

Documentary series  
by  
Lukáš Přibyl

## FORGOTTEN TRANSPORTS

TO

LATVIA  
BELARUS  
ESTONIA  
POLAND

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## Synopsis of the project



When the term “Holocaust documentary” is mentioned, most people tend to recall tattooed numbers on forearms, footage of children in striped uniforms in Auschwitz, Hitler’s speeches or bulldozers pushing mountains of corpses. Lukáš Přibyl’s four films of the *Forgotten Transports* series have none of that. His movies document different “modes of survival” in extreme conditions, as told by men, women, families and individuals

deported to forgotten ghettos and camps in Latvia, Belarus, Estonia and Poland. Almost all are aware of the existence of Theresienstadt or Auschwitz, but no one has heard about these “other” places. The film heroes tell of their struggle for survival, about dramatic tales of love, the fate of people on the run or “normal life” in ghettos with remarkable, life affirming humor and optimism. Absolute majority of them are telling their story for the very first time, and only after lengthy periods of persuasion. The director (and political scientist and historian by training) Lukáš Přibyl documents every word of the witnesses by painstakingly researched visual materials, found in Polish village houses, albums of former SS men and their lovers, or film fragments selected in over 900 hours of footage perused in official archives.

The films contain no present-day and make-believe footage, only true, time and place precise images. Each photograph is the result of a long search, dozens or even hundreds of phone calls and meetings. There is also no narrator, no commentary, only the words of the witnesses.

Out of tens of thousands of Czech Jews deported to the forgotten places in the east, fewer than 300 survived. Přibyl managed to find over seventy of them still alive and recorded 400 hours of interviews, in twenty countries on five continents. The documentary series *Forgotten Transports* (4 x 90 minutes) is now ready to be presented to the viewers, after a decade of work.

## About the films

Each of the four films describes one geographic destination where deportation trains were dispatched to. The film about Estonia, where only women survived, tells a fascinating story of a group of young women and girls who – thanks to their youthful naivety and

constant mutual help – managed to pass through the Holocaust while remaining largely oblivious to the genocide raging around them. In Belarus, from the 7,000 Czech deportees, twenty two men survived, mostly thanks to resistance and armed struggle. Latvia describes the effort to preserve a semblance of normal family life in the ghetto in Riga. Young people fell in love and organized parties, children attended school but on the way to it had to pass under the gallows – all the while contrasting this “normality” with the cut-throat egoism of men forced to fight for survival in the nearby death camp. The film about deportations to eastern Poland is concerned with the psyche of people permanently on the run, constantly in hiding, who had to continually feign and change identities. The film on “Poland” is thus really a story of the loneliness of individuals who joke to survive, “Latvia” is a story of families, “Belarus” of men and “Estonia” of women.



Each of the films in the series is designed to stand by itself and can be screened independently of others, but seen consecutively, an overarching idea becomes apparent. A seemingly concluded story from one film is continued in another. Factual information is not repeated and this “superstructure” allows the viewer to compare the individual survival strategies, reactions and difficult choices faced by people exposed to ultimate violence.



Human memory can be fragile and inadequate, therefore much effort was exerted to confront each interview with all available sources of information. Tens of thousands of pages of extant documents in many world archives had to be inspected and scrutinized – from the KGB collections in the Baltic states, materials assembled by the advancing American army, to war crimes trials evidence held in the German Bundesarchiv.

Overall, the filmed testimonies proved to be exceptionally accurate. For a single person who lived out of a transport of a thousand, there isn't anyone to compare reminiscences with – it is salient how pristine and uncorrupted they remain. These people could not suffer from integration of post-survival knowledge acquired from books or documentaries as no such readily accessible materials exist. They could only tell what they remembered.

Music is key to the series, with each film giving prominence to another instrument, as inspired by a particular mode of survival. Nonetheless, the music keeps to the background, refraining from forcing emotions.

The films do not present a superficial and simplified picture of the Holocaust and do not ascribe the witnesses a role of mere commentators on history. Instead, they tell gripping stories of individual people who speak only about places they knew, people they met and events they lived through. Together, these private experiences and impressions form a new, surprising picture of the Holocaust “as we don't know it”.

## Festivals and Awards

### **FORGOTTEN TRANSPORTS TO LATVIA** (November 2007)

- FITES Trilobit Award for Best Documentary
- One World FF 2008 (7<sup>th</sup> in Audience Award voting)
- Shoah Film Festival Prague 2009

### **FORGOTTEN TRANSPORTS TO BELARUS** (March 2008)

Academia Film Olomouc 2008 – DĚJINY A SOUČASNOST MAGAZINE  
AWARD FOR BEST CZECH HISTORY DOCUMENTARY

- One World Human Rights FF 2009 (2<sup>nd</sup> in Audience Award voting)
- Shoah Film Festival Prague 2009

### **FORGOTTEN TRANSPORTS TO ESTONIA** (July 2008)

- premiere at Karlovy Vary IFF 2008 (Official selection – out of competition, 10<sup>th</sup> place in Audience Award)
- Palm Springs IFF 2009 (short-listed for Audience Award)
- New York Jewish FF 2009
- Jewishfilm.2009
- Cleveland IFF 2009 (5<sup>th</sup> in the Best Film competition)
- Finale Plzen 2009
- One World Human Rights FF 2009 (4<sup>th</sup> in Audience Award voting)
- Minneapolis IFF 2009 (3<sup>rd</sup> in Audience Award voting)
- Special screening at the United Nations headquarters in NY
- Shoah Film Festival Prague 2009

Forgotten Transports to Latvia, Belarus, Estonia – CZECH LITERARY FOUNDATION  
AWARD FOR BEST CZECH FILM 2009

### **FORGOTTEN TRANSPORTS TO POLAND** (March 2009)

premiere at One World Human Rights FF 2009 – AUDIENCE AWARD  
Academia Film Olomouc FF 2009 – BEST CZECH POPULAR SCIENCE  
DOCUMENTARY

- KOUTECKY AWARD – SPECIAL AWARD BY THE JURY
- Shoah Film Festival Prague 2009

## Synopsis – Forgotten Transports To Poland

“They put me into the Toloncház prison, for the third time. An officer asked me whether I had been there before... Naturally I said no, because as Kurt Hübner I had not been there yet...” Breaking down our notions about “Holocaust documentaries”, the film focuses on human identity and its changes. It deals with the difficult choices people escaping Nazi ghettos, labor and death camps in the Lublin region of Poland had to make in order to adapt and survive in utter extremity, on the run, in hiding – with a great deal of ingenuity, much humor and tremendous optimism. This documentary tribute to the human spirit is completely devoid of commentary, contemporary and make-believe footage and employs only impeccably researched time-and-place precise materials and fascinating words of the witnesses. Out of 14.000 Czech Jews deported to forgotten places such as Sawin, Luta, Krychow or Zamosc in the Lublin district of Poland, fifty survived the war. From playing a deaf-mute fool, armed resistance to a touching tale of forbidden love, the handful of witnesses share their past, for the first time. We came to associate the “survival story” with striped uniforms and numbers on the arms. This documentary offers none of that, only a surprising picture of survival “as we don’t know it”.

LUKÁŠ PŘIBYL  
AND TOTAL HELPART T. H. A.  
PRESENT A DOCUMENTARY FROM THE SERIES

# FORGOTTEN TRANSPORTS

## TO POLAND

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY LUKÁŠ PŘIBYL  
EDITED BY VLADIMÍR BARÁK • MUSIC BY PETR OSTROUCHOV • PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAKUB ŠIMŮNEK  
PRODUCED BY LUKÁŠ PŘIBYL • CO-PRODUCED BY ONDŘEJ TROJAN

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LUKÁŠ PŘIBYL  
TOTAL HELPART T. H. A.

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## FORGOTTEN TRANSPORTS TO POLAND

<b>Direction, research, script</b>	Lukáš Příbyl
<b>Producer</b>	Lukáš Příbyl
<b>Co-producer</b>	Ondřej Trojan
<b>Production company</b>	Lukáš Příbyl; Total HelpArt T.H.A.
<b>Production</b>	Gabriela Příbylová, Daria Špačková
<b>Cinematography</b>	Jakub Šimůnek
<b>Editing</b>	Vladimír Barák
<b>Music</b>	Petr Ostrouchov
<b>Sound</b>	Jan Čeněk
<b>Made by</b>	Lukáš Příbyl; Filmová a televizní společnost Total HelpArt T.H.A.
<b>Cast</b>	Jan Bachrich, Perec Szechtman, Lucie Pollaková-Langford, Kurt Ticho, Magda Lichtigová-Sedláková, Jan Osers, Selma Wijnberg-Engel, Chaim Engel, Regina Feldman-Zielinski
<b>Sales, international distribution</b>	Lukáš Příbyl; Menemsha Films, Neil Friedman
<b>Czech distribution</b>	Falcon a. s.
<b>Film made with a contribution from</b>	The State Fund of the Czech Republic for the support and development of Czech cinematography
<b>Production date</b>	March 2009
<b>Running time</b>	90 minutes
<b>Color</b>	Color/BW
<b>Target group</b>	Film for audiences above 12 years

**What was the initial impulse to start working on the Forgotten Transports series?**

Initially I was driven by my desire to find out what happened to my family during WWII, and in particular to my Grandfather, who was carted off already in 1939, at the very start of the war. As I was reconstructing his fate and the history of the completely unknown camp he was taken to, I kept coming across many other obscure places where Czech Jews ended up in. I started collecting all this information, meeting people who survived these “forgotten” camps. Their stories were so radically different from what most of us associate with the common “survivor experience”, i.e. striped pajamas and phone numbers to heaven on the arms, that I told myself that I should not only record their words, but also their faces, gestures, the way they speak, how they managed to adapt and how they remember it all, that strength of theirs, their optimism and admirable sense of humor.

**Why did you decide to make a documentary? Did you know from the start you were going to use film?**

Yes. I did it because of these people. And stories. Except for literature, film is probably the best medium to tell stories of people’s lives. Of course, Forgotten Transports describe the fate of Jews during WWII, but foremost these are films about real, living human beings. They are not a catalogue of Nazi crimes, dwelling on how many people perished where. My films speak about life, death, family, love, betrayal, etc. These are universal topics, not unique to Jews only.

**Many of the people spoke about their traumatic experiences for the first time. How did you manage to convince them to talk to you?**

Ninety percent of all the people who speak in my films had never talked about their war-time experience to anyone, not even to their own children. Sometimes it took up to two years of persuasion to convince them to share their memories with me. Only a handful of them survived, they are dispersed all over the world, they mostly don’t know of each other and in their isolation they had no one to compare their memories with. In many cases they don’t even have much in common with other Holocaust survivors, since their experience was so different. They often have this subjective feeling they are being overlooked, since people have a tendency to disregard places they have not heard about as less horrible. Their logic is that were these camps really that terrible, they would be as notorious as Auschwitz or Dachau. Of course, this is nonsense, the survival rate in most of the places my films are concerned with was less than one in a hundred. Nonetheless, such attitudes also greatly contributed to the fact that “my” witnesses withdrew into silence. Furthermore, these camps are often unknown to expert historians and even the large interviewing schemes, like Spielberg’s Shoah foundation, did not know about these people. And when they did approach them, they were mostly flatly refused. It is not possible to just come visit these people, record their memories of the most traumatic times in their lives and then say thank you, leave and never see them again. You have to

develop a relationship with them. I am happy I can call many of them my friends now and I am in touch with absolute majority of them. Sadly, their number keeps dwindling though.

**People in your films don't seem to ever cry. They even joke, smile...**

In my films, people indeed don't cry. I have interviewed hundreds of people and came to the realization that only people who had spoken about their experience before tear up. The more often you share your memories, the more emotional you can get about yourself, since you are gaining distance from your story, you start to see it from a certain perspective. And you also start to "polish" your story because you are already aware what the listener's response is likely to be, what they are interested in hearing and what less so. The paradox thus is that the most articulate witnesses, who show greatest amount of emotion, often tend to be, factographically, less reliable, they have already shaped their story too much. When you are speaking for the first time, it is so difficult to break that shell of silence kept for over sixty years that there is no strength left for tears. But the people who speak in my films possess a tremendous energy. Without optimism and humor, survival is very difficult. If you mourn too much over your situation in the camp, eventually it will kill you. And these people are truly fantastic witnesses. Since there is no available literature on these camps, no documentaries, they answer many questions with: "I don't know". That's an answer I actually like to hear because it is clear that they did not integrate any postwar knowledge, gained elsewhere, into their memory.

**How did you find these people, since you filmed in twenty countries of the world?**

Searching for the survivors took a really long time. I started with various databases, deportation lists, lists of survivors, perused marriage records, since women changed their surnames when they got married, went through emigration records, because most emigrated. Phone books became my favorite read. If the name wasn't too common and I knew that the person I was looking for left for the US, for example, I simply called all the people of that name in the US, several hundred of them. If you ask: "Were you in Salaspils?" and the answer is "What?", you know you have to keep phoning. When the answer is: "Why do you ask? Who are you?" you know you have found your person. Then all that remains is to convince him or her to talk to you. I even had to develop my very own interviewing technique, my own way to ask questions. It was a true race against time. I also interviewed local Jews or Jews from other European countries deported to these camps, former Nazis and perpetrators, the so-called bystanders, i.e. civilians living close by. We also filmed the locations of these completely forgotten ghettos and camps as they look like now, etc. We documented it even though I knew I was not going to use such footage, but the last traces are disappearing so fast and the number of eyewitnesses is decreasing at such a pace that I felt it was important to capture as much on camera as possible.

**Collecting documentary visual material was surely no less demanding. Where did you find it?**

I believe there is a visual record of almost everything. The only problem is to find that particular photo or film fragment. I was determined to illustrate each word in the film with authentic, time and place precise materials. And so when the people speaking in the

film mention something, you see it on the screen. For example, when the ladies deported to Estonia mention that while put to forced labor at the Tallinn port, they made fun of a diver, I search the archives, find the list of all divers working in the Baltic area between 1941 and 1943. Then I search for their children or families because they themselves are mostly no longer alive and then I find the picture, on which you see the Jewish women helping him onto a boat. In Poland, I was literally exchanging bottles of vodka for photographs. Polish villagers rarely had cameras, but for example the Ukrainian camp guards had their photos taken with their Polish girlfriends and their prisoners, with cameras illegally brought by the Jews. Those snapshots were often left behind in the village houses when the Germans had to hastily retreat. In Germany, I kept pestering the families of SS men mentioned in the films till they told me: "Here is the key from the garage. Grandpa's suitcase with documents and pictures should be there, somewhere. If you find it, take what you want." For each minute of archival footage used in the film, I had to watch twenty, thirty hours of old newsreels, military films, etc. For the few authentic minutes that would precisely correspond to the time and place described, I went through 600 hours of footage, in the Hungarian archives alone. That's why this work took ten years.

**Why did you choose such a minimalist way of making your films, without commentary, present-day footage, etc.?**

From the beginning it was clear to me that I cannot take these fragile old people and bring them to Poland, for example, that I will necessarily have to use the "talking head" format and won't be able to be "visually inventive". Instead, I was striving for complete minimalism, return to the most "basic" documentary, purity of form. That's why I got rid of all commentary. Some documentaries should employ it, of course, but when films describing the Holocaust are concerned, I sometimes feel that they don't really tell the story of the survivors themselves, don't give them enough space. They are often put into the position of certain commentators, who are there only to confirm what has been told to the audience by the narrator, in some learned, all-inclusive commentary. I didn't want to present a "bird's eye-view" of the Holocaust, but wanted to compose the overall picture from very narrow, personal perspectives. That's why I also did not want to use any present-day or make-believe shots. All materials had to be authentic, the way the people saw things then. I always found it strange, for example, when films that are allegedly about the Jewish perspective, contain footage of Nazis marching with torches at some stadium. Maybe there were a few Jews who went to see them, but most would have to be crazy or suicidal to participate in such events. Furthermore, the footage is from newsreels – but Jews could not attend cinemas. Their world was absolutely claustrophobic, they were totally isolated. And so, you won't see Hitler in my films. Though he caused their suffering, he was very distant from their immediate situation.

**What was the biggest obstacle you encountered when making these documentaries?**

Except for finding the witnesses and persuading them to talk, making and raising enough money for it all was probably the hardest task. If you are not a filmmaker by training, you have no previous film work to show and all you have is your claim that you want to film four documentaries about the Holocaust (adding onto the hundreds of them that are

already available) and that you want to do it differently, people will laugh at you. That's actually another reason, why this whole enterprise took so long.

### Biography of Lukáš Přibyl



**LUKÁŠ PŘIBYL** (born 1973, Ostrava, Czech Republic) studied Politics and Near Eastern Studies at Brandeis University and at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Religion and Human Rights at SIPA at Columbia University in New York, History at Central European University in Budapest and Jewish religion and Philosophy in Sweden. Except for various politics-related projects (particularly in the U.S.) he has published on various aspects of Jewish history and curated exhibitions at the Jewish Museum in Prague. The Forgotten Transports series is his first film project.

### Contacts

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