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Tanja Cummings' *Line 41*: A Reflection

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Bałuty would certainly have a good chance in a competition for the ugliest and most dangerous district of Łódź, begins a newspaper review of a new book, *Zła dzielnica* (Bad neighborhood), by Tomasz Włodkowski. I smiled. I started to read the book, which was a good time to revisit German filmmaker Tanja Cummings' film, *Line 41*, about the Łódź (or Litzmannstadt) Ghetto.

Bałuty is the old ghetto area. I lived there for more than five years. I also happen to be Jewish. The Jewish ghosts sought me out, making themselves known, as I gained a foothold in my new home, Łódź, often deemed the runt of big-city Poland. Late-night screams – “*Kurwa!*” – and drunken singing and breaking glass were part of the atmosphere. Yet we loved Bałuty. This was part of our youth. For many of us, a sometimes unpredictable group of foreign misfits, this was our first venture into teaching, landing at the steps of the University of Łódź. Most of the international instructors were housed in what was called the roughest part of town, gray buildings dotting the landscape, bruised and battered, yet framed in bucolic splendor. Thickets of green had a way of cradling decrepit structures. And I heard the whispers – ghetto, ghetto, Jewish ghetto.

Włodkowski starts his tale, recalling the release of the taste and smell of red Oranżada, an old Polish soft drink enjoyed during the Communist era. He writes the flavors, sweet, sometimes sour, fought a fierce struggle with each other to come to an agreement and turn into a memory that continues to this day. It's a poignant metaphor that touches on my years in Bałuty. Such struggles resonate through Cummings' *Line 41*. The tragedy and distinct beauty of the old ghetto area is not easy to articulate, but Cummings does it with precision and skill. Her film is a must-see for anyone interested in the Łódź Ghetto, and in trying to understand this dark chapter in humanity.

“My God, how could they do this?” exclaims Jens-Jürgen Ventzki in the film, as he walks through an old Gestapo prison site where Polish inmates were locked up, and the facility was set on fire, just before the Red Army entered Łódź. Ventzki's father, Werner, was a Hitler career man, and the Nazi mayor of the city during the German occupation. “This is incomprehensible,” the son says, when he is shown the so-called Gypsy Camp, which was a separate part of the Łódź Ghetto. In January, 1942, those who did not succumb to the horrific conditions of the Gypsy Camp were transported to the Chełmno (or Kulmhof) death camp, the first Nazi extermination site. Tens of thousands of Jewish people were murdered at Chełmno, along with some 5,000 Roma and Sinti



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from the Gypsy Camp. "How could normal people live in this parallel world? With these disparate worlds that existed simultaneously?" Ventzki notes the German people of Litzmannstadt, as Łódź was formally called in the war years, generally enjoyed their Sunday strolls and visits to the zoo while the Nazi screws were tightened in the Łódź Ghetto. Ventzki sums up the hard truth about his father, who was also a loving and dedicated parent, which makes it all the more difficult to take in. "It was his intention, his will. And his will was done." The Nazi ideology was pushed with vigor and pride under the elder Ventzki's leadership. Without question, it's an enormous weight for a son to bear. To his credit, the son is upfront and open about his father.

"One is shattered to realize that one's own father lied without restraint..." Ventzki continues. "But morally, this is a tremendous blow. To hear all the things he denied. He claimed to have never been in the ghetto. Which is a lie. He knew and supported everything."

Line 41, released in 2015, takes its name from the tram that travelled through the ghetto, connecting one part of the city to another. "I came to Łódź to try to understand what happened here," Cummings narrates. "But the tram remains a mystery," she adds, as an old tram rumbles into the night. "It embodies a curse of indifference to me. Mechanical. Thoughtlessness. Nothing holds it back. People watch, look away and allow crimes to happen..." Ventzki sits with Cummings, sharing the research on his father, trying to understand as well.

"Look, this is how the buildings looked like during the ghetto times," declares Natan Grossmann, an eighty-something Jewish ghetto survivor, as he walks down a street in Bałuty. "Nothing has changed here." A rough edge outlines Bałuty, but it's also a jewel for a photographer's eye, and Cummings' film captures the character of this district, a raw and genuine find, yet beloved and defended by its residents. As Grossmann located his former ghetto residence and workplace, he shares his story. His father died – or was killed – in police custody; his older brother disappeared. Then his mother died September 16, 1942. "Then I was all alone." He was fifteen. As with Ventzki, Grossmann has his struggles. "Later on I realised that I am to blame for her death," he tells Cummings, in the Ventzki home, in Austria. "I ate her food. When I came home I told her: 'Mama, I am hungry.'" The two men meet. They console each other; they become friends.

"I was robbed of a few slices of bread..." the film quotes an unknown youth in the ghetto. The young person's diary was found in Auschwitz. "In our situation it is not absurd to liken the disappearance of bread with desperation. As both could be deadly to us... The most obvious sign of our psychic degradation is: People react to the loss of a bit of bread and the death of their own father with the same amount of grief." The youth dreamed of being able to tell humanity what had happened in the ghetto. "But will I be able to?" Cummings' *Line 41* ensures the young diarist's voice is heard.