Tablet

Film

THE 1968 FORCED EXODUS OF POLISH JEWRY ON FILM

May Day: How Polish filmakers documented and interpreted the ‘March Emigration,’ an ‘anti-Zionist’ purge in communist Warsaw 50 years ago

By Masha Shpolberg
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“*Skibet*,” Marian Marzyński tells us, was the first Danish word he learned: it means “boat.” In 1969, Marzyński found himself living on such a vessel, permanently anchored in the port of Copenhagen along with 500 other Polish-Jewish refugees who had fled to Denmark in the wake of an “anti-Zionist” campaign waged by the Polish government. In Poland, Marzyński had been first a radio reporter and then a successful television show producer and documentary filmmaker. With the help of Danish television, he was able to put his professional skills to work, documenting everyday life on the boat and encouraging his fellow refugees to reflect on their experience. The resulting film, titled *Skibet/Hatikvah*, is an intriguing mixture of autobiographic documentary, *cinéma vérité,* and interviews that remains our only window into the émigrés’ state of mind, and their first impressions of life in the West.

March 2018 marked the 50th anniversary of the Polish Communist Party’s anti-Zionist campaign, which resulted in what became known in Poland as “the March emigration.” The campaign itself was the product of a complex set of factors. Anti-Semitic action on the part of the Polish state and media apparatus had begun as early as 1967, when the USSR severed diplomatic relations with

Israel following the Six Day War. The ruling Polish United Workers' Party happened to be embroiled in a power struggle at the time between First Secretary Władysław Gomułka and Minister of the Interior Mieczysław Moczar. Sensing that the Jews were now an easy target, Moczar, whose anti-Semitic views were well-known, seized the opportunity to flex his muscle.

A student demonstration at the University of Warsaw on Mar. 8, 1968 calling for greater freedom of speech and civil rights provided the necessary excuse. The students were beaten and arrested; Jewish students were accused of instigating the demonstration. Free-thinking academics such as the Jewish philosopher Zygmunt Bauman and the non-Jewish Leszek Kołakowski were stripped of their University posts. Zionists were said to have infiltrated the government and Jews were purged from the Party ranks. Those who did not lose their jobs were harassed by colleagues and Party representatives into quitting. By 1972, between one half and two-thirds of the country's Jewish population and some of its leading gentile intellectuals had left.

For the Polish government, the campaign was primarily instrumental: It simultaneously allowed for the appointment of political allies to positions vacated by the Jews and suppressed a nascent rebellion on the part of the country's intellectuals. As Bauman noted in 1969, "the anti-Jewish struggle is not an end in itself but only a means to an end." In the process, however, the campaign nearly ended the 800-year history of Polish-Jewish cohabitation. In 1967 there had been some 30,000 Jews living alongside 32 million Poles. Between 13,000 and 20,000 of them emigrated—most to Denmark, Sweden, Canada, and the United States. It is estimated that approximately one-third went to Israel.

Most of those who left were Holocaust survivors or children of survivors. Marzyński himself had been smuggled out of the Warsaw ghetto as a child and placed in a Catholic orphanage by righteous gentiles. As he reflects in the voice-over that accompanies shots of older people on the boat, "some of the Skibet's passengers had survived the war by deportation to Russia where they had been indoctrinated into communist ideology, and later returned to Poland. Denmark is their second exile. And it is the first for their children and grandchildren."

Marzyński acknowledges the burden of this history, but he refuses to succumb to it. One of the

most striking things about the film is its rather cheerful tone, one of bemused reflection rather than lament. The documentary opens with a first-person shot of the boat's hallways. "The ship is sleepy, but from one of the cabins, I hear the Polish hit of the '60s called 'Strange is this World,' " Marzyński narrates. "Czesław Niemen, the Polish John Lennon cries for justice in the world. Today, it appears to be our own world with its own ironies." He then lets the song play over nighttime shots of the boat. "Strange is this world / where there is still so much evil. / And it's strange that / for so many years, man despises man," Niemen belts out. "But there are more people of good will / And I strongly believe that / this world will never die thanks to them. / No! No! No! No! No! / The time has come, high time / To destroy the hatred inside us."

This playful but profound opening is paralleled by a brief excursion into the boat's curriculum vitae: Prior to housing the Polish Jews, Marzyński explains, the Skibet had served first as a pleasure-boat on the St. Lawrence river in Québec and then as an edgy night club back in Copenhagen where "sexual acts would be performed on stage."

The rest of the film consists of two parts: In the first part, filmed in 1969 and titled *Skibet*, Marzyński records daily life on the boat while providing poetic or ironic commentary on the proceedings. Marzyński films the refugees in the dining hall, chatting in the common areas, learning Danish, and interacting with Danish journalists and visitors. Throughout, he expresses his amazement at the Danes' generosity and goodwill.

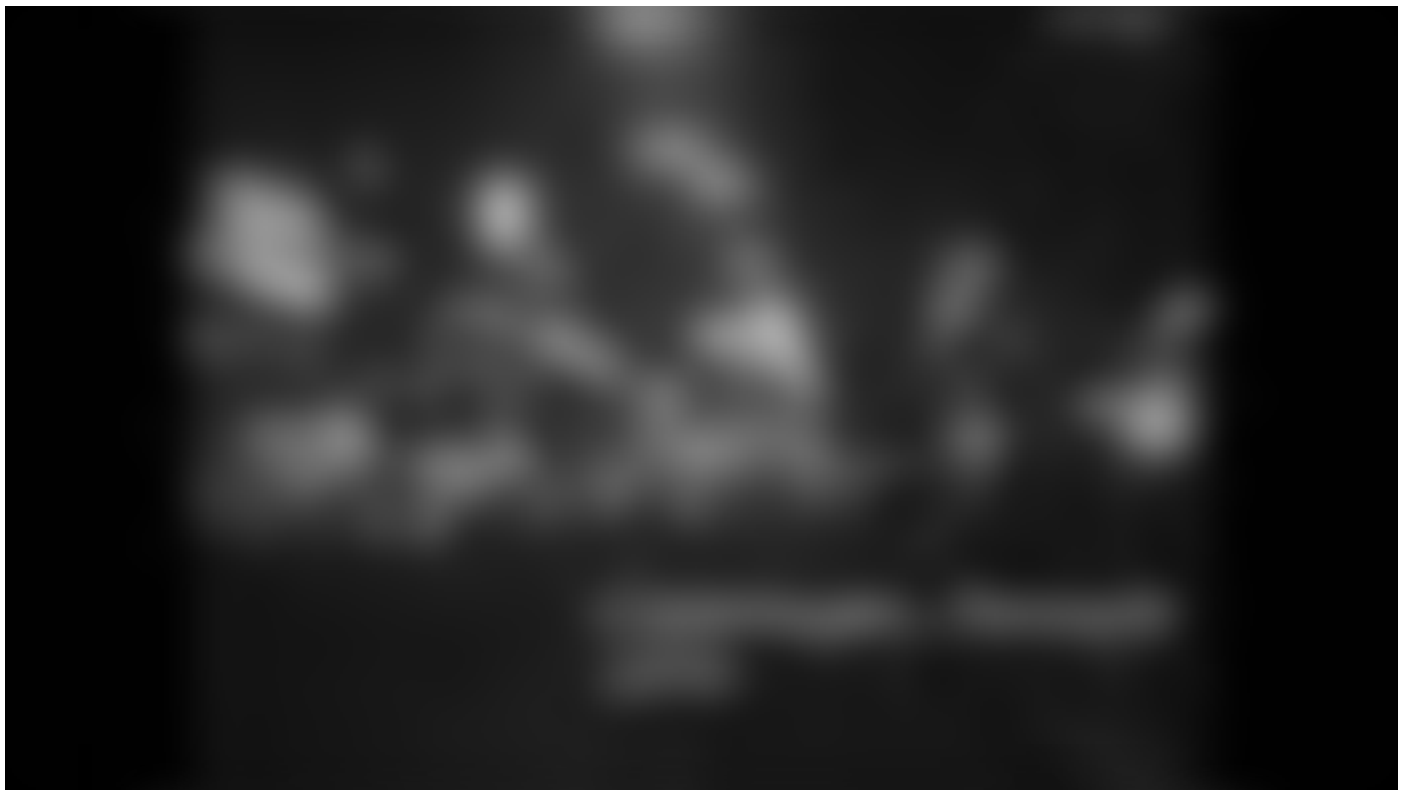
These observational sequences are punctuated by interviews with several of the Skibet's residents, ranging from a 20-year-old student to a middle-aged concert cellist. Marzyński's sociological interest in his fellow exiles appears to inoculate him against the depression plaguing his compatriots. Their experiences, despite differences in gender and age, coalesce into a common story. All say that they have always been aware that they were Jewish, but that it did not mean much to them: they *felt* Polish. All wish they could have remained in Poland except for one woman who explains, "I left not as a Jew but as a person who could not stand the feeling that something like that could erupt again. Next time, it could be gypsies or even hunchbacks. A country with so many economic and social problems will always need to find a scapegoat."

For all of Marzyński's interlocutors, their Judaism is something attributed to them from without, not something they feel from within. The student says he first learned that he was Jewish because that was the excuse the other children would use to beat him up; the concert cellist recalls the pain of being shunned by her fellow musicians once the campaign began—"they would look at me and pretend not to see me, no one would speak to me."

In the second part of the film, shot in 1971 and titled *Hatikvah*, Marzyński spends some time with a group of young people who have formed a folk ensemble on the boat. Only three of the group's eight or so members appear to have ever heard, let alone performed, traditional Jewish music before. Marzyński questions them about how their recent experience has impacted their sense of identity. "What makes you Jewish?" Marzyński asks. "It's simple: my parents were Jewish: that's what makes me Jewish," a woman named Ania responds. "Have you ever been to a synagogue?"

Two thirds raise their hands. “As tourists or to pray?” The answer is unanimous: “as tourists.” Do they interpret what happened to them as an exile or not? The responses are more mixed. Over and over, the young people insist that they left Poland of their own free will although “it was a choice born out of necessity” and they “did not want to.” “It’s hard to come to terms with it,” one young man offers. “You can’t confuse the Polish people with the Polish government.”

The first part of the film, *Skibet*, had been shot in black and white; the second, *Hatikvah*, is shot in color. Though this was doubtless by chance, having to do with the resources available to the filmmaker rather than with his artistic intentions, the effect is the same: The color and the presence of young people brings the wintry world of the Skibet to life, suggesting that despite the difficulties endured spring—and renewal—may not be far off.



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Government censorship meant that Marzyński’s film could not be shown in Poland until 1989. After the fall of communism, however, a handful of directors (both Jewish and gentile), were finally able to speak openly about the “March events,” including the March emigration. The first to do so was the renowned documentary filmmaker Marcel Łoziński. In *Seven Jews From My Class* (1989), Łoziński films former classmates of his who have returned to Poland for a school reunion. In March 1968, all had been in their late twenties, most married and with young children. One of the seven, like Łoziński himself, chose to stay. The rest had all left.

In many ways, Łoziński’s documentary functions as a sequel to Marzyński’s. Łoziński chooses to eclipse himself from the film, however, allowing his classmates’ stories, conversations, and debates to take center stage. In the film’s moving opening sequence, they recognize and embrace one another on the street before heading into the school. Their former homeroom teacher, now an elderly woman, performs a roll call for the seven, asking each to stand up and say where they live now and what they do. All speak with great frankness about themselves and the choices they have made.

Twenty years later, the conversations they have about identity are almost indistinguishable from the ones Marzyński recorded on the Skibet. Only one out of the seven seems to have reconnected with Jewish tradition in a meaningful way. For the rest, Judaism remains incidental to their sense of self, at best a card they had been dealt by history; at worst, a liability. As famed Polish film critic Tadeusz Sobolewski put it in his book, *Dziecko peerelu* (2000), "The protagonists of Marcel Łoziński's film, *Seven Jews From My Class*, wonder to what extent they are Polish or Jewish and to what extent they are inhabitants of Israel, Denmark, the United States. They come to the conclusion that nationality, religion, ideology are all masks one puts on over the course of one's life. The question is: what lies under those masks?"

In 2006, another renowned documentary filmmaker, Maria Zmarz-Koczanowicz, followed in Łoziński's footsteps with *Gdańsk Railway Station* (titled after the main point of departure for the March émigrés). She has the Polish journalist and writer Teresa Torańska interview Polish Jews who have gathered for a reunion in the Israeli seaside town of Ashkelon. She includes archival footage that might not have been available to Łoziński in 1989. We see both rare shots of the student protests, including close-ups of signs reading "we want the truth" and "sticks are not arguments," and the official newsreel which claims that "most of the students are of Jewish descent. Many of their parents occupy prominent positions in our country." We watch excerpts from the infamous televised speech in which Gomułka (whose own wife was Jewish) decries "the *blitzkrieg* of Moshe Dayan" and announces that "sooner or later, that category of Jews [the Zionists] will leave our country." We hear the crowd cheering and shouting "even now, even today!" Finally, we are offered a glimpse of the rallies organized around the country. "Zionists to Zion!" the signs read. "Workers do not forgive provocateurs and troublemakers."

This archival footage gives the viewer a sense of how saturated the media was with anti-Semitic rhetoric disguised as political critique of Israel's actions. "What struck us was the intensity, the fury of that hatred, the old demons that were awakened by the Party and the government," one of the interviewees explains. "1968 was a turning point for my whole generation," another says. "It was the first time in my life when I was truly afraid."

The second way in which Zmarz-Koczanowicz's documentary differs from Łoziński's is in its focus: Her film foregrounds the lived experience of 1968 rather than questions of identity. Torańska phrases her questions in a way that conveys a great deal of sympathy. Consequently, she is able to elicit powerful emotional responses, bringing many to tears. Again, every interviewee reports feeling profoundly Polish and not wanting to leave. "My life was Polish, my friends were Polish, my fiancé was Polish. I couldn't imagine any other life," one woman exclaims.

That the Polish Jewish community had grown so assimilated between 1945 and 1968 speaks to the way in which the communist ideology had, at least superficially, managed to banish much of the ethnic prejudice that had previously existed in the region. As one of Marzyński's interviewees points out, during that period "for the first time anti-Semitism was not tolerated, at least officially." In Zmarz-Koczanowicz's film, more details emerge about its resurgence. Men appear to have been persecuted more severely than women. Jews living in small towns saw more of their

neighbors turn on them than those living in big cities. The ordeal was much more complicated for those in mixed marriages and those of mixed parentage.

Fiction films have, for obvious reasons, engaged with the topic of the March emigration far less frequently than documentaries. Those that have, however, tend to focus on this last theme of Polish-Jewish relationships, and male friendships in particular. Krzysztof Kieślowski was the first to broach the topic in his film, *Blind Chance*, produced during a brief, 18-month period in 1980-1981 when the Solidarity trade union had gained power and censorship was suspended. In one of the lyrical early scenes which depict the protagonist's childhood, we witness Witek bidding farewell to his friend Daniel, who tells him: "In the end, I'm not going as far away as I told you, only to Denmark. I'll write you." There is a distinct sense in which Daniel's departure becomes a moment of trauma and loss not only for him, but also for Witek.

Radosław Piwowarski's *March Caresses,* made after the fall of communism in 1990 is entirely dedicated to exploring this theme. The film's protagonist, Tomek, does not realize that his friend Marcyś is Jewish until he sees two strangers painting the word "Jew" on Marcyś's front door. Soon, a party Marcyś had thrown is described in the town paper as a "debauched orgy" and Marcyś's father is denounced as a Zionist. For Tomek, these events mark the end of youthful innocence and the beginning of a painful initiation into corrupt adult society. In the film's closing shot, he offers his grandfather's sabre to the departing Marcyś—a symbol that in losing its Jews, Poland lost some of the values and ideals of its Romantic heritage.

In his memoirs, Tadeusz Sobolewski voices a similar sentiment: "The question of identity lies at the heart of the March experience. Identity and the manipulation of identity," he writes. "The Jews were told that they were strangers, although there was probably more Polishness in them than in the militiamen who interrogated them. We, in turn, were told that after we got rid of the 'foreign element' we would feel more at home. As a result of this conceptual and linguistic confusion, the perspective from which we had heretofore looked at our country collapsed. After March 8, I felt what many generations of Poles before me had felt: that *I* was not entirely at home."

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