Swimming in Auschwitz

Dir: Jon Kean
63 minutes, USA, 2007
Reviewed by Batya Weinbaum

At its world premier at the 22nd Santa Barbara International Film Festival, this film was promoted as “the first female story of survivors of the Holocaust.” While facing death, six women recount their experiences of “friendship, religion and laughter.” Actually the film was much more than that.

In the question and answer period that followed with two of the survivors in the film and the director, director Jon Kean was asked why he made the film particularly about women. He said that the documentary originally was inspired by a comment by Billy Crystal who had claimed that if you put two Jews in a room, they would make each other laugh. Kean wanted to see if that were true, and if Jews had made each other laugh in the Nazi concentration camps. Kean, from LA, consulted the Holocaust Museum in DC that has a list of 100,000 survivors. He got 1200 names of survivors in LA. He interviewed several men and several women, intending to make a movie about laughter as spiritual resistance. He made this film which tells the story of six different women who had been in Auschwitz instead. The title of the film only becomes clear about half way through. Touchingly, we are told by one of the women that on a hot summer’s day in Auschwitz, they were marched past some German homes. They passed a swimming pool. It was so hot. She just had to swim. She dove in, not thinking that by the time she got out, she would be shot. She was not.

The film opens with a backyard party somewhere, which we later learn is in LA. We have several takes and shots in a festive garden party. Then we slip into still frame as each woman starts telling her story in flashback. Sections of the interviews the director already conducted are woven into the scene at the party that is put on hold. We begin to hear each woman’s voice over a frozen shot of her face, full frame. Gradually we go to shots of full-face interviews of the women in their homes, or wherever he conducted the three or four hour interview. One was done against a backdrop of Shabbat candle on a mantel. At the end of the interview, the director always asked, was there anything else that you would have liked me to ask?

These women are not only survivors of the holocaust; they are survivors of the Holocaust industry. One was in Spielberg’s The Last Days, for which she was flown back to Poland to her town of origin. She says she never wants to return to Poland again.

From the initial garden party, to the long interviews with individual women, to the intercut statistics and maps and facts about the war and historical footage, gradually a collective story leaks out. At first it is annoying that each woman’s story is so cut up. But then gradually it becomes evident that each is painting a picture of a certain moment in time in response to the same series of questions—what was it like before the war, how

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was your childhood, what activities did you used to do, what business was your family in? At this stage the women say variously and their answers are intercut—one is from Amsterdam, another from Poland, another from Czechoslovakia, another from Hungary, and so on. Most of the families were upper middle class, businessmen. One of the women had been sent to a very orthodox school for girls. Another had her papers in for nursing school; another used to read many books and have interesting discussions; her family had subscription tickets for three different theaters and in their city, full-blown opera was performed eleven months of the year.

The next question set apparently was—why didn’t your family and community leave; what were the first signs of the situation built up; how and when did it become clear that your life was about to change? Historical footage is used, showing how integrated the Jewish communities were, even dancing in the streets. Various voices all say the same thing—we thought for some reason we would be safe. Then they each report how their lives changed drastically all at once. From being opera and theater goers, Jews were not allowed to go to opera. This is how for some it starts. Then we see shots of the lines, and of posters against Jews.

The next questions were about the process of getting to Auschwitz, although some were transported to a ghetto first—when were you transported and to where; what happened when you first arrived; how did it feel to be there. Again there were similarities in stories as these women tell their individual tales; they are from different places but experiencing the same sort of process. Heads were shaved. Children and the old were old to go in one line and those who could work in another. Some related having to prick their skin to get blood to put on their cheeks to look healthy enough not to be shipped off. Others spoke of the humiliation of being stripped naked and checked by male soldiers. Some said how silly they felt with shaved heads and unmatched pieces of clothing they were given. They explained how they lost family members and suitcases never to be seen again, and how each didn’t realize what the stench of the burning bodies was or even that bodies were actually burning. Dr Mendele examined one of them and said, you know, if you ever live through this you should get your tonsils out. As each individual’s story is spliced in, a collective picture emerges of the lack of food, the way people took care of each other, how one woman learned from older ones about how to cook food by the recipes being described. How one woman was drawing pictures of clothing when a Nazi woman came in and took her away. They all thought she was being taken out to shot, but she was being taken to a house to try to make clothes for the woman which she answered she knew hot to do although she did not.

What happened during liberation? Individually women gave the picture that it was not so pretty, that Soviet men were raping prisoner women and taking the food for themselves, that many did not now where to go. At the moment of liberation, one woman could not hear anything, although she saw the gates open. She was in shock, numb.

Each woman had been in Auschwitz. But whether they knew each other there or not was never made clear. What came through was the horror and depersonalization of being made to go to the bathroom in front of others; and the gratitude for small favors as people
looked out for each other. If you lived six months, you lasted. Every day people had to struggle not to go throw themselves on the electric fences and make an end of themselves.

The filmmaker said if he had known he was making a film about woman, he would have asked about menstruation. One of the survivors explained that bromide was put in the food, so that people were kept numb and calm, and so that the women would not menstruate, which would have been a mess.

Kean says his next movie is going to be about what happened after liberation, which for some, he said, was worse than what happened in the camps. He related how his wife’s parents returned to their house in Poland to find their neighbors living in it. The neighbors said, we thought you were dead—and didn’t move out.

One of the survivors present said although Holocaust denial exists now it is silly to believe in it. She said it is important to bring awareness to how genocide continues now, such as in Sudan.