

Reel Life: memories of a massacre



photo/Nathan Mandell

Alan Teller, Jerri Zbiral

On June 10, 1942, Nazi soldiers surrounded the Czechoslovakian village of Lidice. They killed the men outright—192 of them—and sent the women to Ravensbruck concentration camp. Of the 105 children in the village all but a handful were murdered; these few, with Aryan features, were reserved for adoption by Germans. The Nazis reduced the buildings to rubble and carted the rubble away. Then they set to work on the land itself, leveling old hills and forming new ones, uprooting trees in one place and planting them in another, even changing the flow of a nearby river.

In short, they erased Lidice as conscientiously and as viciously as the Romans erased Carthage. Why? Because ten days earlier in Prague, Czech patriots had assassinated an especially murderous SS official named Reinhard Heydrich.

The village was rebuilt as a kind of inhabitable shrine after the war, but the crimes that occurred there worked deep changes on the survivors. Jerri Zbiral was born into this traumatized landscape in 1948.

"I don't remember ever not knowing about Lidice," Zbiral says during the first minutes of **In the Shadow of Memory**, the documentary she produced with her husband, Alan Teller. "It's always been a part of my life."

In the Shadow of Memory is less about the historical Lidice than the psychic one Zbiral inherited from her mother Anna and half-sister Eva, both of whom survived the Lidice atrocity and were reunited amid great nationalist fanfare on its third anniversary. Eva, who was five at the time she was ripped from her mother's arms, has always kept her distance from the experience, claiming not to remember it. She declined Zbiral's invitation to view the documentary as recently as last month. But Anna made the tragedy a constant household presence. In the documentary Zbiral recalls her mother scolding her for not eating her dinner: "You should be hungry. You should be as hungry as I was. You need concentration camp, that's what you need."

"I'm only now starting to understand how really deeply my mother's stories affected every aspect of my life," says Zbiral, who lives in Evanston. She found herself defined by an experience that didn't properly belong to her. "Maybe on a deeper level I want to be there too."

Initially she expected to get there by writing a book. Zbiral and Teller started gathering material and recording interviews in 1982; they paid several visits to communist Czechoslovakia. During one trip, in 1987, they gained access to the Anti-Fascist League's archive, with its trove of documents from the Frank

trials (the Soviet equivalent of the Nuremberg trials). There they came across statements by German soldiers who had carried out the Lidice massacre. They also attended a ceremony marking the 45th anniversary of the atrocity and saw firsthand how the event had been co-opted by Czech authorities. Survivors sat on a dais behind and below the speakers' podium, invisible to the audience. Zbiral and Teller wanted to make them visible again.

They returned to Czechoslovakia in 1992 for the 50th anniversary observance. By then, however, the Velvet Revolution had taken place, and they were suddenly free to ask questions and receive forthright answers. As a result of their friend Jacky Comforty's lobbying, they filmed the trip. The footage they shot forms the lion's share of **In the Shadow of Memory**, which Comforty directed.

A 78-minute version of **In the Shadow of Memory** was shown last fall in Prague at the church where Heydrich's assassins took refuge, and in Lidice itself. Edited down now to an hour-long version, it will be given a benefit screening Thursday, April 25, at 6:30 at Facets Multimedia, 1517 W. Fullerton. The \$30 event includes a reception at 5:30 and a postshow discussion. A second screening takes place at 8:30; admission is \$5. The proceeds will go toward finishing the film. Call 847-328-6994 for more information.

—Tony Adler