.

**8** Full text and signatories (in Slovak): Vyhlásenie k deportáciám židov zo Slovenska (October 1987).

**9** See more: "Jewish history still being made." The Slovak Spectator (9 Jul 2020).

the truth about the Slovak national uprising, domestic and foreign resistance, collaboration, labour camps, transports, Aryanization, post-war pogroms etc.

The wild years of privatization, mafias, nationalism of the 90s were marked by a struggle for a democratic and pro-European character for Slovakia, but also by the breakdown of Slovak filmmaking and the dissolution of the only Slovak film studio, Koliba. Film production rapidly decreased; Slovak Television became the main producer of films, mostly documentaries. The director Dušan Hudec focused on retracing the stories of Slovak Jews. In a two-part TV documentary *Poslovia nádeje* (*Messengers of Hope*, 1999), 18 Slovak Jews who survived Auschwitz presented their testimonies on camera; the film *Svedok* (*The Witness*, 2001) follows the fate of a young Jewish boy who escaped a massacre and, as the sole witness, was able to convict the offenders of the murder; and *Miluj blížneho svojho…* (*Love Thy Neighbor*, 2004)[10] maps a tragic incident in Topoľčany, where, before the war, a large Jewish community used to live. The film reconstructs the development of a tragedy – from the peaceful cohabitation of the Jewish and non-Jewish communities, through the radicalization of Slovaks due to anti-Jewish propaganda and antisemitism, the stealing of Jewish property and the transports during March 1942, to a pogrom that took place in September 1945 in which more than 40 Jews were injured. The film *Celý svet je úzky most* (*The Whole World is a Narrow Bridge, 2010*) portrays the Košice rabbi Yossi Steiner who, as a child, had to hide from being deported along with his parents.

Probably the most problematic were the films that dealt with the controversial wartime criminal Jozef Tiso who, as the head of the autonomous government, signed the first deportations of Jews from southern Slovakia in November 1938 and then, as president, additional transports between 1942 and 1945. Tiso and the wartime Slovak state had been among the taboo topics of the previous period when this part of the past was reduced to only the history of the anti-fascist resistance (Kamenec 2009, 43). In the 1990s, the cult of Tiso rose from the ashes due to exiled historians and increasingly strong nationalist voices calling Tiso's 1947 execution a martyrdom (Hruboň 2017).

The first film about Tiso was the television documentary *Pokus o portrét* (*An Attempt at a Portrait*, dir. Ľubomír Mlynárik, 1991), which chose to look at his person as objectively as possible, without prejudice and emotion, and not only in black and white. In addition to the rich archival material that captured the political rise of Tiso, the main dramatic line consists of two different opinions, represented by Tiso's lawyer JUDr. Ernest Žabkay and the plaintiff, JUDr. Anton Rašla. The feature-length

**10** Several films by Dušan Hudec had a problem with television censorship. The public Slovak Television (STV) refused to broadcast *Love Thy Neighbor*. See more: The Slovak Spectator 2004.

documentary *Tisove tiene* (*Tiso's Shadows*, dir. Dušan Trančík, 1998) also focused on the principle of the conflict between several opposing points of view. Trančík followed a method of alternating statements between lawyers, representatives of the church, the ambassador of the Slovak Republic to the Vatican, Anton Neuwirth, an officer of the American military intelligence service (CIC) who arrested the in hiding Tiso, and fanatical nationalists who still worshiped his cult. However, the provocative topic did not find support in Slovakia, so the film was created thanks to the financial support of Czech Television (Filová and Vženteková 2020, 121:125).

## 3 Female Viewpoint, Female Experience in Documentary Film

The victims of criminal acts and wars are most frequently women and children – while men are represented as noble fighters with celebrated heroic deaths, the bravery and heroism of women remain invisible. While we find enough female characters in feature films (Lewis 2017)[11] because every story stands and falls on relationships and different forms of love, in documentary films, it is only rarely that women and children are cast in the roles of witnesses, as personal observers or involved individuals. It is interesting to observe where this position changes, where female narrators/witnesses/protagonists and the female voice come to the fore.

Belarusian journalist Svetlana Alexievich recorded absent female voices and war memories in her book *The Unwomanly Face of War*. She compares memory to *"light-gathering power"* – the ability of a lens to fix the captured image. According to her, women's memories of the war are the most *"light-gathering"* in terms of strength of feelings, in terms of pain.

> *I would even say that "women's war" is more terrible than "men's". Men hide behind history, behind facts; war fascinates them as action and a conflict of ideas, of interests, whereas women are caught up with feelings. And another thing: men are prepared from childhood for the fact that they may have to shoot. Women are not taught that… They are not prepared to do that work… And they remember other things, and remember differently. They are capable of seeing what is closed to men. I repeat once more: their war has small, has color, a detailed world of existence.* (Alexievich 2018, xxiii)

One of the first female portraits is the mid-length film *Cesta Magdalény Robinsonovej* (*The Journey of Magdalena Robinsonova*, 2008). The director, Marek Šulík, didn't have a chance to meet the Slovak photographer personally because she died in 2006, but he

**11** See more: Lewis, Ingrid. 2017. *Women in European Holocaust Films: Perpetrators, Victims and Resisters*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

works with recorded interviews interlaced with archive photographic and film materials, along with newly filmed scenes. His form of presenting Robinsonová's interviews is also interesting; they are shown on a TV screen travelling through different places inside the former Auschwitz concentration camp, where she was interned. The TV-set was chosen deliberately as an important, but also problematic media battlefield in which populists, extremists and defenders of the wartime Slovak State are given the space to talk. Šulík pulls us into the story through a slow ride along a corridor with a centrally placed TV screen in which a film (a life story) is shown as a time-lapse with short pauses, and different picture and sound fragments flash through the grainy image. From time to time, the almost haptically fleshed out accounts by Robinsonová are interrupted by TV or *"systemic"* (technical or social) shortcomings.

On March 25, 1942, the first transport to Auschwitz was sent from Poprad, a city in northeastern Slovakia. In it were a thousand single young women, of whom only a few survived. The television documentary *Prvý transport* (*The First Transport*, dir. Milan Homolka, 2017) combines the talking heads of historians and survivors, explaining the interconnections and recalling past events, along with various materials (radio recordings, documentation, photographic and film material) that explain the development of domestic politics at that time. The first victim of this transport was a woman suffering from severe diabetes who did not survive the inhumane conditions of the long journey. The women's memories of the departure from home to the unknown, allegedly travelling for work, the inhuman and demeaning conditions in the camp, and the fear they felt during every execution, are extremely suggestive. The film is framed by a reconstruction of the past events: at the beginning, high school girls get onto a period cattle train car and try to experience what their peers lived through in the times. At the end of the film, the girls share their unpleasant feelings.

The fates of extraordinary women from the Slovak Jewish community were investigated by director Anna Grusková. Her debut film *Rabínka* (*The Woman Rabbi*, 2012) is a documentary portrait of Gisi Fleischmann, the brain behind the illegal Bratislava Working Group that operated under the Jewish Centre and focused on rescuing Jews from deportation. The film adaptation of her story was preceded by long-term research that also resulted in a radio broadcast trilogy and a theatre play that first premiered in Italy. The film reconstruction of Gisi Fleischmann's life is told through several storylines: archive recordings, expert commentaries, personal recollections, the theatre adaptation of the play *La Rabbina* by a Bolognese theatre and authorial commentary. The rich archive material consists of film shots and photographs of wartime Bratislava, family photographs, letters, telegrams, passports, stamps, maps, graphs, caricatures, drawings, radio recordings and items from foreign archives. Grusková creates a visually and factually rich portrait of the

woman whose organisational and diplomatic skills placed her at the forefront of the Jewish resistance. After her arrest, she was taken to Auschwitz with the note, "R.U." – Rückkehr unerwünscht (Return Undesirable).

The second documentary film *Návrat do horiaceho domu* (*Return to a Burning House,* 2014) is a journey in the steps of Chaviva Reicková, a Slovak patriot, Zionist and soldier. She became a victim of Nazi retaliations after the suppression of the Slovak National Uprising (SNP). In a short period of time, Reicková underwent dynamic personal development: she moved from Banská Bystrica to Bratislava where she organised the migration of Slovak Jews to Palestine. Then she herself moved to Palestine, where she helped launch a kibbutz. She underwent military, paratrooper and intelligence training and, after the launch of SNP, she came back to Slovakia. While *The Woman Rabbi* mapped out a politically and topographically compact area, *Return* is conceived more broadly and divergently – due to both Reickova's foreign activities and the international material available. The first two scenes reveal the two central locations: the Banská Bystrica Region and the Sharon Plain. These scenes show also the two different approaches towards the relationship with *"places of memory"* – the Slovak side is represented by a newly-built miniature Chaviva Reicková garden near the monumental building of the SNP Memorial (the Slovak National Uprising), while the Israeli side is represented by the large, forested campus of the educational centre Givat Haviva. Grusková crosses the boundaries of her research towards broader historical and political contexts – in her film, the grandiose celebrations of the 70th anniversary of SNP in 2014 are shown alongside displays of extremism. A paradox concerning memory is the fact that in the region of the most powerful anti-Nazi resistance and the greatest Nazi retaliations, an ultranationalist extremist in 2013 won county elections(Filová and Vženteková 2020, 135:139).

The title of Anna Grusková's latest film *Žena novej doby* (*Woman of the New Age, 2022*) is based on an extensive publication from 1938 edited by Alžbeta Gwerková Göllnerová and Jarmila Zikmundová.[12] The film is about the fate of one of them, the literary historian, translator and teacher Alžbeta Gwerková, who was tortured and shot by the Gestapo (respectively Hlinka Guard)[13] in the winter of 1944. Grusková used self-commentary, quotes from a book dedicated to the education of the modern woman, historical interpretation and dance scenes.

> *Public opinion looks at women scientists as an unhealthy phenomenon, claiming that a woman chooses this field of activity only out of necessity, because she cannot make a living otherwise, or*

**12** The book was published in two editions: in 1938 with the subtitle *Book for the Education of a Democratic Woman* and with an introductory quote by T. G. Masaryk; in the spring of 1939, under political pressure from the clerico-fascist Slovak Republic, the editors had to change the subtitle to *Book for the National Education of Women.* Nonetheless, both editions were confiscated.

**13** Slovak nationalist militant organization (1938–1945).

> *she is driven to pursue it by a morbid ambition. Public opinion does not want to allow this, that a woman can devote herself to science out of an inner need, that she can have abilities and a scientific character. (…) Every woman must remember that she does not speak, act, or work only for herself, but for all women.* (Göllnerová 1939, 144–147)

## 4 Porajmos – Unknown Romani Holocaust

For a long time, the Romani genocide stood outside of scientific interest, filling the *"white spaces"* of history after the Velvet Revolution in 1989 seemed not to concern the Romani people (Janas 2010). The titles of the first more complex pieces of research testify to this exclusion: *Unknown Holocaust* (Frištenská, Lázničková, and Sulitka 1995), *Unacknowledged Holocaust* (Kumanová and Mann 2007), *Forgotten Camps* (Janas 2008). Like the Jews, the fate of the Romani was the systematic liquidation, while their persecution goes back deeply into the past. Their representation is built on myths and stereotypes that the Roma are savages, cannibals, antisocial, dirty and lazy. According to the American scientist Ian Hancock, the myth was passed down that the Romani people were willing to be enslaved – that slavery was natural for them. According to Hancock, it is striking that even after the war the Romani people received no help, that no-one was called to testify on their behalf during the Nuremberg Trials or any other war crimes trial, that they were never compensated, for a long time they did not have any memorial to the victims, and for a long time they were classed as *"other victims"* (Hancock 2001).

Official Slovak politics seems to have avoided this topic for a long time and thus covered up the debt to its own citizens. Since 2005, thanks to the initiative of the civil association In Minorita, we have been commemorating the Roma Holocaust Remembrance Day in Slovakia. On August 2, 1944, over 4,000 Roma were murdered in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. Since 2005, commemorative plaques and monuments began to increase at the places of deportations, mass executions and labour camps (Dubnica nad Váhom, Lutila, Nemecká, Zvolen, Slatina, etc.).[14] However, not much has changed from an existential point of view. In Slovakia, two-thirds of the Romani population still live in segregated slums, in poverty, and in poor hygienic conditions without water and sewage. Their discrimination continues even today.

Repeated bans on nomadism – both during the wartime Slovak state and under communism – deprived the Roma, who were skilled craftsmen, of the possibility of a living. Elena Lacková, the first Slovak Roma writer, education worker and a graduate

**14** See website: http://www.romaholocaust.sk/sk/pripominanie/159-obcianske-zdruzenie-inminorita. In 2015, the European Parliament declared August 2 as the European Holocaust Memorial Day for Sinti and Roma.

of the Department of Philosophy at Charles University in Prague (1970), recalls how during the war Roma were forced to settle in villages and small towns and how they were soon forcibly evicted from there to the hills at least 2 km away, where they constructed temporary ghettos. They lived in those ghettos or settlements long after the war, because the post-war reconstruction of the country did not involve the Roma (Lacková 1997).

The wartime anti-Romani decrees first made it impossible for Roma to move about, and forbade them from entering cities or using public transport – whoever was caught, had their hair roughly cut or was beaten. The Romani men were taken to labour camps, where they worked on the most difficult construction sites throughout Slovakia. More than 5,000 Roma passed through the camps. Today, almost no one knows that the Romani men, in primitive and slave-like conditions, built railways, bridges, tunnels, roads, regulated water flows and started the rough construction of the Orava Dam. Director Paľo Korec recorded testimonies about the construction of the Prešov – Strážske railway line in eastern Slovakia in the medium-length TV documentary *To ta trať* (*That's the Track, 2002*). He contrasts the present with celebratory archival propaganda shots from the construction of the railway, near which witnesses still live today. They still remember the inhumane conditions in the work camp in Hanušovce during the construction of the long railway viaduct. They remember: *"… how they treated people… We were not human (for them), but animals."* and *"Torture was the most important thing there, the beating, that was the worst, and the hunger."* This new track became the pride of the Clerico-fascist regime, and was also visited by President Jozef Tiso. Of course, the celebration was held without the participation of the Roma.

Ian Hancock sees the difference between the Roma and other nations by suggesting that the Roma lack any means to consolidate and defend their identity, they have no political or military power, they do not have their own territory; their history, religion and language were unknown to others. Dark skin, their way of life and also the fact that the West associated them with the threat of Islam contributed to the creation of a negative image (Hancock 2001, 141). Who does not have his own history does not exist. The feature-length cinematic essay *Diera v hlave* (*Hole in the Head, 2016*) is based on the metaphor of a leaky memory. Director Robert Kirchhoff followed the history of the Romani genocide across several European countries, resigned to archival materials, uncovering the past through a narrative in which current events and situations alternate with memories of killing, concentration camps and pain (Those events include violent police interventions against nomads, a demonstration, a meeting of family and friends after many years, etc.).

> *Each character tells a different story, and the stories intertwine like a braid. They are menacingly and dangerously similar, gradually becoming one story. Because there were Roma concentration*

> *camps in every country, the local police cooperated in the liquidation of the Roma, the killers used almost identical methods… Or not? Isn't it the case that gradually, after these many years, a kind of collective Roma memory about the Holocaust was created, that the stories wander in the memories and other memories are always added to them? The Roma themselves question the reliability of memory, because who would remember all that… After all, it doesn't matter how it happened, because, unfortunately, it just happened.* (Ciel 2017, 34)

This pan-European wandering painfully affects Slovakia as well; here too the Roma were interned in labour and detention camps and suffered mass-murder. Due to the incompleteness of the archival materials, it is almost impossible to find the exact number of people affected. According to estimates, approximately 3–4 thousand people passed through 14 coercive labour facilities (Varinský 2004, 18).

The documentary film *Ako som sa stala partizánkou* (*How I Became A Partisan,* 2021) mixes memories in a fairy tale form through which the director Vera Lacková reveals the tragic fate of her family. The Roma people were not only war victims – forced to live in segregation, forbidden to join the army, imprisoned in the Dubnica nad Váhom concentration camp – they were also active participants in the Slovak National Uprising. Lacková's film talks for the first time about their participation, a topic that was never talked about before. Lacková visits archives, living survivors and neighbours, and composes a portrait of her great-grandfather Ján Lacko, whose mother, wife and four children were shot in a forest by Nazis. The film is not only about past resistance, but also about contemporary struggles – the director fights for making known other Romani partisans and acknowledges the crimes against humanity done to the Roma. She also deals with another *"storyline"* – the female genealogy from her oldest relative, *phuri daj* in the Roma language, through her biological and adoptive mother, to her own pregnancy. In interviews and discussions with her peers and representatives of institutions, she encounters evasive reactions, prejudice and indifference towards extremism. Anew, she builds archive material that illustrates the wartime cataclysm, while she also reveals a current family tragedy: the story of a father beaten and robbed by his white friends, *gadjo*. The director lost her father when she was eight years old. This deep personal scar and the constant presence of the author in the scenes reveal the racism deeply rooted in our society.

One of the locations the director passes through is the village of Lety in the Czech Republic. A large piggery stood on the site where during the war there was a concentration camp for Roma. Three special transports were sent from Lety to Auschwitz and the gypsy camp in Auschwitz-Birkenau, the first in December 1942, the second and third in March and June 1943 (Fraser 1998, 275). In the 1990s, all initiatives to build a Romani monument failed. Shortly after the completion of the film, however, the piggery was demolished and a Roma and Sinti Holocaust

Memorial was opened in May 2024. The film ends as it began: as an almost fairy-tale-like story told to the director's newly born daughter Daria. Romani family stories have always been carried from generation to generation through fairy tales. In a fairy tale, everyone has a name, an identity. Thanks to the director's research, new names, fixed in memory, have been added to their family grave, commemorating the fates of women and other minorities who have lived in oblivion for such a long time.[15]

## 5 Conclusions

In her work about the specific role that documentary film has played and plays in Holocaust representation, Golan (2023) wrote:

> *Using its universal language, documentary film has served as an intermediary between the viewer and the survivor, as well as between the historical truth as captured by the eye of the lens, even before the smoke had evaporated from the furnaces, and the deniers.*

The fates of the "others", Jewish women and Roma people, remained untold for a long time. A number of significant documentary films (*The Woman Rabbi, Return to a Burning House, Hole in the Head, How I Became a Partisan*) have been made only in recent years with a new approach on reflecting on trauma and the Holocaust.

We have tried to present several examples of Slovak documentary films that work with memory in various ways and deepen our knowledge of our past. This is only a small, rather atypical part of Slovak audiovisual production. Even their heroes and heroines are exceptions rather than typical and stereotyped representations of men and women. However, we will also find other examples. The touching story of Sir Nicholas Winton, who in 1939 saved 669 Jewish children and transported them from Czechoslovakia to Great Britain, was made into two Czech-Slovak co-productions directed by Matej Mináč: documentary *Nicholas G. Winton – Sila ľudskosti* (*The Power of Good: Nicholas Winton, 2002*) and a feature film *Nickyho rodina* (*Nicky's Family, 2011*).[16] The feature films *Nedodržaný sľub* (*Broken Promise*, dir. Jiří Chlumský, 2009) and *Správa* (*The Auschwitz Report*, dir. Peter Bebjak, 2020) also tried to attract expanded audience interest, but despite their genre potential and strong

**15** In the recent documentary film *O baripen* (*Pride*, 2023) Lacková focused on the story of the above-mentioned Romani writer Elena Lacková (1921–2003) and her great-granddaughter, the successful young actress and singer Alžbeta Ferencová (1991).

**16** Among Slovak films, they have received the greatest international acclaim. The Nicholas Winton character appeared for the first time in the feature film *Všetci moji blízki* (*All My Loved Ones*, dir. Matej Mináč, 1999).

stories based on real events (the true story of a Jewish boy Martin Friedmann, the escape of Alfréd Wetzler and Rudolf Vrba from Auschwitz), they did not become blockbusters. Both films received positive reviews and acclaim at international festivals.[17]

Despite the fact that Holocaust films are inherently traumatic for the viewer, they constitute a significant and interesting part of audiovisual production in recent years, through which more and more "others" find a place where their voices can be heard. Although even today it sometimes seems that the collective memory does not work and society is prone to forget faster than to correct its failures, new scientific research or artistic activities prove that we must always revisit the past. Such a place of memory is the area of the former labour camp in Sereď, today the Holocaust Museum, opened in 2016 and renovated in 2021, whose original barracks remind one of the repression and the 16 transports to several death camps that took place there.

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17 In 2021, *The Auschwitz Report* was the second-best-attended Slovak film with 39,063 viewers.

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