

seek to complete through new additions and perspectives. *Haiku on a Plum Tree* is a masterful example of transnational, transgenerational storytellings, of the “choices that make up a family tree, of its forks in the road, its maps and places,” to quote Maraini-Melehi. And though she inherited stories that emerged from those choices and felt their epic weight, through her documentary she adds her own choices, maps, and places, reinscribing and reimagining them for herself, for her elders, and for her progeny.

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#### *Shalom Italia*.

By Tamar Tal Anati.

Tamar Tal Films, 2016.

70 minutes. Streaming format, color.

The very first image of *Shalom Italia* offers a metonymy that sets the tone for the entire movie: A close-up features Bubi, one of the three brothers at the center of the story, wiping away a thick layer of dust from the rear-view mirror of his motorcycle, revealing for a brief instant the reflection of his own face. The opening gesture serves as an invitation to remove the heavy crust of personal and familial amnesia over traumatic events of the past. As director Tamar Tal Anati explains in an interview, she wanted the documentary to show “how memory is being constructed” (POV Filmmaker Interview 2017).

The premise of the film itself takes the form of an experiment: Three Italian Israeli brothers search for the cave where they hid during the Shoah. They produce three contradictory accounts of the same narrative, while pursuing three different approaches to their journey back to Italy. From Israel, Bubi came up with the idea of the trip to find the cave in the Tuscan Apennines in a quest for the “place to which we owe our lives.” As the youngest brother, he barely remembers the time spent in the cave and relies on the recollections of his two older brothers, Andrea and Emmanuel, known as Meme. But after only a few minutes, the audience gets a sense of how different their recollections are. For Meme, who was thirteen when his family went into hiding, the persecution of

Jews in Fascist Italy and the Shoah were without any doubt “six years of misery.” In contrast, Andrea, who was eleven during the time of hiding, asserts that he “had fun during the Holocaust,” while he joyfully dances in front of the camera, whistling Bach’s *Italian Concerto*. (Andrea turns out to be a complex character: A fit hiker, his perseverance allows him to discover the cave at the end of the film. As he carves “Edna ti amo” on a tree next to the natural refuge that saved his life some seventy years earlier, the audience understands that the trip to Italy is a way for him to mourn his recently deceased wife Edna, with whom he shared a passion for the concerto.)

Through these three different personal accounts of Holocaust survival, the movie explores the blurred lines between memory and history, myths and facts. Animated discussions reveal significant gaps when it comes to remembering the extent to which inhabitants of the town near the cave helped the family to survive. Meme, a professor of archeology and anthropology, laments current townspeople for inventing legends about the past and forging a “mythological memory” of their survival. Yet Meme also confesses later that as the oldest he had to tell stories to his brothers to alleviate their fears while hiding. The film follows Meme’s transformation, from initial repression of the past to its rediscovery through the journey. While at the beginning he emphasizes “seventy years of canceled [by his parents’ silence] memory” to explain his own reluctance to dig into the past, at the end of the film he comes to terms with the past by giving a talk at a scholarly conference about his family history during the Shoah, an experience that seems to be cathartic. Rediscovery of the past is also conveyed through language: Meme almost never speaks Italian during the film until the very end and with two significant exceptions: when he reads to his brothers a poem he wrote while hiding in the cave and when he expresses gratefulness to an elderly woman who helped the family.

As shown by this scene, the film is also about Jews returning home, a theme that has occupied Jewish scholarship recently although it has remained overlooked in the Italian case. But unlike cases of postwar remigration, this trip is taking place more than seventy years after the Holocaust. The film features poignant scenes of the three brothers returning to the two houses they were expelled from, including their family house in Florence where the current owners—of what seems to be now a hotel—receive their request with a certain uneasiness. “I always dreamed of returning to Italy” are the first words uttered in the documentary by Bubi, the protagonist with fewer traumatic memories.

The return, half permanent for Bubi and temporary for his two brothers, is actually more significant than the goal of the quest. What matters is not the cave itself but the search for it. According to the film’s director, the search reflects an “actual need to find a story they can all live together with, reconstruct a new story that they can find peace with” (POV Filmmaker Interview

2017). In fact, the search is arduous, and for most of the movie the cave seems unreachable and as unreal as a full reconciliation with the past would be. For their metaphoric dimension, the scenes of the brothers looking for the cave in the forest are reminiscent of another recent Israeli documentary reckoning with the memory of the Holocaust: At the end of *The Flat* (Arnon Goldfinger, 2011), the protagonists look relentlessly for the graves of their German ancestors in a Jewish cemetery in a piteous condition and in which the names are unreadable, erased by time and oblivion.

Conversely, at the end of *Shalom Italia*, the cave is found by a sort of miracle, and the three brothers revel in a discovery that becomes a symbol of their freedom: They eat Italian salami in place of the few sardines they could eat while hiding (Bubi has been allergic to sardines without knowing the origins of his traumatic aversion), and Bubi can finally yell in the forest without the fear of being discovered. The moving scene conveys a sense of subversion and joyful reappropriation of a persecutory past. Moments of family comedy and luminous landscapes of Tuscany throughout the film serve as an antidote against the heaviness of trauma. The delicate sense of humor develops the audience's sympathy for the three brothers as well as it highlights the empathy of the director for her subject: her family story (she is married to a son of one of the brothers). In this sense, the film embodies the encounter between Holocaust survivors and "the generation of postmemory" (Hirsch 2012). The last sequence features a new trip by Bubi to Italy, this time with his children and grandchildren, in order to set up a sign that explains to potential visitors the significance of the cave, thus ending the film on themes of Jewish resilience and family transmission between individual and collective memories.

The exploration of generational memory is the movie's strength but also at the same time its limitation. The Shoah as such is almost absent from the film, which does not provide much contextual background to understand the specific ways in which the genocide unfolded in Italy. Hence, without preknowledge of the anti-Semitic policies of the Fascist regime in 1938 and the deportations following the Nazi occupation of Italy after the armistice of September 8, 1943, the audience is likely to not fully grasp the harshness of the persecutions of Jews in Italy. Indirectly, and probably unconsciously, the documentary reiterates the myth of *italiani brava gente* (Bidussa 1994). Denunciation, betrayal, and the manhunt for Jews are omitted from the film, whereas there is now solid scholarly evidence of that grimmer picture (see, most recently, Levis Sullam 2018 and Klein 2017). Only Meme briefly mentions the fear of informants, yet he designates his persecutors only by the pronoun "they": Who were they? Italians or Germans, or both? Zealous anti-Semites of the Italian Social Republic or ordinary people? These questions remain unaddressed. Similarly, the movie doesn't provide any in-depth understanding of the complexity of

the acts of the Italian rescuers (Picciotto 2017). In sum, despite its quasi-ahistoricity, *Shalom Italia* remains a sensitive and beautifully composed work and a fascinating window on the themes of Jewish return, victims' memories, and redemptive narrative.

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