

RR: How would you describe your relationship to the photograph that inspired *With Raised Hands*? When did you first see the picture and had it been particularly meaningful to you for some time before you made the film?

MP: I can't say that I had much of a relationship with the photo before I decided to make the film. I first saw the image of the boy (with raised hands) in a painting by a known Italian painter, Renato Guttuso. That must have been about seven years before the film was made. But at that time, I had no idea that the boy in the painting was taken from an authentic photo, nor that it treats a real historical event. I think it was clear that the colorfully painted image of the boy was related to a war, but it was unclear which one. Nonetheless, the image stayed with me for a long time, and when I recognized it in the actual black and white photo, I was surprised to discover that it was taken in Poland, during the extermination of the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto. In any case, that boy with raised hands, surrounded by armed soldiers, aiming their weapons at him, must have spoken to me in some way. At the time I saw the actual photo, I was studying directing in the Lodz Film School, and I very soon decided to make a short film about the photo.

In order to understand the main reason behind that decision, and exactly what attracted me to the photo, I will have to tell you where I saw the print of the original picture. It was in a book of a (former) Yugoslav, I believe a Croat/Jewish art critic Oto Bihalji Merin, another acclaimed name from the post WW II art scene. His book was entitled *A Revision of Art* and it is a comparative art study about various "eternal" themes (images, visions, forms) that keep re-appearing throughout the history of culture and civilization. The chapter containing the photo was called *With Raised Hands* and knowing the film's godfather will probably help explain the content of the film, and the reason for its existence. Basically, Merin was comparing images of the same motif – of raised hands – throughout the history of culture. For thousands of years, these images had been reappearing from the plains of the ancient Latin and Central American civilizations, to the tombstones in the Jewish cemeteries. According to my understanding, they have expressed man's eternal and deep striving toward 'the skies' and in a visual way, spoke of man's innate spiritual aspirations. In a way, they are testimonies of the religious nature of the human.

RR: Did you have any moments of hesitation when you wondered whether or not it was entirely legitimate to weave a fiction around the making of the photograph?

MP: I never had that kind of hesitation. In my eyes, all art and culture weaves fiction with history, sometimes up to the point that no one knows any longer what was real, and what's part of the teller's imagination.

However, I did have some concerns about the fact that the picture was already pretty well known and used in other art forms, and that it was a commentary on an important part of our history. I am not sure whether I make myself clear but: you don't want to make a false or even mediocre piece of media about something that deeply affects millions of people.

(Even though journalists do that all the time and they keep getting more sophisticated at it. In my opinion, they specialized in it during the recent wars in former Yugoslavia.)

But to get back to *With Raised Hands*: even though the film uses a real historical event, and brings fiction (or wishful thinking) into it, I don't think it manipulates, abuses or in any way violates the historical truth. People crave freedom and 'salvation' whether they are Jews, Christians or Muslims, and whether they live in conditions of war or peace. I hope that that's a truthful assumption and that's what the film is about: the desire to be free, whatever that means.

RR: Can you describe your preparations, including casting, location scouting, arranging the décor, finding costumes, etc.?

MP: [...] When it came to the casting of the child-actors, I had to do everything on my own. I don't know who suggested this idea, but since I was clearly looking for children with Semitic features and there weren't enough kids to choose from, someone suggested that I try the Gypsy communities. It sounds strange to me now, as I tell it, but that's how it was. So I started visiting pretty much all of these communities in Lodz, making portraits of the children, and getting to know them. It took some time to find the right ones, but I was very lucky in general. The boy that I found for the main role was a natural. Of course, it helped that I had the photograph, so I knew exactly what I was looking for. The same was true of the locations. I held the picture in my hands and spent a lot of money on taxis, driving around, looking. I didn't have location scouts or a production designer, so I had to find it all myself and then verify it with the director of photography (Jarek Szoda).

RR: The second shot in your film is quite long and complex. It lasts almost a minute and covers a number of actions: first people out of focus approach the camera, then the main German soldier appears from our left within the frame in a close-up. He smiles to the camera, then begins coaxing someone off-camera to do something. (Soon, of course, we will understand that he was speaking to the boy.) He then moves out of our view and a woman, whose back was toward the camera, turns around, after which another soldier pushes her away, as well as about 18 other people, one at a time. All of this in a single, unbroken take. It would undoubtedly have been easier for you to divide these various actions into separate shots, but instead, you chose to cover them all in one continuous take. What were your thoughts in going for that kind of continuity rather than cutting at that early point in your film?

MP: The overall visual concept prevented me from breaking down the opening scene into more shots than there are. The idea was that until the moment of the freeze frame (when the boy raises his hands and we reveal the full situation as in the documentary photo) everything is seen from the point of view of the soldier who is a cameraman/photographer. So, everything had to be shot from one single angle, the angle of the German photographer. Since that was supposed to be the camera of a war photographer, shooting propaganda footage for the Wehrmacht, we decided that our own camera had to behave in a similar way: as if the DP [director of photography] behind it is someone who is just getting ready to shoot his still; someone who is not familiar with the subjects or with what is about to happen. For him, as for us, it is a process of gradual discovery or disclosure. First, he fixes the focus, then adjusts the speed (the shot starts in slow motion and then reaches 24 frames per second) and only then, he starts identifying the characters. Then he switches the turret

(shown in the opening shot) in order to find the right lens and camera distance. Since there were three primary lenses on those cameras, there are only three shots until the moment we come to that freeze-frame (the moment when the photographer 'discovers' the image that we recognize from the documentary photo). In other words, the camera behaves like any camera in preparation for a given shot. In addition, the director of photography and I saw a lot of WW II war footage and borrowed the stylistic features of that camera work. As I said, what follows after the freeze frame is kind of a fantasy, and it's no longer from the POV of the reporter. Therefore, there isn't only one point of view.

RR: The boy's throwing his cap into the air is of course an important symbolic gesture. Your thoughts when you decided to have him do that after he disappears from our view?

MP: I am generally a great fan of film lapses. I like films in which more is hinted than told. I jokingly call them 'interactive films' because they don't spell everything out for you, but leave a lot to your imagination. That way, you can also do your own share in making the film. That's a huge topic and I often like talking about it. Before that moment (in the film) there is another lapse, when the boy actually escapes from the sight of the photographer. We never see that critical moment of the boy running around the corner. We just see that he is no longer there.

RR: Did you ever consider trying to contact Tsvi Nussbaum - possibly the little boy who survived, and to arrange for him to see the film? I believe he was living in upstate New York in 1985. Do you think that it might be interesting to know how he would experience the film or would that not be of particular interest to you, considering that the film is a work of fiction?

MP: I would love to know how he would react to the film. I actually wouldn't even mind making a film about it, even though I am not sure whether that should be a documentary or a fiction.¹

27 October 2002

¹ Since the time this interview was made, Mitko Panov and I visited Tsvi Nussbaum and showed him *With Raised Hands*. When I asked Tsvi Nussbaum how he experienced the film, he answered: "It touched my heart." And Mitko Panov did in fact film our meeting.