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Remembering Poland: A Documentary Film on Luboml Poses New Questions

By Rabbi Daniel Brenner

In Abraham Blumberg's latest article, "Poles and Jews" (*Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2002), he describes the current state of Polish debate on the Holocaust. After new evidence of Poles massacring Jews at Jedwabne was made public, the Polish press and intelligentsia remained silent on the topic for six months. Then, with the publication of one article in Poland's leading newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, they exploded into a debate concerning Polish guilt, anti-Semitism, repressed memory, and tolerance.

Poland's history is somewhat of a paradox – it was both one of the most tolerant places for Jews to live (Jews were even given governmental autonomy in Poland beginning in the 16th century) and a land that was home to the most violent of anti-Semitic attacks. For American Jews, many of whom trace their roots to Poland, this paradox had played out in the two dominant modes of remembering Poland in our collective history: the quaint – Poland as a place of happy *shtetl* life, Chagall love scenes, dancing Chasidim, milk cows, and babushkas, and the haunting – bloody pogroms, church based and unofficial anti-Jewish hatred, mob lynching, pillaging and eventual destruction of three million Polish Jews. Taken together, this makes any memory of Poland by Jews to be bittersweet.

Luboml - My Heart Remembers is a documentary film focused on the Polish

shtetl, Luboml, once home to a vibrant community of 4,000 Jews. This touching, personal film, produced and written by Ron Steinman and Eileen Douglas, steers clear of the overly romantic or accusatory as it chronicles the memories of a number of Jews who left before and during the destruction as they recall and revisit the town of their childhoods.

The film is presented in clearly marked segments concerning “holidays” and “family life,” but the film breaks away from standard History Channel style documentaries in important ways. Director Ron Steinman spares us from the armchair philosophizing of professorial types analyzing the events of the past. There are no historical re-creation montages. This film’s strength rests in the power of the stories from Luboml’s former residents and the exceptional photographs of Luboml (taken from the extensive Luboml collection soon to be housed at the Library of Congress in the American Folklife Center). The narrator, Eileen Douglas, has a light touch, and lets the former Luboml residents deliver the tales that bring Luboml back to life.

The central question of the film is not the typical historical analysis: “Why did the Shoah happen?” but the personal, emotive question, “What was lost?” And this film’s answer is that what was lost was not some extraordinary perfect village, but an ordinary *shtetl*. Luboml was a town like many other towns -- there were class differences, religious and secular diversity, a movie theatre, a marketplace, and a sense of community and civic pride. The film delightfully conjures up the joy of *shtetl* life without embracing the clichés of simplicity and piety. In one segment, a resident remembers the movie theatre in Luboml and the film, *The Dybbuk*. The movie is remembered as a horror film – a cinematic treat that scared the living daylights out of the children of Luboml. In another scene, Aaron Ziegelman, the former Luboml resident who funded the film, stands looking down a hill on which he once sledded as a boy and describes the thrill of a once daredevil stunt. Watching this film, one realizes that market towns like Luboml, and the hundreds of similar *shtetls* in Poland, were more akin to American suburbs than the Amish-like enclaves of *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Towards the end of the film, as we see footage of the tanks rolling into Luboml, there is a profound sense of loss. But we also know that the lives are not forgotten – the film concludes with two former residents standing in prayer shawls at the memorial monument to the Jews of Luboml and reciting *kaddish*.

Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka once remarked that “it is not possible to ignore the example of the Jews and the obsessed commitment of survivors of the Holocaust, and their descendants, to recover both their material patrimony and the humanity of which they were brutally deprived.”

Luboml: My Heart Remembers recovers humanity. It does so by letting those who walked down Luboml's streets tell their story. The film is sure to have a lasting role in the essential task of educating the next generations about the many communities like Luboml that were destroyed during one of the darkest hours of human history.

New York's public television Channel 21 WLIV will be airing *Luboml* in the fall season. It will be an opportunity not only for the many American Jews with roots in Poland to celebrate their history, but for thousands of other Americans, from all parts of the globe, to hear a story of both loss and resilience.

As Poles debate the way in which Poles remember Jews, they may want to pause and see a beautiful, powerful film about how Jews remember Poland.

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