“You Who Live Securely in Your Warm Homes…”

Letizia Airos Soria (February 06, 2008)


The screening of the film L’isola delle rose: La tragedia di un paradiso (Island of Roses: The Tragedy of a Paradise) written and directed by Rebecca Samonà was accompanied by a brief but intense interview by journalist Andrea Fiano with Stella Levi, a former resident of Rhodes who survived Auschwitz.

The auditorium of the Centro Primo Levi [2] is packed. The entire audience is moved, emotional, reflective, and at times incredulous.

“You who live securely in your warm homes, when you return in the evening find hot food and friends, consider that if this is a man…,” these lines by Primo Levi along with others by the author, stick in my mind throughout the evening.

January 27, 2008. The screening of the film L’isola delle rose: La tragedia di un paradiso (Island of Roses: The Tragedy of a Paradise) written and directed by Rebecca Samonà was accompanied by a brief but intense interview by journalist Andrea Fiano with Stella Levi, a former resident of Rhodes who survived Auschwitz. The film reconstructs the annihilation of the Jews of Rhodes who were deported after September 8, 1938. The events come to life through the first-hand account of someone who lived them.

Before the interview, we watch 52 intense minutes of a story that is not often found in history books: the details of daily life interrupted. The true force of the documentary lies in its narration of everyday life which is completely wiped out in a short time. Over the course of the screening a silent invitation becomes a responsibility: to reflect on our own daily lives, especially on our seemingly insignificant

actions.

Rebecca Samonà’s work is important for this reason. It confronts and questions our own way of life: the small gestures, our relationships with others.

“In every group, there exists a predetermined victim: one who carries pain, who everyone mocks, on whom they heap malevolent rumors, and with mysterious agreement everyone unloads their negative feelings and their desire to harm,” wrote Primo Levi in The Truce (1962). This is a description of a social dynamic that is seemingly banal yet insidious and not to be forgotten.

L’isola delle rose: La tragedia di un paradiso recalls history through personal black and white images, similar to our own home movies. They are that familiar. On the screen we see the narration of a time gone by, one that no longer exists but that could very well still be with us.

The main theme is autobiographical. It is a journey (both physically and in memory) to Rhodes by the director/author, pregnant with her second child, along with her own mother who is the daughter of an Italian serviceman interned in Germany (1944-45) and of a Jewish woman from Rhodes, who after a pleasant life there was deported. Her life ends in Auschwitz, as did hundreds of others from the island.

The film traces the director’s maternal Jewish line through a trip that passes from physical places to hidden places in the human mind.

Slowly we realize that we are discovering pages of forgotten history. Individual life histories lived in first person, mostly female, are revealed through rare archival highlights and become entwined.

At a certain point, the film passes from light to darkness. A nearly idyllic atmosphere is introduced at the beginning of the film. Clips of advertising from the period depict Rhodes as a real paradise of happiness and harmony. And it is in this tranquility that the director’s grandmother is raised and lives her incongruent love story with a Sicilian official. In 1936, against the wishes of her parents, she decides to run away and marry him. Her family’s subsequent acceptance of the marriage would seem to further the young woman into a life of considerable security and prosperity. But that did not occur. “Consider that this is a woman. Without hair and without a name, with no more strength to remember, empty eyes and cold womb, like a branch in winter,” wrote Primo Levi.

Rebecca and her mother, some sixty years later, visit the places hungry for answers. They question friends of the family, read diaries of the father interned in Germany; they examine every square foot of the places that were settings for both happy times and heinous memories. And in their path of memory, an absurd witness appeared: disbelief.

Snapshots of everyday life: lunches with family members, parties, set tables with food, the long shores of Rhodes full of healthy and beautiful people, young people poised for prosperous futures. And afterwards, a family, many families, an entire community, completely exterminated.

The director seems to suggest that any one of us could have been in Rhodes at that time. When we get up, when we go to work, when we take the sun at the beach, when we play with our children, when we fall in love, when we celebrate, we do so without ever imagining that one day the folly of other human beings can destroy everything.

Memories, especially female memories, take on a symbolic value: it is through the transmission of memories from the grandmother to the mother, to the director herself and to her daughter in her womb that we learn never to forget.

The sighs of an elderly woman seated next to me signal the entire vision of the film that ends in front of a captivated audience. After a few minutes, there is the steady but fragile voice of another woman, Stella Levi. An emotional Andrea Fiano conducts the interview. Levi’s memories gives voice to the past but also looks to the present so the same mistakes are not committed in the future.

Visiting the island only once, in 1967, Stella Levi recalls: “I have lived with the ghosts of Rhodes, I still hear the voices of the people I knew. Ghosts that vanish but that I would like to take with me.”

“Before ’38 we were all the same. Before you were a human being and then you were not. The humiliation of being dragged out of your own home, and no one stopped them!”

With Mrs. Levi’s first words one senses the same, nearly child-like disbelief that accompanied the film. “Sometimes I ask myself: I lived through all of this? At Auschwitz you smell death even during the brightest and warmest days in August. The sky becomes gray. Auschwitz was death.”

“This is not an easy interview for me because I am the son of a Jewish survivor. I have so many questions, but at the same time I am afraid of invading her privacy.” And so begins Andrea Fiano with great sensitivity. “Why were more women able to survive?” he asks. Mrs. Levi responds, “I don’t know why women seem to be stronger in this case. Perhaps it is because they protect life. They carry it inside.”

“My memories are in Italian and I have to translate them into English in order to speak to you. When I returned to Rhodes I knew that I would find only ghosts there. The colors, the scent of that city are no longer the same. There are no Jews now. Today the entire community is gone. There is a synagogue, a museum…. but it is difficult to associate the memories. Places of happy, ordinary life can become brutal horrors…silent witnesses of the worst human atrocities. Radiant Rhodes, the emerald sea, full of oranges, its houses, offices, schools…”

Mrs. Levi shares in a loud voice a paradoxical question: “How could they be so elegant and commit these crimes? In the evening, after giving the gas, they dressed up and played the most beautiful music.”

“I remember that when we arrived at Auschwitz they didn’t think that we were Jews because we didn’t speak Yiddish. They understood only when they saw us pray. Since we spoke French, we were placed with the French women. This was my salvation. The French women spoke German and this was the only way we could follow orders …”

She says with great certainty: “Can it happen today? Dafur, Bosnia… It is happening… ‘Remember, you were a slave in Egypt.’ This is one of the most important precepts in Judaism, but it should apply to all of humanity.”

And to the question of whether she feels hatred, she responds: “No. Hatred is a disease and I do not want to hate.”

Primo Levi wrote: “He who has been tortured remains tortured. He who has been tormented can no longer acclimate himself in the world, the revulsion for the annihilation can never be extinguished.” (The Drowned and the Saved, 1986)

In Stella Levi’s words, in addition to the courage and the need-want to tell, there is internal burden of a marked existence.

“You who live securely, in your warm homes…”

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