

WATCHING

# “Bogdan’s Journey”

*Editor’s note: Students in Dr. Elissa Sampson’s class on the Jewish Lower East Side were asked to attend Jewish Studies events and write brief response papers. We wanted to share with our readers student Barr Lavi-Romer’s response to the film “Bogdan’s Journey” documenting one Catholic Pole’s refusal to let the memory of the 1946 pogrom in Kielce, Poland be forgotten (see “Highlights of our Public Programs,” p. 2).*

There are few unfamiliar with the struggle against a violent history, whether this history belongs to a family, a nation, or a people. Yet how many of us actually question how blame, and shame, are passed down over time and generations? How many of us ask: can responsibility be placed upon a town? A people? A nation? How many of us wonder at the action required when responsibility is assumed? At the beginning of “Bogdan’s Journey,” we are momentarily transported back to July 4, 1946. We are shown a small Polish town, Kielce, a town that, at the start of this day, shelters more than two hundred Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. By the end of this day, more than forty Jewish refugees have been killed and eighty more injured by a combined



group of militia, soldiers, and townspeople, and Kielce is no longer simply a small Polish town. Kielce is now the site of what will become known as Europe’s last Jewish pogrom. Considered a forbidden subject in communist Poland, the pogrom went unaddressed and unmentioned for over thirty years. And years of silence have left discussion of the pogrom restricted and painful. Many refuse to acknowledge any Polish role in the pogrom, insisting that all responsibility lies with secret police. Others simply balk at the notion of reopening a decades-old wound. And then there is Bogdan Bialek, a Catholic Pole who is determined to confront Kielce’s history and the prejudice that lives on years after the pogrom. “Bogdan’s Journey” follows Bialek as he struggles to bring to the forefront a history that many would rather forget.

Bialek shoulders the questions that many choose to shirk. But what makes Bialek’s journey perhaps most captivating is his imperfections, his humanity, the vulnerability he demonstrates as he searches for the answers to unanswerable questions. At times Bialek is unwaveringly determined; at times he falls into fits of melancholy and disillusionment. He cries openly when speaking with Jewish survivors of the pogrom. Sometimes he is at a loss for words. Once, when a survivor says that she is sure he would have saved her had he been alive then, his response comes quietly but quickly: “I am not sure. I do not know what I would have done.” Bialek does not claim to have all the answers, and it is precisely this uncertainty that allows his experience to resonate so powerfully with a variety of audiences.

On one level, “Bogdan’s Journey” is a powerful tool for revealing both the trauma and potential for healing that come with reopening this dark chapter in Polish history. But the film is not meant solely for Polish and Jewish audiences. Towards the end, Bialek says that the people of Kielce today are not responsible for the 1946 attack against the town’s Jewish residents; however, they are absolutely



responsible for what is done with that memory. They are responsible for the prejudice that they allow to flourish around them to this day. They are responsible for ensuring that the past is not repeated. His words are directed at the people of Kielce,

but his message points clearly to each of us in the audience. It is nearly impossible to hear him speak without recalling our own histories and the questions we ourselves have refused to confront. We are responsible — not for having all of the answers, but for asking the painful questions about our histories, and for taking action in the present.

Watching “Bogdan’s Journey” is a painful experience. It hurts to sit in a theater and listen to the retelling of the events of 1946, to be shown images of the dead and the injured lying upon the ground, half-covered by twisted sheets, alone on the ground or, even more horrifyingly, cradling a dead child. It hurts as a Jew, and it hurts as a human. Yet the pain of the experience was not shocking — I think that most who see such a film enter the theater already anticipating the pain that lies ahead. What I found more shocking was the extent to which I related to Bogdan himself, the Catholic Pole who at first glance seems like he could not be more different from me. By age alone, Bogdan is removed from the events of the Holocaust and the 1946 pogrom, yet his heritage links him irrevocably to their memories. I, too, am removed from, yet tied to those events. And though it seems my connection, my Jewish

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heritage, should place me on a side opposite Bogdan’s, and my experience should be the reverse of his, I instead saw my own struggle mirrored in his. I, too, have grappled with what it means to carry a memory that is not my own, and the responsibility attached to that memory. How do we, the generations that follow these horrors, keep these memories alive without causing unnecessary hurt and pain? How much of the pain of those memories belongs to us? How much do we have a right to feel? How much do we have a responsibility to feel? How do we make true the words we hear so often: *never again*? ♦