



Boat people: the film that tells the story of the 1968 exiles

In 1968, up to 20,000 Jews left Poland following an antisemitic purge by the communist regime. **Masha Shpolberg** speaks to filmmaker Marian Marzyski, who documented the life of one group of Jewish refugees living on a boat in Copenhagen

For his whole life, boats have held a special meaning for Marian Marzyski. The Polish filmmaker's prize-winning first film, *Return of a Ship* (1963), focused on a trans-Atlantic vessel that brought Polish Americans back to their homeland during the period of liberalisation that followed Stalin's death. It went on to win the Grand Prize at the Krakow Film Festival in 1964 – the year that famed documentary filmmaker Richard Leacock was head of the jury. Marzyski's second film, *Skibet* (the Danish word for ship), was made in 1970 and documented the filmmaker's own time living on a boat in the port of Copenhagen along with 500 other Polish Jewish refugees. "It was a ready metaphor," Marzyski tells me when I meet him for an interview at his home in Brookline, just outside Boston, Massachusetts. "A boat on anchor – a boat to nowhere."

2018 marks the 50th anniversary of the 1968 'anti-Zionist' campaign that

compelled Marzyski and roughly two-thirds of Poland's Jewish population to flee the country. The campaign was the result of a complex set of interlocking forces. The first of these was the Soviet Union's decision to reaffirm its support of the Arab States by cutting all diplomatic ties with Israel following the Six Day War. Virulent anti-Zionist discourse filled the pages of most Soviet bloc newspapers. Due to domestic turmoil in Poland, the words spilled over into action.

In 1967, Poland's leader Władysław Gomułka was locked in a power struggle with Minister of the Interior Mieczysław Moczar, who was known for his openly antisemitic views. At the same time, students and the Polish intelligentsia were beginning to express profound discontent with the communist régime. Moczar saw in these political developments a rare opportunity: cleansing the country of Jews would simultaneously suppress the intellectuals' rebellion, demonstrate

Poland's loyalty to the USSR, and free up positions within the Communist Party to be filled by his own supporters. Although Gomułka, whose wife was Jewish, resisted at first, he was soon overpowered.

The campaign struck its first blow on 8 March 1968: a student demonstration at the University of Warsaw demanding greater freedom of expression and civil rights was violently suppressed, with many of the students beaten and arrested. The media insisted that students of Jewish origin had spearheaded the demonstration: Zionists working to undermine the Polish state. In the year and a half that followed, dozens of anti-Zionist demonstrations were staged by the government in cities across Poland, many of them featuring banners inscribed with the slogan: "Zionists – to Zion!" Jews were purged from the Party ranks, fired from their jobs, and called in by the country's Security Service for interrogation. For most, the public humiliation, economic strain and constant harassment proved to

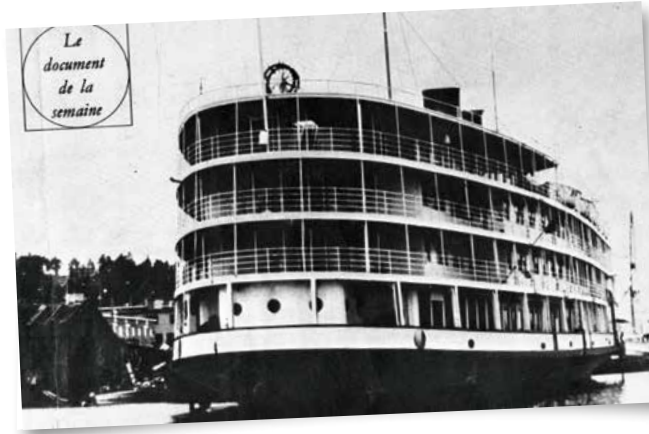
be too much: by 1970, between 13,000 and 20,000 Jews had emigrated to Denmark, Sweden, Canada and the United States. Ironically, given that they stood accused of Zionism, only one-third went to Israel. Marzynski was one of those who left for Denmark.

In recent months, a number of Polish museums and cultural institutions have organised events commemorating what has become known in Poland as the 'March emigration'. Many have held screenings of Marzynski's film. A radio reporter and celebrated television show host in Poland before his departure, he began filming three weeks after his arrival in Denmark. Shot in black and white with the support of Danish television, *Skibet* features a mixture of interviews and cinéma vérité depictions of everyday life on the boat, which had been converted from a provocative nightclub into housing for the refugees. A second part, entitled *Hatikvah*, was shot in colour for French television several months later and features an extended interview with young people who had formed a Jewish folk music ensemble on board. Recognising the ways in which the two pieces spoke to one another, Marzynski combined them into a single film under the title *Skibet/Hatikvah*. The film remains the only document of the refugees' state of mind at the time.

Marzynski would not stay long in Denmark: within a few years of his arrival, he was offered a job teaching film production at the prestigious Rhode Island School of Design in the United States. From there, he went on to work for the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), producing documentaries on historic and scientific topics, as well as films that spoke to his own experience as a child survivor of the Holocaust and a Polish Jew in exile. In his 1996 film *Shtetl*, he travelled to the village of Bransk, Poland, examining the reasons that drove some Poles to protect their Jewish neighbours and others to collaborate with the Nazis. In *Never Forget to Lie* (2013), he collected the testimonies of other child survivors who, like himself, had been rescued by righteous Gentiles.

MASHA SHPOLBERG: How did you begin making films?

MARIAN MARZYNSKI: I started by being a radio reporter – I was fascinated by the sound of people speaking on the streets. Then I went to television and worked on talk shows that also focused on the ordinary man. In the early 1960s, I travelled to Paris and discovered cinéma vérité [documentary filmmaking showing people in everyday situations]. They were shooting with the first mobile cameras, and



Marian Marzynski at home in Brookline, Massachusetts; left: the boat that housed the refugees from Marzynski's film, *Skibet*

instead of telling a story that was prepared and scripted, they were filming direct encounters. When I returned to Poland, I decided to use my experience in radio and television to make films.

In Poland, there was also a different reason to focus on everyday reality – because reality was forbidden. The Party had a ready-made narrative about happy life under socialism and any glimpse of ordinary life threatened to undermine that narrative.

MS: *Skibet* combines autobiographical narration, interviews, and vérité footage—something no one was doing at the time. Why did you do it that way?

MM: I'm not a typical filmmaker: I was originally a reporter, and I discovered stories. Superficiality was my greatest fear, so I tried to go beneath the surface, to be one with the people I was filming. I am a filmmaker, but I am also a witness.

MS: Were people on the boat wary of speaking about their experience?

MM: They were open because I was one of them. They had their reservations, of course. They were shocked, they were blocked... I caught them in a moment which is a dream for a documentary filmmaker – the moment when a person is questioning their destiny, is not aware of that destiny, is not able yet to describe the past even and is caught in-between.

MS: In the film, it's striking how assimilated the Polish Jewish community was in the post-war period. Your interviewees insist that they felt "100 per cent Polish" and this is what made 1968 so painful.

MM: That was the mechanism of our survival. Secular Jews had a much higher chance of survival in World War II because they were the ones who had friends and contacts on the Christian side. Those most likely to help Jews came from two opposing parts of society: they were either secular, left-wing intellectuals or devout Catholics who felt that they had no choice but to do the right thing. As a five-year old in 1942, I was smuggled with my mother out of the

Warsaw ghetto. I was hidden for three years by my family's Polish friends and two Catholic priests. My mother survived by posing as a religious woman and working as a maid in a Polish family. My father jumped off one of the last transports heading to

Auschwitz by making a hole in the tramcar, but was shot in the woods afterwards and didn't survive.

In the post-war period, the communist government was very effective in promoting a secular, culturally uniform society. Before 1968 antisemitism was illegal. Someone could be put in jail for calling me a dirty Jew.

MS: Was it a difficult decision for you to leave Poland?

MM: No. I left because I did not want my child to live in a lie, to live a double life saying one thing at home and another outside. But I didn't want to hear about Polish antisemitism. Whatever you think about Poland, those people who saved and hid and kept us alive during the war, they were not antisemites.

It was complicated. Many Polish people, when they saw that we were given this opportunity to leave the country, thought we were lucky because they would have liked to leave, too. Of course, they didn't realize that none of us would have left if not for those demonstrations organised by the Party. We were not scared of the words spoken by the First Party Secretary, who was known for saying stupidities, but of the people who kicked out my stepfather from his job; who kicked so many others out of work.

MS: Why did you go to Denmark?

MM: I couldn't go to Israel because we never felt religiously connected. Denmark had declared that they would take the Polish Jewish refugees.

MS: Do you still feel that Poland is your country?

MM: Absolutely. Culture is portable. I say that when I came to America at the age of 32, I brought my culture with me in a suitcase and I enriched it tremendously through the new culture I have been acquiring. I also travel to Poland regularly and teach both there and in the US. ■

Many of Marzynski's films, including *Skibet/Hatikvah*, can be viewed online free of charge on: vimeo.com/marianmarzynski. **Masha Shpolberg** is a PhD candidate in comparative literature and film & media studies at Yale University. Masha's pieces have appeared in *Senses of Cinema*, *Tablet Magazine* and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*.