

LETTERS TO AFAR

POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews

Warsaw 2013

Museum of the City of New York

New York 2014

The Contemporary Jewish Museum

San Francisco 2015



Sokołów, video; 2 minutes

Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York



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LETTERS TO AFAR

POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Warsaw

05.18.2013 - 09.30.2013

Museum of the City of New York

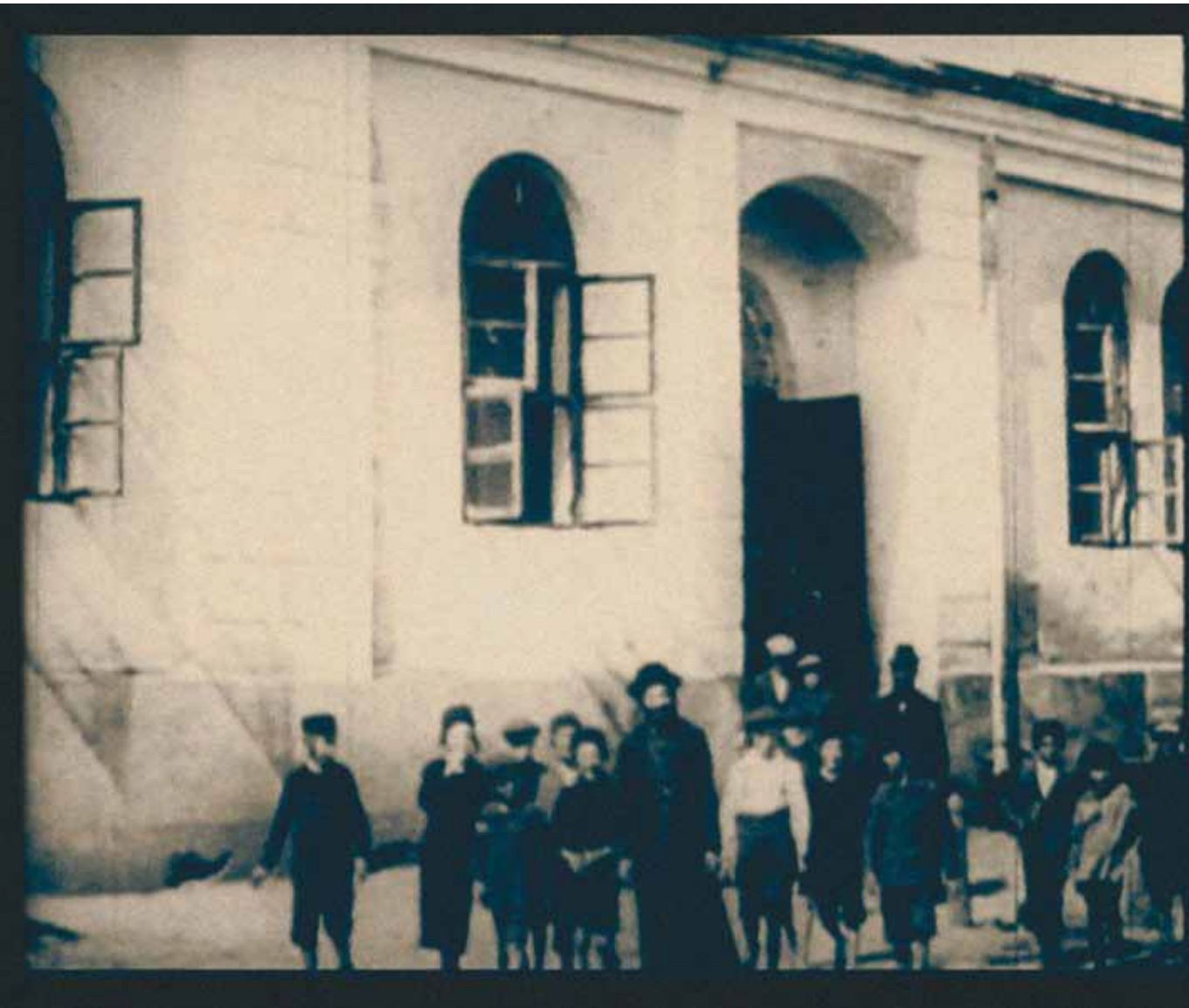
10.22.2014 - 03.22.2015

The Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco

02.26.2015 - 05.24.2015

Video installation by Péter Forgács
with music by The Klezmatiks,
commissioned by the
Museum of the History of Polish Jews
and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

The footage used comes from the collections
of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York,
the National Film Archive in Warsaw,
the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington,
Beit Hatfutsot in Tel Aviv
and the Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive in Jerusalem.





Kolbuszowa, video; 23 minutes

Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York

BEGINNING OF THE JOURNEY

Andrzej Cudak

Acting Director
Museum of the History of Polish Jews

The Museum of the History of Polish Jews invites you on a journey to the Second Polish-Jewish Republic. This journey begins with our first temporary exhibition, *Letters to Afar* – a video installation prepared by Péter Forgács, with music by The Klezmatics.

The exhibition presents the life of Polish Jews as captured in prewar films made by American Jews during return visits to their birthplaces, where they attempted to capture Jewish life in the towns and cities of their childhoods for friends and family back home.

The exhibition is a joint project organized within the framework of a partnership agreement between the Museum of the History of Polish Jews and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. Founded in 1925 in Vilna and transferred to New York in 1940, YIVO is the most important center of Yiddish Studies in the world. Its collections are a treasure house of archival, library, museum, photographic and film resources on Jewish life in Poland. Home films from YIVO's archival collection form the basis of Péter Forgács's installation and were the inspiration for the accompanying music by The Klezmatics. ■

May 2013





Oszmiana , video; 18 minutes 44 seconds
Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York

A ROAD INTO THE OPEN

Jonathan Brent

Executive Director
YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

YIVO is pleased to enter into the first joint project under our new partnership agreement with the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw. This project has great significance for both institutions. It marks the first formal collaboration of the YIVO Institute with a Polish institution since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and it represents YIVO's participation in the awakening of new Jewish life in Poland today. This awakening is taking many forms: a rediscovery of Polish-Jewish history; a resurgence in the study of Yiddish among both Poles and Jews; a historical and moral introspection that is the precondition for ensuring the democratic, liberal future of the Polish nation and the ability of the Jewish people of the Diaspora to imagine what Arthur Schnitzler called in 1908 "The Road into the Open."

YIVO's home movies from the 1920s are a perfect vehicle for establishing this partnership. In conjunction with the world renowned music of the Klezematics and the inspired vision of Péter Forgács this project bears the old into the new, history into the present day, and provides a window for demonstrating YIVO's work in public education, scholarship and artistic programming.

May 2013







Kolbuszowa, video; 23 minutes
Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York

LETTERS REWRITTEN

Tamara Sztyma

**“THERE” AND “NOW”
– FILM LOCATIONS
FROM THE PAST**

Péter Forgács’s installation, *Letters to Afar*, is based on the concept of addressing images, and then transmitting these visual messages through time and space. Entering the exhibition, we are immediately surrounded by multiple images of past lives reflected on film. Like many other films made for private use, the home movies made by Jewish immigrants from the United States visiting their former homes capture unique, intimate moments from the past, stirring feelings and allowing the viewer to be at once “there” and “now”. Warsaw, Vilna, Łódź, Kałuszyn, Kamionka, Kolbuszowa, Nowogrodek, Oszmiana, Krakow, Kurów—film locations from the past—become settings in which the action, although registered long ago, is played out inside the gallery. We see the life of locals in the streets, markets, parks, in front of homes, schools, synagogues; we follow their everyday routines

and gestures. Finally, we encounter them in the extraordinary situation of meeting with their kin from beyond the Atlantic. It is here that family ties and relationships within the community are fully revealed. The scenes played out before our eyes make us not only witnesses of history, but also a party to these events.

For the Jews from the United States visiting their former homes the journey to Poland was a sentimental one: a voyage to their own lost past, as it were. The nostalgic and emotional component of these trips is evidenced by a note composed by Alexander Harkavy during his first return visit to Nowogrodek in 1921: "I finally reached the gates of my great, beloved town [...] The sight of Nowogrodek moved me to tears. It was 43 years since I left the place where my cradle once stood, where I dreamed youthful dreams, where I left the grave of my mother who died before her time." Visitors' feelings were a mixture of hope and fear. Curious about the changes that had occurred, they still wanted to find the places they remembered from the past. "After 43 years I was expecting a lot of changes, but the market square looked exactly the same," Harkavy wrote. "On the other hand

I noticed a great change in the population, the market place seemed much less peopled [...] yet I was happy to see that modern Jewish culture had reached this place too." The visitors, if they had cameras, recorded films with the intention of showing them to relatives in America. They documented familiar places, families in their daily surroundings, playing games, going on walks, waving to the camera, sending greetings, and visiting the graves of ancestors. Next to the joy of these meetings, these films also express the distance and sense of alienation that set the filmmakers apart from their relatives in Poland. The everyday life of the provincial towns they observed stood in stark contrast to the modern life of Jewish immigrants in New York, the most modern city in the world, whilst also the heart of modern Yiddish culture.

Focused on capturing the inner life of local communities, these films provide a meaningful glimpse of the autonomy and richness of Jewish life in interwar Poland. School, youth, self-help and cultural organizations existed in even the smallest towns, operated not only by local communities, but also assembled around political movements, both national and religious. This broad social





Kamionka, video; 14 minutes

Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York

spectrum can be discerned especially in the films made by members of American “landsmanshafts”, organizations of immigrant Jews from the same locality, which often tried to organize help for their former communities in Poland. Pesach Zukerman’s film, shot in 1929 on behalf of the Kolbuszower Relief Society, was just such a report on the economic and social conditions of the local Jewish community in Kolbuszowa. Thanks to numerous screenings of the film in the United States, the society raised funds not only for the citizens of Kolbuszowa, but also for those of nearby towns, including Sokołów, Rzeszów and Raniżów. Similarly, the film from Nowogrodek was made by Alexander Harkavy, president of the Nowogrodek Relief Committee in New York, which the citizens of Nowogrodek had turned to for help in 1930. These and many other films show the difficult economic situation of the Jewish population throughout interwar Poland—one that only worsened as the economic crisis deepened and anti-Semitic attitudes became more pronounced. During this period, many Polish Jewish organizations, as well as Jewish entrepreneurs and retailers, barely managed to make ends meet, dependent on the financial support of Jewish organizations from abroad—financing that was distributed through a network of loan associations (“gmiles chesed”) set up in towns and cities throughout Poland.

Concentrating on smaller towns and the lives of largely impoverished relatives, visitors seldom turned their cameras on in the large urban areas that functioned as the birthplaces of vibrant political and cultural life—those cities that were home to an active Jewish intelligentsia and witnessed the rise of Jewish press, theater, cinema, politics and sports. Thus, although these films provide an accurate picture of Jewish towns, they do not give a complete view of Jewish life in interwar Poland, where, aside from religious life and autonomous Jewish institutions, there was also increasing polonization and assimilation, coupled with the rise of a modern Jewish culture. This aspect of Jewish life is only dimly present in these amateur films, mostly visible in the modern appearance of the young men and women who stand in contrast to the traditional lifestyles of their parents and grandparents. Above all, modern Polish Jewish life is best expressed in shots of the busy streets of Warsaw, Łódź and Vilna, moments captured by the camera of Gustaw Eisner, a travel agent originally from Łódź who organized trips for Americans to their native lands. “I set my camera in motion as soon as the ship pulled out of the New York harbor. I am recording my whole trip and hope in this way to share with my friends when we return to America all that we have seen,” Eisner wrote to a friend in 1931. During his two visits to Vilna, Eisner also filmed impor-



Warsaw, video; 35 minutes

Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York





Vilna, video; 13 minutes

Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York

tant historical moments, including the groundbreaking ceremony for the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, the funeral of Tsemah Shabad, leader of the Vilna Jewish community, and a mourning procession after the death of marshal Józef Piłsudski.

Returning several decades later to these films created by Jewish travelers, Péter Forgács reconstructs the “visual postcards” written by them, filtering them through his artistic sensibility with a new addressee in mind—the museum visitor of the 21st century. Forgács selects specific frames from these films based on subjective criteria. He then replays these fragments at different speeds, breaking the images up into frieze compositions, adding to them some natural soundscape and the music of The Klezmatics, who offer a modern reinterpretation of traditional Jewish sounds. In this manner, the artist composes over a dozen audiovisual “orchestrations” that are played simultaneously within the exhibit, where the different sizes and shapes of these projections develop the dynamics of the exhibition space. Employing these devices, Forgács paraphrases and reinterprets the efforts of the original filmmakers, who largely intended to show the films to their relatives in America, offering their audience an opportunity to enter, if for just a moment, a different space in which they could be together with those

portrayed on film. Forgács manipulates these images in order to heighten the viewer’s attention to everyday moments from lives whose distance from us is no longer defined by space, but by time—moments separated from us not by an ocean, but by a gulf of eighty years.

Like the original filmmakers who registered the gestures of their kin before the cameras, Forgács is above all interested in the behavior of people—their looks, gestures, and mutual interactions. His gaze, even more so than the amateur’s camera, enters the private world of those on screen, and tracks their fragile, intimate moments by ripping individual frames from the whole, underscoring them by isolating them, and sometimes adding additional emphasis through the repetition that the frieze structure of the triptych allows. Ultimately, Forgács exposes these images and their subjects anew, as it were, before the viewer’s eyes, and tries to penetrate into the private world of people from a different place and time—children dance, hands clasp, women cast seductive glances, a man grabs a hat blown off by the wind, an elderly woman turns away her wig-covered head.

Forgács does not strive to create a historical panorama; his aim is not to build a great historical narrative. While a tension between the desire to depict the private world of

families and to capture the wider social context pervades the amateur interwar films, in the adaptive work of the artist there is a tension between micro- and macro-history. In order to anchor the individual perspective within the context of the era, he includes additional, archival footage from *The Banner of Freedom*, a Polish film made in 1935 that shows the history of Poland's rebirth and reconstruction under marshal Piłsudski. Key figures and moments from the interwar history of Poland appear in these selected scenes, where we witness the Polish Legions in battle, Piłsudski's arrival in Warsaw in November 1918, Ignacy Paderewski representing Poland at the Versailles Conference, the Polish-Bolshevik War of 1920, Piłsudski receiving the marshal's baton, the May Coup, Ignacy Mościcki assuming the presidency, and the construction of the Gdynia seaport.

The dance-like tension between public and private history is also developed through the discreet textual commentary inserted into the films by the artist, for which he uses citations from memoirs, letters and literature that refer to general facts as well as individual events and people. Here, he also rewrites the intentions of the original filmmakers, who largely relied on orally explaining the silent footage for their American audiences, mostly family members. While screening, there were moments of spontaneous narration

when the names of places and people were pronounced aloud. In a similar way, the artist's commentary focuses the viewer's attention, indicates direction, and provides a counterpoint to the flow of impressions and thoughts stimulated by the projections. Like the creators of these films, Forgács distances himself from the world shown therein. Whereas, for the former, the distance between the filmmaker and that which was filmed was created by the cultural and economic differences between Jewish life in American metropolises and in little towns in Poland, that which dictates the artist's distance is historical consciousness. Although, unlike in his other works, in *Letters to Afar* Forgács tries not to emphasize this post-Holocaust perspective, neither he nor today's audience can fully escape it. Therefore, Forgács subtly arranges the projections so as to give the space some sacred overtones. He not only presents triptychs, but also uses a monumental vertical screen in the central area of the gallery, a presentation that echoes altar compositions. This creates another sort of tension: as the viewer succumbs to the seductive dance of "there" and "now", he cannot fully sever himself from the opposite thought lurking on the horizon—that of being "here" and therefore being conscious of what happened "then". In what measure we let ourselves be seduced by "fragments of life" from the past, or think of the broken continuity of that life, is a matter of individual perception.



Zaręby Kościelne, video; 11 minutes

Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York

The sacred and monumental air of the exhibition is also enhanced by inviting the viewer to climb the staircase “to heaven,” that is—to a small upper gallery dedicated to films recalling the world of Jewish tradition. Here, an amateur film from the traditional Jewish neighborhood of Kazimierz in Krakow, is accompanied by scenes from *The Dybbuk*, a 1937 feature film based on the play by S. An-sky. The plot, set within the world of Chassidic beliefs and legends, reflects the Kabbalistic view of the world as a single organism that draws its vital energy from God. Bringing attention to the spiritual side of Judaic tradition is by no means a univocal statement or elegiac accent. On the contrary, it demonstrates the vitality of tradition. The young Chassidim on the streets of Krakow belong to a new generation, a part of which still chose religion in response to the challenges of modernity. *The Dybbuk*, one of several Yiddish-language films made in interwar Poland and shown in movie theaters across the country, represents the phenomenon of modern Jewish culture, one capable of creatively combining the secular and popular sphere with tradition and religion.

Rather than being an elegy, Forgács’s installation is a tribute to life. By rediscovering and revising material from the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, the artist invites us to a rereading and reliving of “letters” from the

past. Both the footage recorded by interwar filmmakers and its artistic retransmission by Forgács are letters written from a specific perspective, for a specific purpose and audience. What is common to both of these perspectives is the desire to capture life, not only in a documentarian and historical fashion, but also in an existential dimension meant to establish a connection between the filmed world and those to whom the films are addressed.

■





Zaręby Kościelne, video; 11 minutes
Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York

THE VISITOR'S GAZE REVISITED

Jeffrey Shandler

ON AMERICAN JEWS'
FILMS OF TRAVELS
TO INTERWAR POLAND

Though we have made this glorious country as our second home, living under far better conditions and enjoying more freedom under the American flag, we still feel and consider in the depths of our hearts our native towns with all its shadows and faults as the sunny spot of the first happy years. Looking upon the schools, synagogues, and all the other unique features prevalent in our idealic [sic] towns, we feel as a shock of pride would touch us and many a tear relieves our very sensitive hearts while looking at these pictures and recalling the first episodes of our early lives."

—opening of "A Pictorial Review of Kolbishev," produced by the Kolbuszower Relief Society, 1929.

Among many novelties of Polish Jewish life in the two decades following World War I, one of the less noticed at the time has since become among the most prized: the creation of several dozen amateur films of Polish Jewish communities, recorded by former residents of these locales on visits from abroad. These films are a hybrid of the home movie, as it is conventionally understood—a document of family gatherings at birthday parties, holiday picnics, and the like—and the travel film, recording adventures while on vacation in a resort or foreign city. Indeed, these films of immigrant Jews' visits to Poland are home movies of a special kind—documenting the travelers' former homes for screening in their new homes. The defining subject of these films is not the visitor's destination *per se*, but the visit itself; they document the encounter between the visitor and the visited.

These films are an outcome of a larger phenomenon of this era: return visits to Poland and other East European countries by Jews who had immigrated, primarily to the United States, the most common destination of the approximately two million Jews who left Eastern Europe between the 1880s and the start of World

War I. After a generation of large-scale movement away from Eastern Europe, these return visits reflect changes in the diaspora of Polish Jewry responsive, in turn, to threshold developments in postwar life on both sides of the Atlantic: in Europe, the struggle to recover from the war's economic devastation in new countries established in place of the Habsburg and Romanov empires; in the United States, an economic boom and the enactment of restrictive quotas curtailing mass immigration. As more than three decades of steady arrival of Polish Jews to the United States came to an end, their American-born children came of age, nurtured in an immigrant culture defined by negotiating the disparities between the mores of their parents' former and current homes. Concurrently, the Second Polish Republic offered Jews both new possibilities as citizens of a democracy and new challenges as an ethnic and religious minority in a freshly independent polity facing the task of recovery from a devastating war. American Jews' visits to former homes in Poland in the 1920s and 30s gauged the extent to which these immigrants' lives had diverged from the communities in which they had been born and raised. At the same time, these journeys demonstrated the powerful hold that





Kolbuszowa, video; 23 minutes

Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York

their hometowns had on the Jews who had left these places behind.

American Jews traveled back to Poland for a variety of reasons: on personal trips to see relatives and friends, in delegations from relief agencies providing economic aid, as scholars or artists eager to steep themselves in the culture of East European Jewry. These trips all entailed a symbolic engagement with Poland, defined by the nature of visiting itself. Each trip was a planned stay for a limited period of time, bracketed by lengthy journeys to and from their destination, and culminated in a return to the traveler's new home in the United States. Central to the symbolic value that these visitors assigned to Poland was their understanding of Europe as the Old World, a chronotope—that is, a conceptual interrelation of time and place—locating a personal as well as a collective past. Through these travels, immigrant Jews both renewed ties to their former homes and affirmed the new lives they led in America.

As travelers do today, these visitors documented their trips, whether to share the experience with others upon their return or to consolidate the brief, intense encounter with former homes for their own remembrance and to affirm their sense of self. Most often these records

of travel took the form of letters, postcards, diary entries, or still photographs. Films of these trips were less common, for a variety of reasons. Portable motion picture cameras for amateur use were relatively new, as was stable 16mm film stock (“safety” film superseded more volatile nitrate film in the early 1920s). Filmmaking equipment was much more expensive than what was required for still photography. In the early 1920s, a new Cine-Kodak movie camera cost close to half the price of a new Ford Model T automobile. Early movie cameras were more cumbersome than the Brownie or other snapshot cameras of the era and required skills to operate that relatively few amateur photographers had in the 1920s and 30s. And once the footage was developed screening films required the additional purchase of a projector. Those travelers who filmed their visits to Poland in these decades were distinguished by their relative prosperity and their commitment to using state-of-the-art technology.

Though this medium provided unprecedented opportunities to record moving images, it had its limitations. Footage was recorded without sound; the images were black and white. The lighting required for sufficient exposure of the film usually restricted shooting to outdoor locations, and the length of a reel limited how long a

filmmaker could shoot without reloading the camera to about ten minutes.

Most of the films that American Jews made of return trips to Poland during these years document travel undertaken for personal reasons. These films appear to have been shot by the visitors themselves and were likely meant to be shown only to families and friends. A few films were intended for somewhat larger audiences, such as those made for screening to a *landmanshaft*, an organization of immigrant Jews from the same hometown in Europe. These films were likely used to raise funds among *landmanshaft* members to aid their relatives and former neighbors in Poland, who struggled with the postwar economic recovery and, during the late 1930s, economic discrimination.

The structure of all these travel films usually resembles home movies of the period. They typically consist of an episodic series of discrete shots, loosely organized, rather than a running narrative sequence structured through montage. Some films, especially those made for larger audiences, incorporate intertitles that either identify people and places, or comment, at times playfully, on the footage. These travel films center on documenting the visitors' search for the former quotidian—the places,

people, and activities once familiar to these travelers in their childhood hometowns. The camera records the visitors' gaze, beholding the environment of their past and taking stock of changes. Shots often pan across landscapes and crowds or, when dealing with smaller subjects, especially people, remain fixed, as if the photographer were taking a still picture.

At the same time, the camera's presence frequently interrupts the course of daily life, demanding attention. Crowds are assembled in order to meet the American visitors and to be filmed; babies are lifted up to bring them into the camera's view; families stand framed in doorways of homes or step out from inside, in single file, parading before the camera. People often stare back at the photographer, at times awkwardly, appearing unsure what to do. Occasionally they address the camera (saying what?) or smile and wave their hands (to whom?), perhaps offering greetings to relatives in America who will eventually see them on the screen. The camera simultaneously facilitates communion between Polish Jews and American visitors and articulates the distance between these two centers of the East European Jewish diaspora.

The encounter between Polish Jews and their visitors from abroad, often implicit in these films, becomes





Sokolów, video; 2 minutes

Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York

readily apparent when the American travelers appear on camera, whether embracing and frolicking with locals or praying and weeping beside the graves of their ancestors. As still photos documenting these trips also demonstrate, Americans presented themselves to the photographer differently than did Polish Jews, who generally appear less at home before the movie camera—an instrument wielded by persons, once familiar as relatives or neighbors, who have been transformed by their Americanness, the change evident on screen in their dress and comportment.

These films thus conjoined an innovative medium with a novel social phenomenon—the visit to Poland from America. The camera became a vector for tracing a new kind of connection between immigrants and their former communities. While the visitors' gaze is more obviously retrospective—beholding the world of their childhood—it also considers the prospects of their fellow Jews in Poland. This tension is especially apparent in the films made to help in fundraising. For example, a 1935 film screened at a banquet of the Sędziszów landsmanshaft opens with an exhortation to the immigrant Jewish audience in New York to reflect on their hometown's past and, implicitly, to consider its future: "Sędziszów, as we knew it, has vanished. Its remains struggles [sic] desperately for life amidst suffering and

starvation, with only little relief in sight. The scenes following depict part of miserable conditions prevailing. Reminiscences of our youth will now take us back to the very cradle of our birth. Its sons and daughters, who have here attained high positions in social and commercial life and achieved financial success, have trodden the paths of this now desolated community."

Indeed, all these films leave unanswered the question—asked, perhaps tacitly, by both Polish Jews and their immigrant visitors: When will we see one another again? This question may have been voiced not only when these travel films were shot but again when they were screened. Like home movies generally, especially those recorded without sound, they would have been accompanied by commentary when shown to family and friends. In effect, this live, impromptu chatter completed the films, not only identifying the people and places depicted but also offering expansive narratives that link the images of the visit to decades of memories extending beyond what appears on screen.

After World War II, this footage has acquired a profoundly different symbolic value, one scarcely imagined by either the filmmakers or their subjects in the 1920s and 30s. Prized even more than still photographs of inter-

war Polish Jewry, given these films' relative scarcity and their animation, they seem to "bring to life" a destroyed world with unrivaled fullness. At the same time, the films' ostensive aliveness also calls attention to their incompleteness: Who were these people? What were they saying? What color were their clothes? What were they doing inside the buildings seen only from outside? And what, ultimately, became of them all?

Over the years, the destruction of these communities has been compounded by the passing away of the filmmakers and others of their generation who could provide these films with their original "sound track." Their silence becomes emblematic of these multiple losses—of individuals, communities, cultures, and those who, sharing their origins, could remember visiting these people for a few days in the respite between world wars.

As these films have become more antique, and their subjects grow more remote and obscure, they have become more compelling, provoking desires to forge new engagements with them. In the decades following World War II, many a filmmaker has sought to contextualize these films with narration, sound effects, and music in the numerous documentaries that have sampled this footage. These documentarians' "discovery" of interwar

travel films in the YIVO Institute and other collections coincided with musicians' "discovery" of klezmer music on vintage 78-RPM recordings, sometimes in the same archives. It is therefore fitting that this installation brings together Péter Forgács, a filmmaker renowned for his inventive work with vintage amateur footage of mid-20th century Europe, and the Klezmatiks, a leading force in the transformation of the traditional instrumental music of East European Jews. Rather than deploying these films instrumentally, as records of actuality, in order to present cinematic narratives of the prewar Jewish past, these artists make the films a subject of interest in their own right. Both Forgács and the Klezmatiks call our attention to the medium and its mediating practices by disrupting film's simulation of an actuality. These artists invite us to revisit with fresh eyes and ears these brief reunions of Jews in the far-flung diaspora of Polish Jewry, united and refracted by the vector of moving images.

■





Kolbuszowa, video; 23 minutes

Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York

SEARCHING FOR OVERLOOKED IMAGES

Joanna Andrysiak

**PÉTER
FORGÁCS'
WORK**

Old, black and white film reels. Their condition reminds us that they come from a time long past. Smiling people at the family table or bathing in a lake. Feeding a newborn baby. Happy, posing for a camera held by someone they trust. This is the imagery of *Free Fall* (1996) and of most of Péter Forgács' other films. It is only the layer of sound he adds (here, a reading of German wartime decrees radically limiting the rights of Jews) and the dates appearing on the screen that tell us that the scenes, filmed by György Petö, come from the 1940s. And that the film's protagonists shared the fate of Hungarian Jewry – a fate that the amateur filmmaker's camera could not record.

It is difficult to say what compels an artist to build his work almost exclusively out of archival images created by someone else. Perhaps the distressing signs of decay visible on nearly every inch of celluloid, and the lasting sense of satisfaction that he might save from oblivion the memories stored thereon. Or yet a weariness of the Great Narratives through which the complex history of the 20th century is usually told, and the desire to portray the past through the eyes of those omitted in such master narrations.

In the case of Forgács, one of the best known Hungarian exponents of *found footage*, the artist's fascination can be traced back to 1983, when he founded the Privát Fotó és Film Archívum (Private Photo and Film Archive) in Budapest. To gather its collection, the artist traveled throughout Hungary, visiting family homes, archiving old films and conducting interviews. The collection thus built inspired the "Private Hungary" series (1998-2002), whose fourteen parts present the chronicles of several Hungarian families, juxtaposing impressions of life in Hungary with important political events. "In Hungary [...] eleven different political rules existed between 1918 and 1989, (including three revolutions and two counter-revo-

lutions) [...] As a consequence, any family home-movie collection [...] will show the unique sign of the times," Forgács explained in an interview.

In "Private Hungary", next to the story of the Pető family, we also get to know the story of the Hungarian bishop Laszlo Ravasz, persecuted both by the Nazis and the Communists (*The Bishop's Garden*, "Private Hungary" 14, 2002). We also discover the stories of bourgeois families fighting against the nightmare of Communism (*Either - Or*, "Private Hungary" 3, 1989), or the film diary of Baroness Jeszenszky (*The Notes of a Lady*, "Private Hungary" 8, 1994), a rare record of the life once led by Hungarian aristocracy. The amateur filmmakers who registered these films all shared an enormous passion for cinematography as well as an enthusiasm for new technologies in general. For them, the camera was a marvelous, nearly magical device.

While working on the subsequent parts of "Private Hungary" the artist also made efforts to obtain home movies from all over Central Europe as well as other European countries. As a result, Forgács' portfolio of





Kurów, video; 10 minutes 26 seconds
Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York

over 30 films and over 30 visual installations includes depictions of the Hungarian emigration to the United States at the beginning of the 20th century, the German occupation in Holland and Greece, and the Spanish Civil War. In his latest film - *German Unity @ Balaton* (2011), the political transformation in East Germany is portrayed through a juxtaposition of the vacation films of Germans spending their holidays at lake Balaton with the documents of the GDR Ministry of Security which kept these families under surveillance.

Common to all of Péter Forgács' films is a nostalgic mood, particularly inherent in the slow-motion dynamics of many of the takes, and the minimalist music of Tibor Szemző, whom the filmmaker works with on a regular basis. One often gets the impression that the images are arranged for the music and not the other way around—a fact confirmed by the artist himself. One of the rules of this “patchwork game” is to “let the music carry the emotional story.” One easily forgets that the artwork, the story which gains a fictional dimension, is in reality a skillfully arranged sequence of documental shots. Their reference to reality is all the more tangible because unlike professional documentarians, their authors—amateur filmmakers—filmed their own private world. What Forgács attempts to do in his film practice is primarily to

produce new meanings from this extant archival footage. “It is always very intriguing for me,” he says, “when I imagine how someone else might have constructed a wholly different cinematographic meaning based on the same material.”

Forgács' style has a distinctive character, not only esthetically, but also because of what his films make us realize about the turbulent history of the 20th century, and therefore also about history in general. A fragment from his film, *El Perro Negro. Stories from the Spanish Civil War* (2005), which portrays Spain in the 1930s through a combination of films by the Salvans family and Ernesto Noriega, is highly representative of a large portion of his work. In one particular clip, a figure jumps into a river, accompanied by a caption that reads “On July 18, 1936, civil war broke out.” The juxtaposition of this key historical fact with the image of an undisturbed moment of happiness and relaxation reminds us that private lives and events of national importance run parallel to one another, and that even the most momentous historical calamities do not immediately ruffle the course of private existence.

Equally provocative are the playful antics in front of the camera in the opening scene of *El Perro Negro*, or the images of Hungarian or Dutch Jews enjoying familial

happiness, coupled with our awareness of the dangers hanging over them at the time. These happy moments from the era's private lives trouble the master narratives of history, acting as an obverse whose reverse is the history of wars, genocide and Communist repression. The fact that this "reverse" is absent from the footage itself, and present only in the viewer's mind, can be attributed to the nature of home movies as such—one cannot expect anyone to want to save difficult and unpleasant moments from oblivion. Private films, as the artist says, are always a "nostalgic family album [...], family stories, home get-togethers, tourist views, etc."

But sometimes the two sides of the single story told by the artist come together to form a particularly horrifying narrative. A perfect example of this is a scene from *The Maelstrom*. *A Family Chronicle* (1997), a film in which the Peereboom family of Dutch Jews is preparing for departure to what they think is a labor camp in Germany. As it turned out, the family was shipped to the death camp in Auschwitz-Birkenau. As we watch the grandmother and mother sitting at the table, mending children's clothing, talking and smiling at each other, their ignorance of what is to come fills us with terror. This is very much Forgács' intent. "This is a powerful motif [that] gives an uncomfortable feeling for the viewers," he said in an interview. "It is like the suspense in a Hitchcock

film. We know ahead of time that the innocent victim will fall into the hands of the killer. We want to warn her or him: watch out! And our palms are sweating. We can't help, and here—in my films—it anticipates real blood, real suffering. We always have that in mind, even if we never see it in my films."

The Maelstrom is also an extraordinary example of how Forgács highlights the paradoxes of history. The black and white home movies of Max Peereboom, showing his family's daily life from 1932 to 1942, are set alongside the color home movies of Arthur Seyss-Inquart, the German Reichskommissar for the Netherlands. Out of the many emotions that might be evoked by the sight of this man's smile and happy moments, the most powerful conclusions are drawn by the viewer precisely from the tension of this troubling contrast. We watch Seyss-Inquart talking to his family while they are skating, kissing his granddaughter, playing cricket with his wife and children. The family scenes from the lives of people whose fates proved so different—the victims, who perished in 1942, and their oppressors—do not differ in any substantial way.

Another extraordinary example of Forgács' depiction of the paradoxes of history is *The Danube Exodus* (1998), a film and artistic installation created by Forgács during





Zaręby Kościelne, video; 11 minutes
Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York

his stay as an artist-in-residence at the Getty Museum and Getty Institute in Los Angeles in 2000-2002, and presented at several museums around the world. The 60 minute film was made in 1998 from footage shot by Nándor Andrásovits, the captain of a Danube cruise ship who documented his travels around Europe. The purpose of the first trip that attracted Forgács' attention was to transport Hungarian Jews to the Black Sea, where they were to board a ship bound for Palestine. A year later Andrásovits made another voyage. This time he was transporting German farmers, natives of Bessarabia, who were fleeing the Red Army and being forcefully resettled to Nazi-occupied Poland. In his film, Forgács decided to stress, as he puts it, the "incomparable duet of the German-Jewish exodus." Choosing these two particular voyages from the archive of Captain Andrásovits, he forces the audience to compare the obviously terrifying position of the Jews in the 1930s with the uncommon situation of the German citizens. All of these people were forced to leave behind their homes and lives, the former as refugees, in constant danger, the latter as legal repatriates. Despite the similarity of their exoduses, the mood of each group was entirely different. While the Bessarabian Germans, facing no threat of imminent death, were mourning the loss of their homes and estates, the Jews danced and rejoiced, because though they had

lost everything, their lives had been saved.

It is also worth noting whom Péter Forgács chooses as the protagonists of his films. Apart from a few exceptions, such as Istvan Bibó or Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose thoughts are read against the background of film clips in *A Bibó Reader* (2001) and *Wittgenstein Tractatus* (1992), the heroes of his films are usually ordinary people whose names and stories we would never have known if it were not for Forgács' works. Despite their ordinariness, Forgács treats his subjects with a piety usually reserved for History's superheroes. The film *El Perro Negro. Stories from the Spanish Civil War* is a perfect example of this approach. By incorporating an incidental motif into the title and inserting the image of a black dog at various points in the film, the filmmaker stresses that he is interested in what is completely insignificant from the viewpoint of greater history: the images it overlooks. Ultimately, Forgács' film is, above all, a record of the story of a certain family—a couple of people and a black dog, perhaps belonging to them, but not to history with a capital "H" and its possessive rhetoric. In an interview, the artist stated: "There is a duty to tell my history because there is no "History" anymore. There are his- stories and her- stories. So the duty is to tell your story and my story. It's a kind of deconstruction."

It is not only historical narrative that Forgács deconstructs, but also the reservoir of material from which he creates his works: the archive. For it is not without significance whether the footage used comes from private collections, to which the artist attaches a great value, or from public archives, often embroiled with institutional power. Archival practice is never indifferent, neither when it consists in photographing and filming reality, the memory of which someone decides to keep, nor in the process of gathering and organizing already existing footage. In each case, it is affected by choice.

This reflection on the nature of archival images is perhaps most evident in Forgács' *"Col Tempo" - The W. Project*, an installation which the artist presented at the 53rd International Art Exhibition in Venice in 2009. This multi-dimensional work was in large measure composed of photographs and film fragments featuring faces that turn and look at the viewer. Key to their interpretation was the provenance of the material. It had been commissioned by Josef Wastl, a scholar and member of the NSDAP, who was also head of the Anthropology Department of the Museum of Natural History in Vienna from 1938 until 1941. In 1939, Wastl organized an exhibition entitled *The Physical and Spiritual Appearance of the Jews*, which included material confiscated from the Jewish Museum

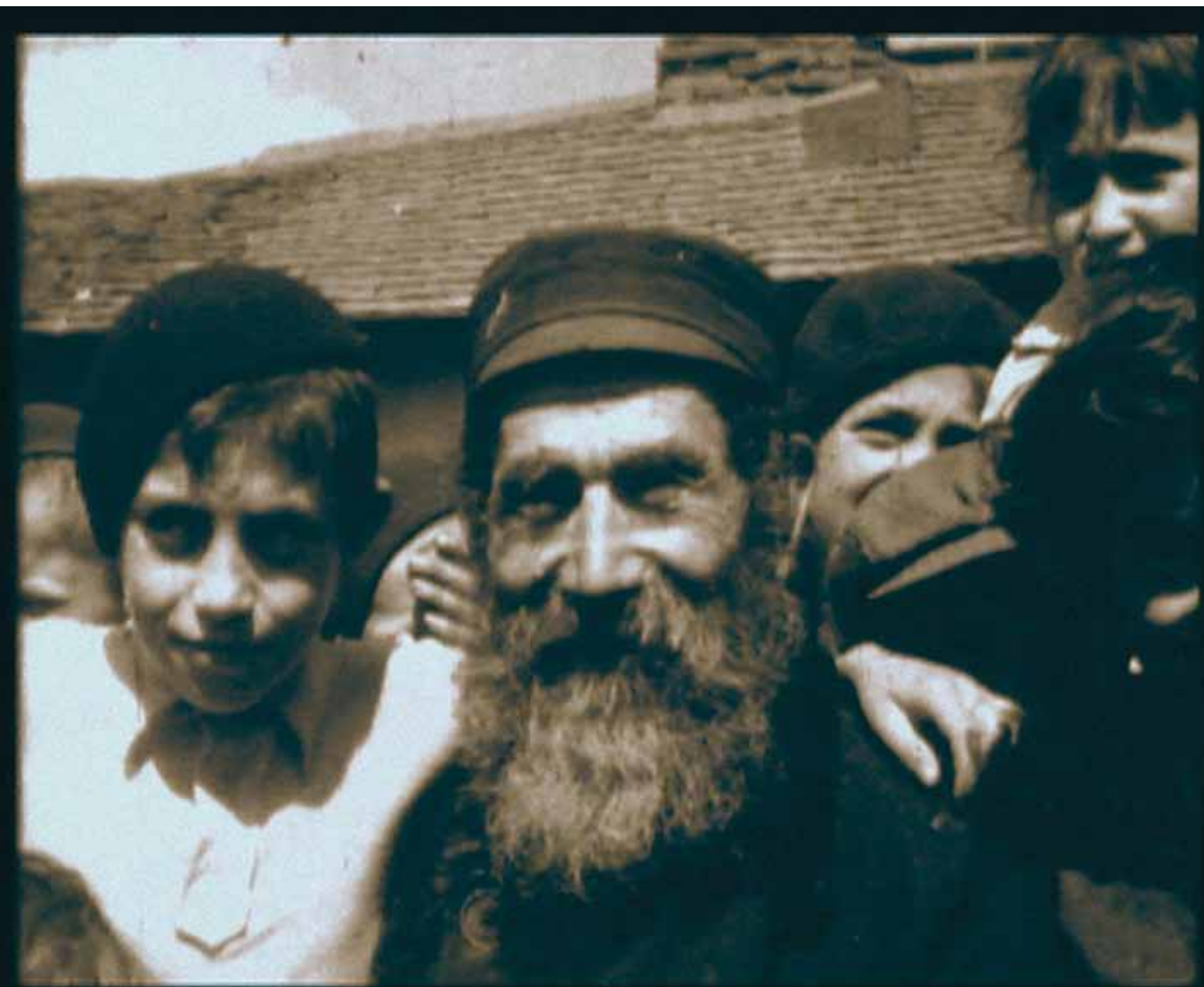
in Vienna, police identity photographs of Jews, and the results of a racial study conducted on 440 Jewish men of Polish origin. The men were photographed, hair samples were collected from 105 of them, and plaster masks were made from 19 of their faces. Through these studies, anthropologists contributed directly to the murder of Jews: their classification determined the fate of the individuals whose race was studied. The purpose of the Viennese exhibition was to encourage visitors to ask themselves, upon leaving, whether their neighbors or those they passed by in the street, whose features bore resemblance to those they had just seen, were not by any chance Jewish.

The Wastl archive was thus above all a tool of objectification; in the photographs, the Jews were not recognized as subjects, but objects to be classified. The artist restores their subjectivity by finding those who survived—an interview with one of them was presented as part of the installation. This shows that an archive created as an instrument of oppression can still be redeemed. This distinct transformation, however, is only effected in the viewer's experience.

Those who have the chance to experience Forgács' work are often left with haunting images of faces. It is on the

films' faces that the viewer's attention usually comes to rest, because the moving image is time and again frozen on them. This is how the filmmaker reminds us that the people on the screen are no longer there, that they and their world have passed. Resurrecting the films in which they appear, and especially focusing our attention on them for a longer moment, is a form of commemoration. The substratum of these films—the damaged celluloid onto which they have been recorded—is undeniably a symbol of the loss of memory. The memory that Péter Forgács strives to preserve.





Kałużyn, video; 13 minutes

Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York





Kolbuszowa, video; 23 minutes

Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York

FILMS USED IN THE INSTALLATION:

Amateur films of :

Zaręby Kościelne and **Warsaw** (1930-1939),

Krakow (1935),

Kałużyn (1935-1936),

Kolbuszowa (*A Pictorial Review of Kolbishev*, 1929),

Kamionka and **Skidl** (shot by Gerold and Lillian Frank, 1934),

Vilna, Łódź and **Warsaw** (shot by Gustaw Eisner, 1929-1935),

Gródek (shot by David Shapiro, 1935),

Oszmiana (1937) and **Kurów**

From the collection of the YIVO Institute in New York

Amateur film shot by Benjamin Gasul in **Warsaw**, 1939

From the collection of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington (Steven Spielberg Film and Video Archive)

Novogradok, amateur film shot by Alexander Harkavy, 1931

From the collection of Beth Hatefutsoth in Tel-Aviv

A Day in Vilna and **A Day in Warsaw** from the **Five cities** series,

directed by Saul Goskind, produced by Isaac Goskind, 1939

From the collection of the Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive in Jerusalem

The Dybbuk, directed by Michał Waszyński, produced by Ludwig

Prywes, Poland 1937

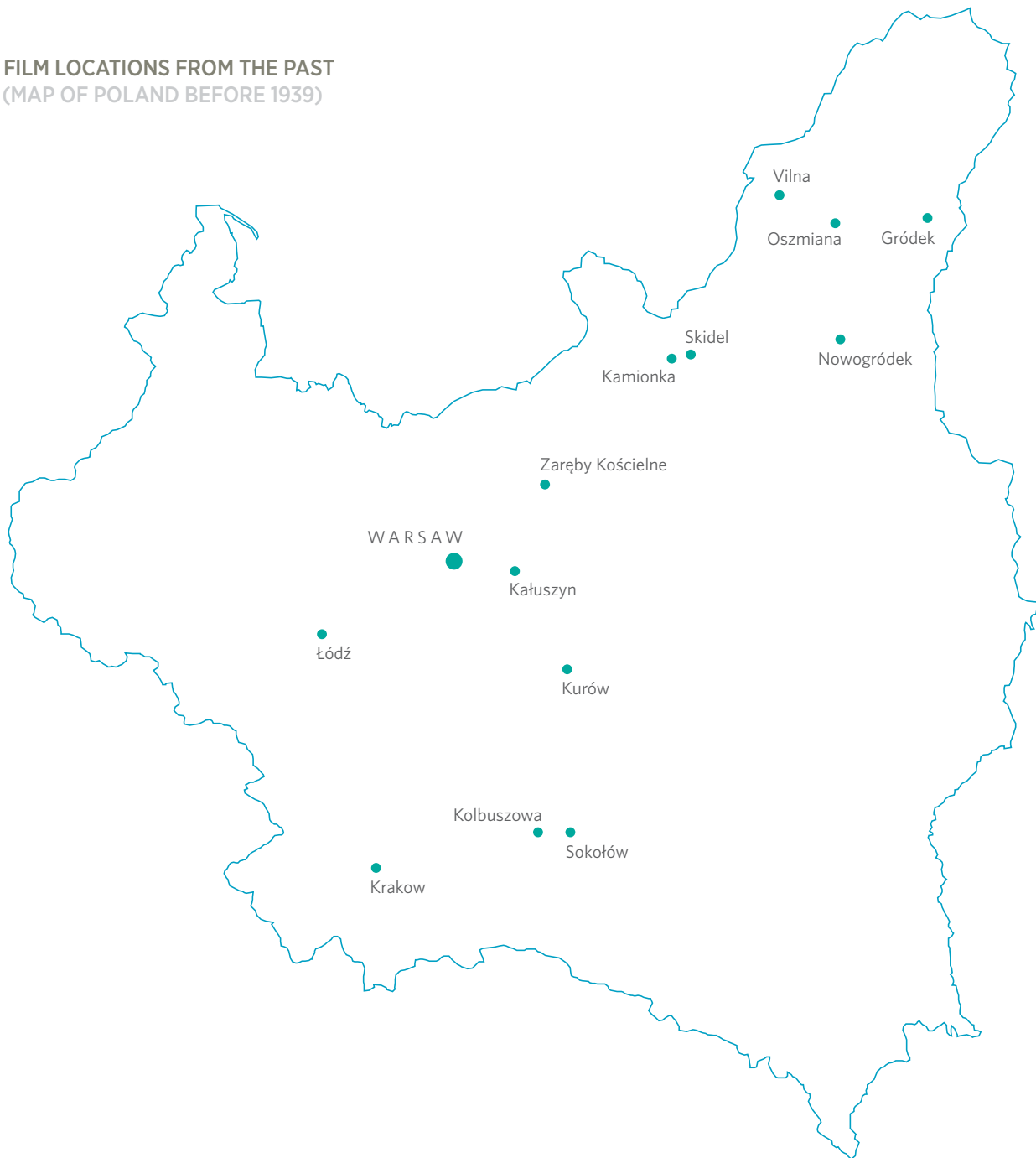
From the collection of the National Film Archive in Warsaw

The Banner of Freedom, directed by Ryszard Ordynski, produced by

Falanga, Poland 1935

From the collection of the National Film Archive in Warsaw

FILM LOCATIONS FROM THE PAST
(MAP OF POLAND BEFORE 1939)



TEXTS USED IN THE INSTALLATION:

Shalom Soroka, *Kałużyn – Our Town*, in: *Sefer Kalushin; geheylikt der khorev gevorener kehile* (The Memorial Book of Kaluszyn), ed. A. Shamri, Sh. Soroka, Tel Aviv 1961

Arye Rozenzon, *Betar in Kurów*; Sura Ajzensztadt, *This Is How I Saw Kurów*, in: *Yizker-bukh Koriv; sefer yizkor, matsevet zikaron le-ayaratenu Koriv* (Yiskor Book in Memoriam Of Our Hometown Kurow), red. M. Grossman, Tel Aviv 1955

Michael Peled, *A Small Jewish Village, of Blessed Memory*; Zelda Ziskind, *My Village and My Street*; Aliza Gofstein, *Oshmana – My Hometown*, in: *Sefer zikaron le-kehilat Oshmana* (Oshmana Memorial Book), ed. M. Gelbart, Tel Aviv 1969

Pinkas Navaredok (Navaredok Memorial Book), ed. E. Yerushalmi, Tel Aviv 1963

Gerold Frank, *The Elders of Kamionka*, 1938 (“The Nation”)

Alexander Harkavy, *Navaredok*, New York 1921

Norman Salsitz, *A Jewish Boyhood in Poland. Remembering Kolbuszowa*, Syracuse 1990

Zusman Segalowicz, *Tłomackie 13. Fun farbrentn nekhtn*, Buenos Aires 1946

Jakov Pat, *Fun noentn over*, New York 1956

Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *From That Place and Time, a Memoir 1938-1947*, New York 1989

Ber Rozen, *Tłomackie 13*, Buenos Aires 1950

Alfred Döblin, *Reise nach Polen*, Berlin 1924 (Alfred Döblin, *Journey to Poland*, translated by Joachim Neugroschel, New York 1991)

S. An-sky, *Dibuk* [in:] *Dramen*, Vilna 1921 (S. Anski, *The Dybbuk*, translated by Joachim Neugroschel, 1998)

LETTERS TO AFAR

Video installation: **Péter Forgács**

Music: **The Klezmatiks**, featuring **Frank London, Matt Darriau, Lisa Gutkin, Lorin Sklamberg, Paul Morrissett and Richie Barshay** (special guest - **John Mettam**)

Exhibition curator: **Tamara Sztyma**

Senior advisor: **Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett**

MHPJ project director: **Katarzyna Nowakowska-Sito**

YIVO project director: **Suzanne Leon**

YIVO project coordinator: **Krysia Fisher**

Video editor: **Péter Sass**

2nd video editor: **Zoltán Vida**

Sound editor: **Tamás Zányi**

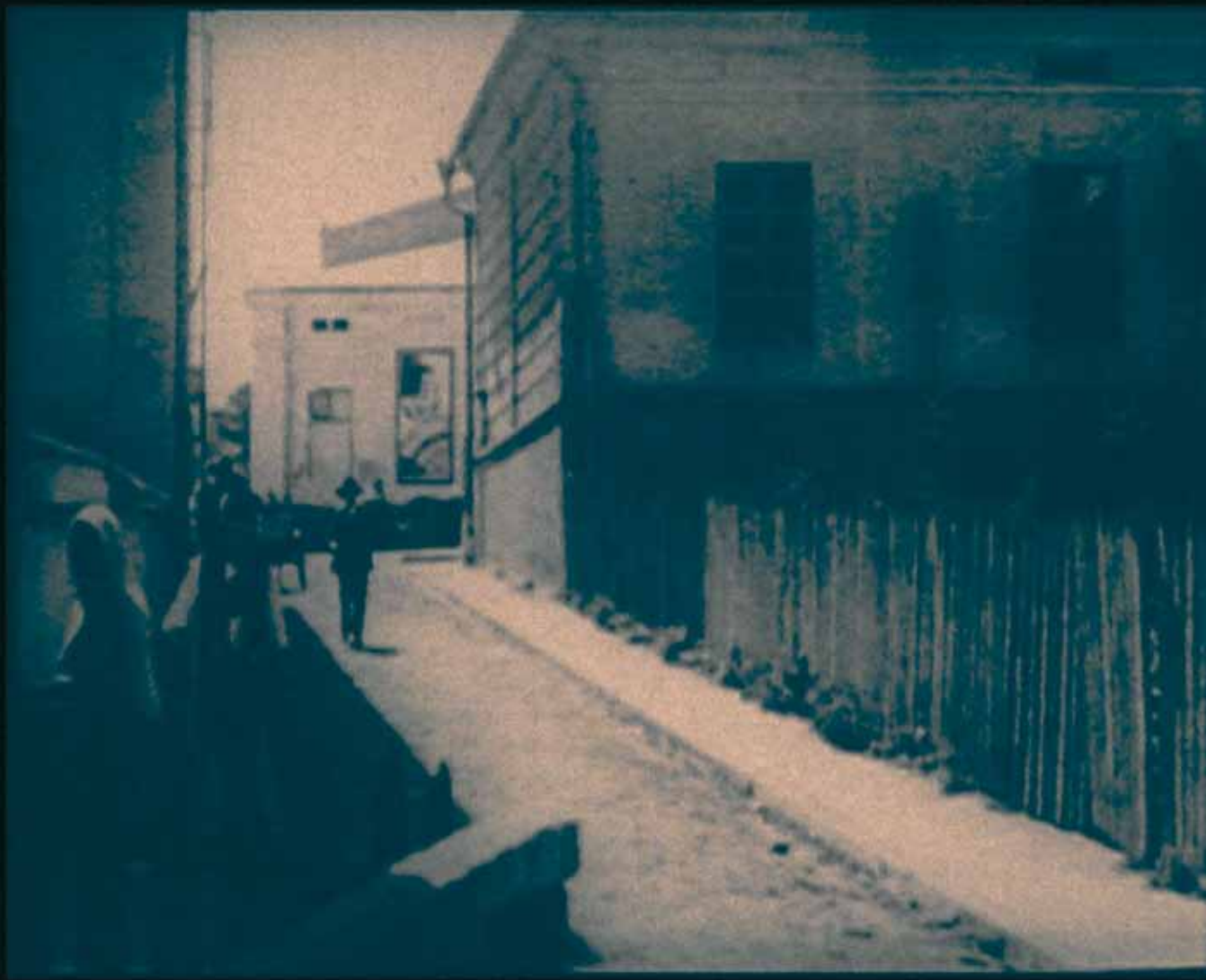
Technical advisor: **Rafał Król**

Graphic design: **Anna Rzeźnik, Kasper Skirgajło-Krajewski**

Illustrations: stills from films from the collection of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

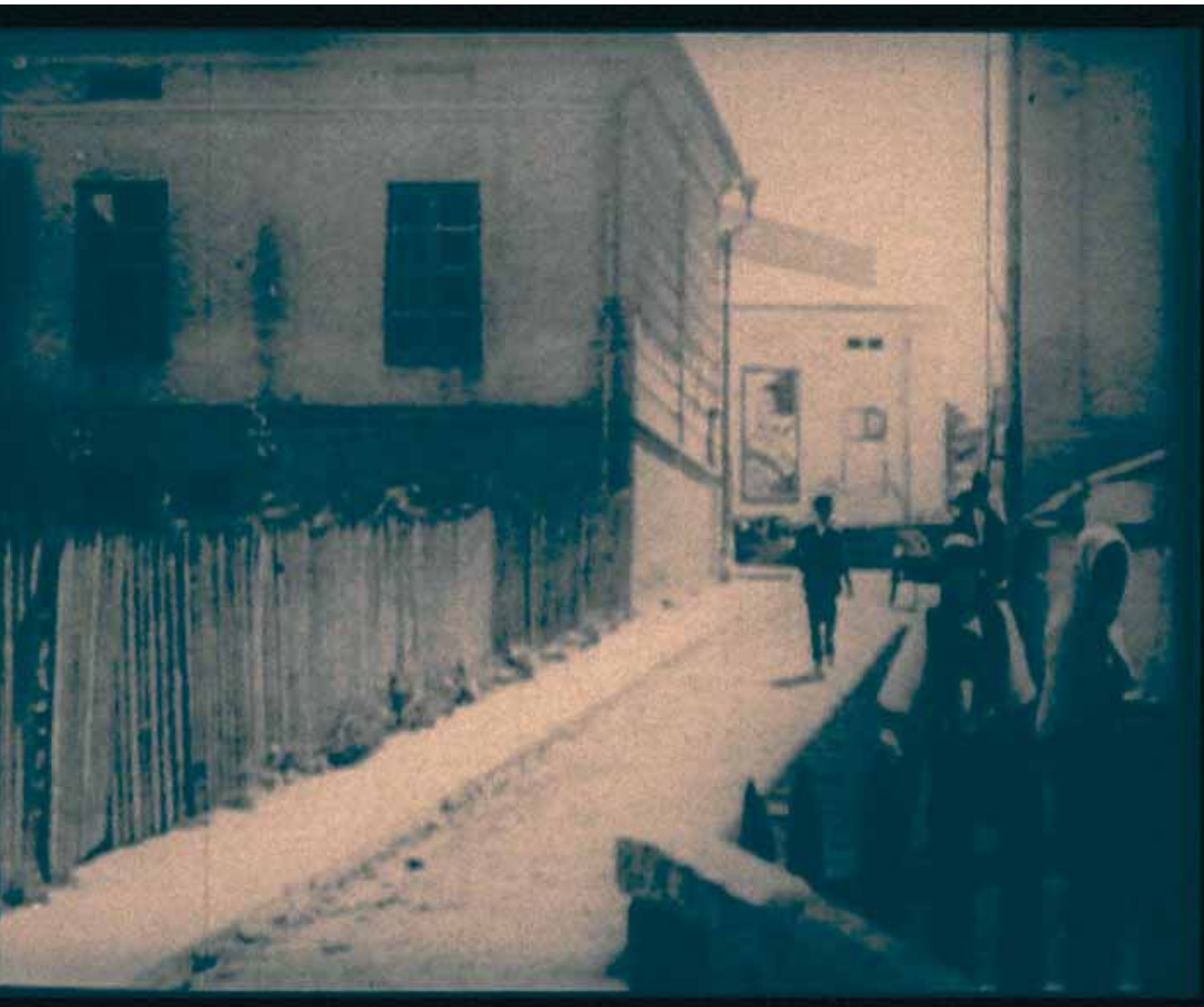
Texts edited by: **Magdalena Prokopowicz**

Translation: **Dominika Gajewska, Maria Zawadzka**



Kolbuszowa, video; 23 minutes

Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York



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