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Tango of Slaves. West Glen Communications, Inc..

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Remembering What?

In 1977, my wife and I visited the Slovak villages in which her parents were born. Early in the trip, one of her relatives took us to the courtyard of a building that served as an assembly area for deportations to Auschwitz. Afterwards, our driver suggested something else that we might like to see. We drove a short distance and parked. Then he guided us through an alley, at the end of which we suddenly faced a Jewish house of worship. <p> The building's front door had a padlock on it, walls had bullet holes in them, and many of the windows were broken. Possibly, no one had been inside since World War II. While I looked at it, it seemed to look at me, awaiting my reaction. Suddenly, I began to say Kaddish for no reason I can think of, except that it seemed impossible to accept that the people who had worshiped there should be abandoned in death, as they were in life. They had to be remembered. This wasn't a polite request. This was a law, and the law had to be obeyed. <p> At the dawn of the twenty-first century, remembrance in America has become a kind of national pastime, for Gentiles as well as Jews, and not just with reference to the Holocaust. Readers can learn that the generation that fought World War II demonstrated heroism of a type seldom recorded. Moviegoers (the overwhelming majority of them born after the conflict) can learn how their grandfathers, fathers, and uncles experienced campaigns in which millions of men fought each other to the death. <p> But anyone who was alive and aware of what was happening during the 1940s will tell you that by late 1944, war weariness had set in, that the population was no longer as enthusiastic about sacrifice as it had been just after Pearl Harbor, that you did not have to search hard to find corrup-

tion and greed, and that the United States Army worried that the numbers of AWOLs and deserters in the European theater had reached alarming proportions. Veterans will tell you that if the actual stink and noise of combat could somehow be reproduced in movie theaters, nauseated and deafened audiences would rush out. And Holocaust survivors will tell you that unless you actually experienced a ghetto, a deportation train, or life in a death camp, you cannot grasp how utter confusion combined with utter despair affects people. <p> <cite>Tango of Slaves</cite> was produced and directed by Ilan Ziv, a man who wants his two young daughters to have some idea what life was like for their ancestors in Poland, before and during the Holocaust. He has only one photograph of his father, a Warsaw ghetto survivor, as a boy. He now asks his father, who lives in Israel (as does Ziv), to travel with him to the Polish capital and then to the site of the ghetto. There his father will react to what he sees some fifty years later, and Ziv will make a movie about his father's reactions and what both men have learned from the experience. <p> Ziv does not receive unanimous encouragement for his undertaking. At first, his father is reluctant to return to Warsaw. When Ziv, who is put off by "popular" depictions of the Holocaust, discusses the idea of the film with Marcel Ophuls, this elder statesman of documentaries advises that the time is past for such enterprises; movie audiences have heard enough about the catastrophe. Nonetheless, Ziv perseveres, his father finally agrees to make the trip, and they set off for Poland without any certainty what they will find. <p> What he and his father discover, from the moment they arrive, will not surprise anyone who grasps

the degree of indifference that marked non-Jewish reaction to life in the ghetto. Monuments have been built to commemorate the ghetto uprising, but no physical traces of the ghetto remain. Nor do any traces of the 500,000 people who lived in it. Parks have replaced buildings in which people sat, slept, and relieved themselves on staircases because there were no rooms available for them. Among the few remnants of one of the great centers of Jewish culture in Eastern Europe is a Yiddish theater in which many of the performers are Polish Christians, and in which nearly all of the audiences are Polish Christians who listen to simultaneous translations from Yiddish to Polish while they watch the performers. Children play where Jews fought tanks with pistols. General Juergen Stroop's 1943 message to Hitler, "Es gibt keinen juedischen Wohnbezirk in Warschau mehr!" ("No Jewish area exists in Warsaw any longer!") has truly been realized. This Jewish place of residence does not exist in the memories of those people who walk through its site on a daily basis and now accept the monuments as part of local scenery. <p> Ziv's father says several times during the course of the film that he is among the "last of the Mohicans," meaning that as survivors die, what actually happened in Warsaw will be lost to memory. This is not true, because the curious will always have the diaries kept by Chaim Kaplan, Emmanuel Riengleblum, and Adam Czerniakow, among others. How people felt and what they experienced could hardly be made clearer to later generations than in these works. <p> Matters take a different turn when it comes to memoirs, photographs, and films about Jews before the Holocaust. We have relatively little footage of pre-World War II Polish-Jewish life, and of the footage we do have, most relates to well-off people or to children living happy lives in facilities financed by the American-Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. But most Polish Jews were not even remotely well-off. As Roman Vishniac's photographs attest, they lived in misery

from birth to death. (Unfortunately, the bulk of Vishniac's photographs were lost when he and his family fled Europe.)[1] <p> Then there are films made by Germans during the occupation. These had as their purpose to portray Jews as greedy, despicable, manipulative, and best isolated from other peoples. A sequence Ziv uses shows polite, well-dressed Hasidic rabbis visiting Czerniakow in his neat, plain, well-lighted office. Then it shows Jews dining in a restaurant whose tables have white tablecloths and whose kitchen is evidently well-supplied with food and drink, which, we learn, had to be purchased for the film at black market prices paid by Jews. <p> Ziv's father breaks down, and he can no longer continue the visit. He returns to Israel. Ziv continues and illustrates just how popular an activity remembrance has become: Sotheby's auctions off ghetto photographs to eager buyers. <p> In the end, what has been accomplished? Little that is tangible for the benefit of Ziv's daughters. Yet again, we learn that the disaster is incomprehensible. And yet again, we learn that history can't be relived, no matter how many movies we watch. The best remembrance turns out to be constant vigilance and action, if necessary, to make certain that such a disaster does not happen again. Lamentations and public ceremonies attended by celebrities are no answers to questions about what to do next. <p> Vigilance and action are especially important with the recent rise of Juerg Haider, who thumbs his nose at history, and of his admirer, the premier of Bavaria, who is eager to become German chancellor. Courageous people in Austria and from all over Europe came to demonstrate against neo-fascism, in Vienna. I didn't hear any reports about American Jewish leaders among them, though. <p> The title of the video, <cite>Tango of Slaves</cite> refers to a song said to have been sung in the ghetto and in Auschwitz. <p> Note: <p> [1]. Roman Vishniac. <cite>A Vanished World</cite>. New York: Schocken Books, 1983.

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