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Haim Gouri and the Ghetto Fighters' House Holocaust Trilogy Movies

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ABSTRACT

Between 1974 and 1985 The Ghetto Fighters' House [Museum] collaborated with one of Israel's best known literary figure-poet, journalist and screenwriter-Haim Gouri and together produced three movies about the Holocaust which were based upon a collection of excellent documentary materials. Known as the Holocaust Trilogy, the first film earned an Oscar nomination for best documentary, a feat not matched until 40 years later. Today, we see a remarkable resurgence of these works and this article will explore why this increase in interest is occurring.

Keywords: Holocaust History; Cinema; Haim Gouri; Ghetto Fighters Museum.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I plan to examine the three films-made and released over a decade-that collectively make up the Ghetto Fighters' House Holocaust Trilogy. Ghetto Fighters House (GFH) is a Kibbutz founded in April of 1949 and its early membership was exclusively made up from Holocaust survivors. Many of these early members had been involved in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and other members had significant involvement in various resistance movements across Europe. Early in the history of the kibbutz, a museum was established, and it progressively grew into an important facility. Furthermore, GFH was (and still is) one of the premier sites to hold annual Holocaust Commemoration Ceremonies, known as Yom Hashoah events, from the very earliest period of Israel's history.² In order to understand the full significance of these works some questions will be raised and addressed: Who is Haim Gouri, what is his contribution to Israel society and how did he become involved in this Holocaust project? Next to be addressed will be the movies and contents. And finally, we will look at the cultural meaning and importance they conveyed at the time of their making and today.

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² (Azaryahu, 2000, pp. pp. 86-97)² Azaryahu (2000, pp. pp 86-97) This 50th Jubilee edition of an anniversary book is an excellent resource, detailing the philosophy of the creators of the Kibbutz Beit Lohamei Haghettaot and the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum (Bet Lohamei Hagettaot) built by the founders. Here the defining principles are stated clearly.

2. Cham gouri

In January 2016, an article appeared in Haaretz newspaper, addressing the fact that Gouri had just turned down the prize given annually by the Ministry of Sports and Culture for Zionist works of art. In so doing he was quoted as saying, ““I told them immediately that I would not accept the prize. I will not say what my opinion is of the prize for Zionist art. I was born a Zionist and will die a Zionist, and all my life I fought for Zionism-but I do not find any connection between this book and prize”.”³ Why does this man-now in his 90’s-turn down such a prize after accepting virtually every prize possible in literature? The list of prizes includes: The Ussishkin Prize (1961), the Sokolov Prize (1962), the Bialik Prize (1974), the Yitzhak Sadeh Prize (1980), the Aigle d’Argent du Festival du Film Historique for his film *The Last Sea* (France, 1983), the Israel Prize for Poetry (1988), the Ka-Tzetnik Prize (1990), the Neuman Prize (1994), the Uri Zvi Grinberg Prize (1998), the Prime Minister’s Prize (2004) and the Chevalier dans l’ordre des Arts et des Lettres decoration (Mascia-Lees, 2011).⁴ Perhaps the answer may be in his gradual disengagement from right-wing politics in later life. Born in Tel Aviv in 1923, Gouri was raised by parents with a strong socialist Zionist bent. In 1948, during the War for Independence, he enlisted in the Palmach, served valiantly and continued in a military role and later took on governmental assignments. Prior to the war, in 1947, he was assigned by Palmach to work in Europe, in post Holocaust resettlement projects, primarily with Hungarian and Czechoslovakian survivors. Gouri studies literature at the Hebrew University, worked as a journalist and later went to France and studied at the Sorbonne, returning to Israel in 1954, and later serving in the IDF, both in the 1967 and the Yom Kippur (1973) wars. He forged strong relationships with various post Holocaust settlers or immigrants, especially those with a background of armed resistance. One of these early associations was with Antek Zuckerman, a founding member of the Ghetto Fighter’ House Kibbutz. In his writings, he brought stories of the Holocaust before the first post 1948 War generation. His association with Zuckerman would also entail some lesser-known work that may well explain his engagement with the film projects later on. GFH was, as mentioned earlier, a primary site for Yom Hashoah commemorative events. Because of the strong association with the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising the events also included a pageant of the uprising and in 1953 Zuckerman turned to Gouri to script the pageant. The first pageant attended by 15, 000 people, at the time, this represented 3% of the Israel’s population. In Gouri’s outline the pageant was in three acts representing “Lamentation of Destruction,” “Voices of Uprising,” and “Message of Revival.”⁵ Maintaining this relationship was a crucial factor in Zuckerman turning to him in the early 1970s to ask for his assistance in the making of a short documentary piece of cinema about Jewish Resistance during the Holocaust.⁶ Of course, this documentary was never made, and instead the Holocaust Trilogy developed over a decade or so. Another feature, or side of Gouri was his work as a journalist. He covered the 1963 Eichmann Trial and was later lauded by scholars for correctly reporting the events-a nationalized, and later internationalized work of journalism. Anita Shapira has noted that, unlike Hanna Arendt’s treatment of the testimonies as superfluous gossip,⁷ his reporting raised the public consciousness to a degree that altered Israeli society and affected, “young Israelis... moving slowly but steadily back to their Jewish identity. The first indication of this shift was Haim Gouri’s report on the trial.”⁸ Anita Shapira has also placed Gouri in the ranking of the most influential Palmach-generation writers.⁹ A combination of the foregoing factors figured in the making of these three films.

3. The holocaust trilogy films

Most film festival catalogues, production advertisings, press releases, and scholarly references to these three movies, refer to the trilogy entity as having been “produced under the auspices of GFH.” Yet such

³ (Izikovitz, 2016)

⁴ (HebrewLiterature, 2015)

⁵ (Neuman, 2014, p. p. 24)

⁶ (G. Mayer, 2016a, pp. pp. 47-50) GFH was searching for identity and purpose, especially during the first two decades of its function.

⁷ (Arendt, 2006)

⁸ (Shapira, 2014, p. p. 266)

⁹ Ibid p.265

a trite expression does not really say much about the close collaboration that took place between Gouri, Zuckerman, movie director, Daniel Bergman,¹⁰ Jacquot Erlich, Benny Shilo, and key figures during the Eichmann Trial-from witnesses, to prosecutors and key prosecution figures.¹¹ In addition, Gouri would carry on follow up interviews with witnesses for future works, and this is how he obtained further information from Michael Gilad-who lived in Tel Aviv at the time-in the formation of the movie title 81st Blow and the building of the theme subtext (some details to be discussed later in this article).¹²

The films under discussion are: The Eighty-First Blow release date: 1975, The Last Sea release date 1979, and Flames in the Ashes released in 1985. Of note, is the fact that Gouri was given unprecedented access to Israel State Archives and materials held by Ministry of Defense as well.

Thus he had almost unlimited resources of documentary films, wartime newsreels and photographs. Furthermore, not only had he reported on, and written extensively about the Eichmann trial, but he was given access to all recorded and filmed records as well. These were all utilized in the form of photomontage and the narration was not one of an outside commentator, but instead he made use of recorded testimonies inserted in appropriate places.

“But in Gouri the excited and triumphant monologue of the announcer has given way to a spirited montage of voices.”¹³ Without naming the places or the exact dates, authenticity is rendered by real voices who were part of the events, albeit various other ones.

3.1 The 81st Blow (released 1974)

The 81st Blow covers the subject matter of Holocaust from a chronotope perspective¹⁴, and aims to localize a time line of the historical events. Thus we see life before, in the cities, the shops, the markets and schools, all the daily variations that were once present in a thriving Jewish Eastern Europe. Opening with the sweet and haunting melodies of a woman singer-whose voice and refrains are periodically heard throughout the movie- the very first scene is an odd juxtaposition of a large Christian cross, with Jesus splayed out in agony and glory, immediately followed by a walkthrough of an old Jewish cemetery. The life scenes just described last until exactly seven minutes into the movie, and then there is a sudden sweep to the Reichstag on fire. And we continue-as history surely knows-with Hitler onstage, the Nazi hordes marching, and other displays of Nazi hysteria. At 14 minutes we are provided with scenes from Kristallnacht. From that point onward is the dreadful deterioration of the Jews, in the ghettos, in the camps, on deportation trains, and all the other horrors of the Holocaust.

Actually the title has a story of its own or, to be specific, the real story of a young man. Michael Gilad, was born in Katowice, Poland and with the war's outbreak, fled with his family to Prezemysl (sub-Carpathian Poland) and from there deported to Auschwitz. During his imprisonment he suffered a horrific whipping-80 total blows- by a Nazi officer, which was witnessed by an on-looking doctor nearby. When it was over the doctor walked over thinking he had died, but somehow he managed to stay alive. Later he was to become Mikki Gilad, an Israeli police officer and was called to testify at the Eichmann trial. Part of his story was that when he finally arrived in Eretz Israel and told his story, no one believed him, and that became the 81st blow. Mikki lived in Tel Aviv, and as mentioned, after the trial he was interviewed several times by Gouri.

¹⁰ Bergman is listed as director of the 81st Blow and The Last Sea; while Gouri is the director of record for Flames In The Ashes.

¹¹ (G. S. Mayer, M; Moerdler, Z; 2014, December14-16)The author was a museum intern at GFH Museum during the years 2013-2015, and had opportunities on numerous occasions to discuss and gather information about these movies, including preparation with two colleagues for a joint project toward developing a discussion panel for an international conference on Holocaust cinema held in 2014 at The Simon Wiesenthal Center in Vienna;

¹² (Loshitzky, 2001, p. p. 16)

¹³ (Hartman, 1996, p. p. 89)

¹⁴ (Bemong et al., 2010, pp. pp. 22-31) While this discussion is not about fictional literature, I will argue that the concept is useful for the framing of certain epochal periods in Jewish history. While I will address this in detail a little later in the article, we are talking about the establishment of our collective post-memory.(Hirsch, 2012)

3.2 The Last Sea (released 1979)

The film begins with a serene view of the seas-presumably Mediterranean-gentle waters rolling. Then, immediately we are brought to Europe, where celebrations for “the day after” have erupted. Repeated scenes, from every city and place imaginable throughout Europe, are full of festivities and soldiers marching, and strangers kissing on the streets, followed by singing and dancing. And then, suddenly, at 4’22” into the film, the Reichstag reappears (harken back to first film) this time exploding wildly into the sky.

The festive scenes, now give way to harrowing scenes from the camps, emaciated and dehumanized beings, and senseless suffering and loss. In the following minutes a multitude of documentary clips are spliced together to illustrate the panic and confusion sweeping Europe, as people attempt to return home, or escape, or migrate somewhere, to find someplace, anyplace to go. Only at the 35’ minute mark does the film reach the shores of Palestine. And here we see documentary evidence of the British blockade, the suffering of masses crowded onto small and dangerously burdened vessels. The people are, for the most part imprisoned again, this time in interment camps, and held back by razor wires, once again. A very credible account is provided of the difficulties facing the Jews trying to reach the British mandate of Palestine, that which will become the State of Israel in 1948. Some of the scenes at sea have been documented and verified in publications, including a book addressing the oft forgotten detail that a rag-tag group of North American volunteers plied their smuggling piracies to bring in fully 50% of the sea arrivals in the post war period.¹⁵



Photo 1: Screen shot from movie Last Sea: Reichstag blown up

The movie ends with a take to the same soothing seas seen at the start. This is a story of struggle to survive and relocate and to reach the ultimate redemption of arriving to Eretz Israel.

3.3 Flames in the Ashes (released 1985)

“Who is more heroic, one who goes in the woods to fight with a gun or one who decides to go the last road and die with his family?” This is a question posed by one of the voices heard in background voice-over during this film. In the 1980s it was about time that public recognition and accord be rendered in the silent debate simmering for twenty years, the question of heroism and sacrifice, or of armed resistance and martyrdom.

During the first two decades-and even before-of the inception of the new State of Israel, there was a popular public perception that pluralities of immigrants from Eastern Europe, the survivors, were a sorry lot who went “to slaughter like sheep” and did not come close in character to the small minority who were involved in armed resistance. Indeed, the pejorative nickname for these folks was *sabone* (*soap*), referring to the allegations (disproved academically)¹⁶ that they were a sorry, useless lot and were even made into soap.

The movie commences with a somber scene, some people attending a commemorative ceremony, place unknown, but the signage indicates the Warsaw Ghetto with the uprising date of April 19, and apparently the 1945 year is applicable to the date this came from; something highly likely and in keeping with the rest of the action.

¹⁵ (Hochstein & Greenfield, 1988) The author had the opportunity to interview Murray Greenfield and heard personal accounts of the harrowing times (G. Mayer, 2015).

¹⁶ One of the better explanations for these myths around soap from humans is found at the Martef Hashoah Museum in Jerusalem, in an exhibit designed by the author (G. Mayer, 2016b).

That somber scene is then followed by a twenty-minute cacophony of various heroic celebrations and displays of public valor. The venues vary from Nazi soldiers goose-step marching, as they enter victoriously into Paris, and seemingly heroic speeches by Petain, Goebbels, and an assortment of other nefarious dignitaries. There are flag raisings and “seig-heils” (Nazi salute), an almost ludicrous outpouring of seeming heroism. Then, suddenly at twenty-two (22’31’) minutes into these events, we are jolted by men and women on death marches, and scenes of destroyed crematoria, and various other horrible places of suffering and destruction, mangled human beings, and atrocities. Of course, the viewer at this point is being asked to ponder just what is heroism? All this segues at about forty minutes (40) to sequences of murder and execution. There are firing squads, individuals shot at close range, and hangings in public of beautiful women and groups of civilians, all horrific scenes of gruesome deaths.



Photo 2:

Then the film shifts into a different direction, certainly toward resistance. Partisans are seen in action, raiding Nazi positions, hiding in the woods, working together in seemingly socialist harmony. In the background is music, mostly tunes by Edith Piaf. Interspersed in the midst of armed resistance venues, there are scatterings of victims suffering, human beings dragged from trains latched onto their family members, and the incarcerated camp prisoners attempting to carry on with a semblance of normal life and dignity. The messaging is inescapable. Indeed here are the very concepts of Jewish heroism, not just by armed resistance but also through spiritual martyrdom. It was during the 1960s and 1970s that the concept of “Kiddush Hashem” or martyrdom became a transformative explanation of those who died a “docile” death and held their faith and kept with their families, rather than offer armed or violent resistance.¹⁷ The visual display-through cinematography-of these principles are inescapable and well executed.



Photo 3: Screen shot of hangings.

It was during the 1960s and 1970s that the concept of “Kiddush Hashem” or martyrdom became a transformative explanation of those who died a “docile” death and held their faith and kept with their families, rather than offer armed or violent resistance.¹⁷ The visual display-through cinematography-of these principles are inescapable and well executed.

4. Discussion

These films, individually and collectively, are remarkable for their documentary contents and serve as stand-alone Holocaust historiography. To convey an “eyewitness” experience, and avoiding the “schlock” quality of fictional Holocaust cinema is a major feat. In addition, Gouri has stuck a “bull’s-eye” as regards the moral imperatives at play in Israeli culture during the decade of their making. This did not go unnoticed among Holocaust scholars, and has been addressed in many scholarly papers and conferences. Libby Saxton has written that, “Nevertheless, inviting us to listen to eyewitnesses speaking about their experiences is thus one way that filmmakers can avoid the ethical risks...by enlisting us as listeners as well as viewers, documentaries such as Shoah, Reisen ins Lieben, and the Eighty First Blow place different ethical demands...a form of ethical dialogue...”¹⁸ Another Holocaust cinema scholar, Ilan Avisar, ascribes the cultural importance of these movies as, “The important input of the new critical discourse of national cinema is that...filmmaking reflects a specific ideology or serves as an agent of that ideology... films gain special cultural gain special cultural meaning...”¹⁹ Gouri, in a remarkable feat of cinematic technique, utilizes two main sources of documentary, or evidentiary, materials: one being the recorded voices-mostly from Eichmann Trial-and the other made up from an assortment of documentary archives, films, and photographs, which as mentioned, were made readily available by supportive governmental entities. “The very format of voice-over adopted in Gouri’s trilogy is reminiscent of newsreels shown in old movie theaters” in addition, “Gouri never develops his

¹⁷ See: Robert Rozett in “Jewish Resistance” (Stone, 2004, pp. pp. 224-227)

¹⁸ (Saxton, 2008, p. p. 85)

¹⁹ (Avisar, 2005, p. p. 126)

technique in order to portray memory as either in its own place, evolving its own stories or symbols, or in a competitive situation."²⁰

All the while Gouri's dealing with academia, Israeli cultural politics, and the ethics of Holocaust representation;²¹ these efforts were also noticed by Hollywood. Nominated for an Oscar in the documentary category in 1975, the 81st Blow would remain the only Oscar nominated Israeli documentary until 2013.²²

Although noticed, then in 1975, neither the trilogy nor Israeli cinema at the time possessed the savvy marketing tools, which exist now in order to promote these works. Nevertheless, they seem to have become self-promotional, gaining increasing respect and viewership over the years. The trilogy has become standard staple at many film festivals, in Israel and in international circles.²³ These works have taught scholars and have been used in academic presentations-many times at GFH, but also internationally- and have also inspired scholars and creative writers. Vera Meisels attributes her inspiration to write about Genocide, to the movie 81st Blow.²⁴ Their importance as archival record and as conveyance of Holocaust historiography has aroused the attention of documentary makers and they have been enlisted for restoration as important documents.²⁵

5. Conclusion

Historiography of the Holocaust as an institutionally based effort is usually confined to the historical museum, yet the vast amount of archival information, provided so eagerly by the state archives, renders the films' importance on par with any Holocaust museum.²⁶

These three films have served multiple purposes, at the time of their making, during the recent past and will so in the future. Achieving cinematically courageous techniques in order to tell the stories, they have also become entrenched as part of history. Remarkably GFH, or Israel, or the field of Holocaust studies may claim this ownership, and even the rest of the world bestows admiration. Yet they represent only a small portion of Haim Gouri's creative output and his contributions to literature, poetry and journalism will remain part of another story.

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²⁰ (Hartman, 1996, p. p. 89)

²¹ By the 1990s a plethora of Holocaust discourse, including cinema and fictional and non-fictional literature, led to controversy and Saul Friedlander addressed many of these. (Friedländer, 1992)

²² (Tablet, 2013)

²³ Shown at several Jerusalem and nationwide Israeli festivals it has continued to gain prominence and promoted new discussions.(Gidor, 2016); (Reporter, 2003); (Editors, 2004)

²⁴ (Meisels, 1999, p. p. 128)

²⁵ Shown as part of the restoration projects exhibition (Project, 2014).

²⁶ (G. Mayer, 2017, pp. pp. 48-51)

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