

A film by
Jacky and Lisa Comforty

The Optimists

The Story of the Rescue of the Bulgarian Jews
From the Holocaust

COMFORTY MEDIA CONCEPTS AND THE CHAMBON FOUNDATION PRESENT A JACKY AND LISA COMFORTY FILM
CAMERA BY YOAV BEN-DAVID IVAN VARIMEZOV SIDNEY LUBITSCH EDITED BY JACKY COMFORTY AND LISSA OLIVER
MUSIC BY STUART ROSENBERG CO-PRODUCED BY GAIL SONNENFELD AND STEFAN SONNENFELD
AND PRODUCED BY JACKY AND LISA COMFORTY DIRECTED BY JACKY COMFORTY

What can ordinary people do in a time of crisis?

Thousands have been moved and inspired by

The Optimists

The Story of the Rescue of the Bulgarian Jews from the Holocaust

A film by Jacky and Lisa Comforty

Director: Jacky Comforty
Producers: Jacky and Lisa Comforty
Writers: Jacky and Lisa Comforty

**Co-Winner of the Peace Prize,
Berlin International Film Festival**

**First Prize for "Documenting the Jewish Experience,"
Jerusalem International Film Festival**

Winner, CINE Golden Eagle

Best Documentary, Hope and Dreams Film Festival

**"A rare documentary . . . compact and elegant."
- New York Times**

**"Uplifting documentary . . . fascinating story."
- TV Guide**

**"A miraculous sharp movie."
- Chicago Tribune**

**"Individuals triumph over odds in inspiring 'Optimists'."
- Chicago Sun Times**

**"Potent and gripping"
- Boston Globe**

Sixty years ago, 50,000 Bulgarian Jews survived the Holocaust because Bulgarian Christians helped defend them. *The Optimists: The Story of the Rescue of the Bulgarian Jews from the Holocaust* tells the inspiring story of the many individuals who, each in his or her own way, took action to foil the Nazis' plans to send Bulgarian Jewry to concentration camps.

Yet another European Jewish community -- this one inheritors of the distinctive Sephardic culture of the Jews of medieval Spain -- seemed destined for quick annihilation. But they were spared the fate of most of Europe's Jewry. The everyday heroes who made this miracle happen included Christians and Muslims from all walks of life: business men, housewives, religious leaders, trade unionists, educators, lawyers, doctors and other professionals, government officials, and many others. Theirs is an especially compelling lesson for today's world.

Running Time: 82 minutes Not Rated by the MPAA

The Optimists explores how different ethnic and religious groups stood by each other in Bulgaria even during the Holocaust. Bulgaria's experience offers valuable insight into how people can build bridges between different communities of different ethnic and religious backgrounds and, in so doing, defend human and civil rights.

It is not only a Jewish story. It is a universal one, powerful in its ability to inform and inspire all audiences.

*Everyone is entitled to his own faith.
No one should violate the intimate,
spiritual life of another.
That's how I think now,
that's how I have thought in the past,
and if I live any longer,
that's how I'll think then.*



--Bishop Boris Kharalampiev,
Pazardjik, Bulgaria, who helped stop
the deportations of Jews from his city in 1943

The Optimists is a presentation of **Comforty Media Concepts** and the **Chambon Foundation**.

Produced by

Comforty MEDIA CONCEPTS

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www.comforty.com, www.theoptimists.com

Distributed by

“This is a film that celebrates the human spirit. It offers hope that people of different races and religions can learn to live together in peace.”

--Leora Eren Frucht, Jerusalem Post

***The Optimists* is a wonderful film. The title refers not only to a Bulgarian jazz band, but to how the audience feels after watching such a moving testament to human decency.”**

-- Annette Insdorf, Director of Undergraduate Film Studies, Columbia University. Author of "Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust".

“We were extremely moved and fascinated by your film - because of the chapter of history it tells (which is still not so well known), because of the characters it portrays, but also by the film as such and by its filmic quality.”

-- Ulrich Gregor, Director of The Forum for New Cinema, Berlin International Film Festival.

The Optimists

On March 9, 1943, police arrived at the home of Jacky Comforty's family in Bulgaria. This was to be the beginning of the end, the start of the journey to Treblinka.



Rachel, Mimi, Aaron, and Rachimim Comforty in the weeks before their scheduled deportation to Poland. Note Jewish star on Rachamim, right.

All was proceeding according to the plan drawn up several weeks earlier by Nazi Germany and its Bulgarian allies. At gunpoint Jacky's grandparents; his aunt, then fifteen years old; and his uncle, age four, all marched to the deportation center set up at a neighborhood school. Jacky's father, 22 at the time, was not at home when the police came. He had already been interned in a near-by forced labor camp.

The four Comfortys scheduled to depart for Poland that day were among the 8,500 Bulgarian Jews targeted first for extermination. Just a few days before, 11,343 Jews from neighboring Greece and Macedonia had gone to their deaths. They had all lived in Bulgarian-controlled territory "given" to Bulgaria by Germany under the terms of the alliance pact between the two countries.

On March 10th, the Bulgarian Jews were brought to schoolyards and other gathering places around Bulgaria to await transport to additional trains. They waited all day. And then, at the end of that day, they were simply sent home.

Fifty thousand Jews lived in Bulgaria. Fifty thousand Jews didn't die, because Bulgarian Christians and Muslims found ways to protect them from their would-be murderers, even in defiance of their own Nazi-allied government. The Optimists tells their story.

The purpose of this documentary project has been to explore how these different ethnic and religious groups came to live together in peace in Bulgaria during the Holocaust, and to learn how the lessons learned can be applied today.

In Bulgaria, both organized efforts and individuals made a difference. The Bulgarian Parliament, Church, intellectuals, trade unions, professional guilds, and the Jewish community all helped defeat the Nazis' plans for mass deportations.

And the many individuals who helped left a legacy of rescue stories. They include:

- * the deputy speaker of the Parliament who ruined his political career but successfully mobilized Parliament members to stop the deportations
- * the baker who hid Jews in his ovens
- * the judge who rescued his friend caught up in a transport of Greek Jews traveling by train through Bulgaria
- * the priest who pledged to board the train to Treblinka along with the Jews if they were deported
- * the teacher who wore a Jewish star out of solidarity with her Jewish friends and the many anonymous Christians who went before daybreak to wash away hateful anti-Semitic slogans Nazis painted during the night on buildings in the capitol of Sofia

The History

In March, 1943, 8,500 prominent Jews in Bulgaria were to be the first from that country to be deported to the death camp at Treblinka. Bulgaria was allied with Germany. They, like many other Jews in the Balkans were “Sephardic,” a word which means “Spanish” in Hebrew and which conjures up the rich traditions of the Jews dispersed from Spain at the time of the Inquisition of 1492. Most of their Sephardic brethren did not survive the Nazi onslaught nearly 500 years later.

In that same month, the Bulgarian government deported and handed over to the Nazis 11,500 Jews from Bulgarian-occupied Thrace and Macedonia. And yet, after waiting several hours at deportation centers, the first targeted Bulgarian Jews were simply told to go home.

Ultimately, despite Nazi pressures, the entire Jewish community of Bulgaria was spared the Holocaust. They were the only Jewish community to survive intact in Nazi Europe. Fifty-thousand people survived because Bulgarian Christians and Muslims found ways to protect their Jewish friends and neighbors. Individuals and organizations made a difference. Ordinary people stood up for their Jewish friends and neighbors. The Church, certain Bulgarian Parliament members, trade unions, professional guilds, and the Jewish community itself all helped defeat the Nazis' plans for mass deportations and the Bulgarian governments eager attempts to fulfill those plans.

Viewers of this film come away with a heightened sense of how individuals can make a difference and can change the course of history. It highlights the importance of personal responsibility, religious and ethnic tolerance, and human and democratic values. Thousands of viewers around the world from all religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds have been moved and inspired by the great act of humanity which lies at the heart of this story.

The Search

Jacky Comforty is an award winning filmmaker and the son of Bulgarian Jews; his paternal grandparents and extended family were among those rounded up for the train ride to Treblinka. He has long been determined to tell the story of the Bulgarian Jews, and their rich Sephardic heritage, and to do so before those who lived it have passed away.

Sweeping changes in Eastern Europe finally made possible exhaustive, ground-breaking research in Bulgaria. Mr. Comforty, along with his wife and co-producer, **Lisa Vogel Comforty**, spent four months in 1990 filming in Bulgaria, Israel, and Spain. Their film is based on materials collected there.

Their collection includes 160 hours of interviews and on-location documenting of communities, social events, landscapes, and other scenes; 5,000 photographs of pre-war and war-time Jewish Sephardic life in Bulgaria; and hours of rare archival film footage, sound recordings, documents, and artifacts.

Before the Comfortys began their original research, few others had interviewed Bulgarian Jews or otherwise documented their experience and heritage. Few photographs of Bulgarian Jewry were formally collected. The Comforty Collection, as it is known at the United States Holocaust Museum, contains about 5,000 photographs of Bulgarian Jewish life from the turn of the century through World War II. The Comfortys discovered about 2,000 photos upon the death of Jacky Comforty's grandmother, Rachel Comforty, who had hidden them in shoe boxes in her Jaffa apartment over the course of forty years. Rachel had carried most of these photographs with her when she emigrated from Bulgaria to Israel in 1949. She had carefully kept them throughout World War II in Bulgaria, carried them with her on a rickety boat to Israel, and then kept them with her in the tents she lived in refugee camps when she first arrived in Israel.

The photos required intensive preservation efforts. Much of the Comfortys' work over the past several years has consisted of cleaning, properly storing, identifying, organizing, and digitally archiving the photos, preparing them for museum archiving and exhibition.

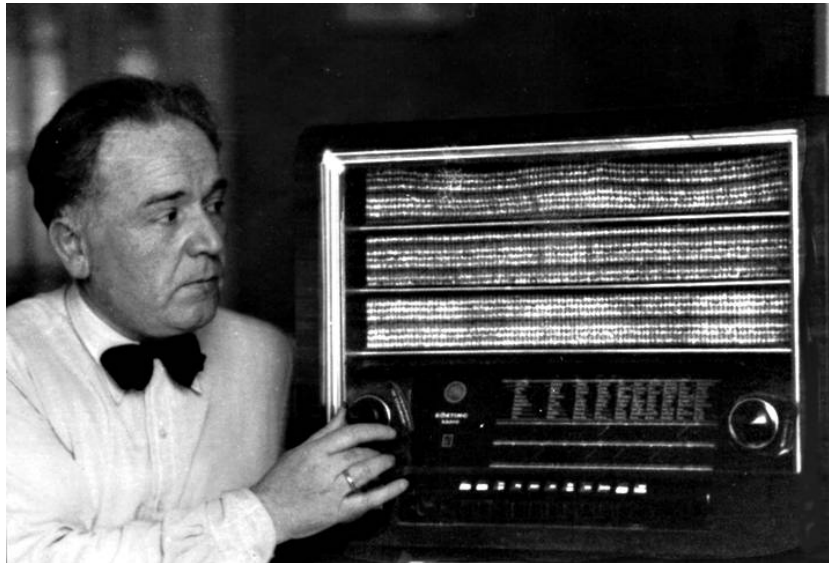
The even greater miracle, of course, is that Bulgarian Jewry escaped the fate suffered by all other Jewish communities in Nazi-allied and occupied Europe. But fifty-eight years have passed since this chapter in Holocaust history and the reasons the Jews were saved, and the very fact itself, remain obscure.

An Example for Today

The Bulgarian Jewish experience provides a model for peaceful coexistence of disparate peoples. During World War II, individuals made a difference, as did organized efforts by many groups. However, Bulgarian Jews, Christians and Moslems have lived together harmoniously in Bulgaria for millennia. The subject offers valuable insight into what conditions encourage the protection of human rights, civil liberties, and tolerant relations between people of different religions and cultures. It is not simply a Jewish story. It is a universal one, powerful in its ability to instruct and inspire all audiences.

The Comfortys' goal is to bring this story to public attention. Their purpose is to heighten appreciation of the potential for human good reflected in this chapter of Holocaust history and to explore how that potential came to be fulfilled. Both current and future generations are, and will always be, in need of such examples. The Bulgarian experience should not be allowed to drift into obscurity. It should remain, along with other instances of rescue, at the forefront of understanding about the Holocaust. The Optimists helps to build awareness about a time and place in which the relentless evil of the Holocaust was, in large measure, vanquished by common decency and uncommon courage.

The Optimists is a presentation of [Comforty Media Concepts](#) and the [Chambon Foundation](#), a non-profit educational foundation established by filmmaker Pierre Sauvage. The Chambon Foundation, is named in honor of the French village of Le Chambon; in the area of Le Chambon, 5,000 Jews were sheltered during the Holocaust by 5,000 Christians. This story that was the subject of Sauvage's highly acclaimed documentary "[Weapons of the Spirit](#)". The Chambon Foundation is dedicated to documentary exploration of the Holocaust and to communicating "the necessary lessons of hope intertwined with the Holocaust's unavoidable lessons of despair."



Jacky Comforty's grandfather, Jacques Ovadia, and his beloved radio. Just before it was confiscated. The radio was their most important means of knowing what was happening in the war. Sofia, Bulgaria; 1941

***The Optimists:
The Story of the Rescue of the Bulgarian Jews from the Holocaust***

Credit List

Director

Jacky Comforty

Writers

Jacky and Lisa Comforty

Producers

Jacky and Lisa Comforty

Co- Producers

**Gail Sonnenfeld
Stefan Sonnenfeld**

Editors

**Jacky Comforty
Lissa Oliver**

Camera

**Yoav Ben David (Israel)
Ivan Varimezov (Bulgaria)
Sid Lubitsch (USA)**

Sound

**Moshe Lubliner (Israel)
Boby Voinishki (Bulgaria)
Ehran Ostreicher (USA)**

Music

Stuart Rosenberg

Special Advisors

**Mr. Nir Baruch
Dr. Moshe Mosek**

Funded in part by grants from:

**Simon Wiesenthal Center
The Maurice Amado Foundation
Illinois Humanities Council
Israeli Ministry of Trade
Evanston Arts Council
The Gloria F. Ross Foundation
Lawyers for the Creative Arts**

The Optimists is a presentation of
**Comforty Media Concepts &
Chambon Foundation.**

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JACKY COMFORTY

Filmmaker, Producer, Distributor, Social Entrepreneur

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Background

Award-winning filmmaker; multimedia and new-media creator and producer. Specializes in customized documentaries, educational and instructional programs for professional and educational application.

Jacky Comforty is multi-skilled, multidisciplinary, multicultural, and multilingual. He has worked for over 35 years creating films and videos in the United States, Germany, Israel, and Bulgaria.

A social-educational entrepreneur whose programs teach, empower, and inspire learning and help training, community-building and outreach activity. His leadership, dedication and integrity have brought international experts and renowned academics to support his endeavors and initiatives.

Over the last 30 years, Jacky Comforty has specialized in two main subjects. His work has been groundbreaking in the fields of **Inclusive Education** and **Holocaust Studies**. He is particularly known for his work on the **rescue of the Bulgarian Jews from the Holocaust**. He is curator and owner of a large photographic, film, and audio archives of historical and scholarly significance to Holocaust Studies and of smaller collections about early childhood education, peace education, and history.

Jacky Comforty is the creator/producer and distributor of the best-selling **Inclusion Series** that helped implement inclusive practices in U.S. school districts and is used in hundreds of universities around the country. He is the creator of educational programs for notable U.S. universities and institutions and for collaborative work with diverse scholars and disciplines. See, e.g., www.inclusionseries.com.

Mr. Comforty is director, co-producer, and editor of the award winning film **The Optimists**, which tells the story of the Bulgarian Jews and their survival during WWII: www.theoptimists.com.

Mr. Comforty commands a range of genres, from documentaries to comedies. He is known for the effective, sensitive, interviewing techniques he has developed for oral histories and other projects requiring on-camera discussions that are genuine, meaningful, and in-depth.

Mr. Comforty opened his educational media company, **Comforty Media Concepts, Inc.**, in 1987. His production company is well equipped with multi-format, full scale, state-of-the-art design and production technologies, video editing, and other post-production capabilities.

His sharp analytical skills, rich artistic range yet minimalistic and effective approach, knowledge of world history and cultures, and expertise in media technologies provide a powerful foundation for achieving creative

goals. His ability to work with diverse kinds of professionals and scholars on multidisciplinary projects and his ability to provide an overarching vision lead projects that involve multi-cultural, multi-disciplinary sensitivities and provide documentation, archiving, publication, and distribution expertise.

Jacky Comforty creates original, customized solutions for all clients or projects, including video programs, media installations, and high-end content for museums, publishers, universities. Educated at Tel Aviv and Ben-Gurion Universities in film and television and classical history, Mr. Comforty speaks and lectures in English, Hebrew, German, and Bulgarian.

Mr. Comforty's video work and media installations have been displayed in major museums in the United States; 54 hours of his oral histories are archived with the United States Holocaust Museum and the Simon Wiesenthal Museum of Tolerance.

His independent documentary work has received numerous awards in major international film festivals and his work has been screened in over 100 cities worldwide. He is a popular speaker whose after-screening presentations include lively question-and-answer sessions with audiences.

In recent years, he has focused on media education and documentation of best practices in the fields of inclusive education and early childhood education in Israel and Bulgaria. He has led initiatives to support Bulgarian early childhood education and research.

Awards and Grants

- 2016 Production grant from the Smithville Foundation for ***The Quest for Best***
- 2016 Production grant from the Starseed foundation for www.earlychildhoodmedia.com
- 2015 Initial grant from the Starseed foundation for www.earlychildhoodmedia.com
- 2015 Preservation grant by the Eugene & Emily Grant Family Foundation for **The Comforty Archives.**
- 2002 Artist-in-Residence in Berlin, DAAD fellowship.
- 2002 Communicator Award, ***In the Shadow of Memory.***
- 2001 Co-Winner of the Peace Prize and Honorable Mention at the International Forum of New Cinema Berlin International Film Festival, ***The Optimists.***
- 2001 CINE Golden Eagle, ***The Optimists.***
- 2001 Best Documentary, Hope and Dreams Film Festival, ***The Optimists.***
- 2000, First Prize, Jerusalem Film Festival, The Jewish Experience, ***The Optimists.***
- 1999 Karlovy Vary film Festival, ***In the Shadow of Memory.***
- 1998 CINE Golden Eagle, ***In the Shadow of Memory.***
- 1998 Fellowship, Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture
- 1998 Finalist, Jerusalem Film Festival, ***In the Shadow of Memory.***
- 1997 CINE Golden Eagle, ***Through A Glass, Lightly.***
- 1997 Gold Hugo, (Chicago International), ***Step by Step: Heather's Story.***
- 1997 Bronze Apple, National Educational Media, ***Through A Glass, Lightly.***
- 1996 Cultural Fund Grant, Evanston Arts Council
- 1995 First Prize, Arts: Artists, AAM Muse Awards, ***Through A Glass, Lightly.***
- 1994 Production Grant, Illinois Humanities Council
- 1993 Media Award, Illinois-TASH for ***The Inclusion Series.***
- 1993 Major Production Grant, Maurice Amado Foundation, ***The Optimists.***

Selected Film and Video Projects

- 2016-17** **earlychildhoodmedia.org** a new video documentation resource of early childhood education in Bloomington Indiana, to support training and learning for the global early childhood education community. The site has over 500 video clips and movies, and interviews.
- 2015** **edu-media-bg.com** a new video resource to support training and learning for the early childhood education community in Bulgaria. The site has over 300 video clips and movies, articles, lectures and interviews.
- 2014** **Inclusionseries.org** a new video resource to support training and learning about a variety of educational and human issues. The site has some 700 video clips.
- 2013** **BALKAN JAZZ. Comforty Media Concepts.** A documentary about two musician brothers and their friends, and how music, war, and luck and survival shaped their lives.
- 2011** **EDUCATORS' TOOLBOX. Sofia University and Comforty Media Concepts.** Workshop with K-12 teachers about media literacy and classroom usage of media for education, communication, and documentation.
- 2010** **THE FUTURE IS NOW. Tufts University, Sofia University, and Comforty Media Concepts.** Strategic plan for an Early Childhood Development Center in Sofia, Bulgaria, and a major documentation and research project focused on Best Practices in early childhood education in the United States and in Reggio Emilia, Italy.
- 2010** **TEACHER STEREOTYPES. Sofia University department of continuous Education.** A new media projects comprised of interviews with teachers, directors, parents, students, and experts about teaching and being a teacher.
- 2009** **MISIKUN LESIKUY. Comforty Media Concepts, Ashalim JDC Israel.** A two-year documentary project about an inclusion program of toddlers with special needs in a day care center in Ashkelon, Israel.
- 2008** **INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: THE VARNA EXPERIENCE. Comforty Media Concepts.** Educational documentary about inclusive education of all children into school and community. For an International Educational Conference organized by the City of Varna, Bulgaria, October 2008.
- 2008** **THIS IS MY BODY** and **TESTIMONY. Comforty Media Concepts, Ashalim JDC Israel.** Two videos about people with disabilities who were victims of sexual abuse and exploitation.
- 2007** **PENKA'S SCHOOL OF LOVE. Comforty Media Concepts.** A short educational documentary about a pioneer of early childhood education in Bulgaria. For the Fourth International Conference on Children and

Adults, Adults and Children” organized by the Elisabeth Clarke and Penka Kassabova Association, Sofia, Bulgaria, and it's chair, Dr. Rayna Zaharieva, PhD.

2005 ***FRIENDSHIP.*** Comforty Media Concepts/Inclusion Press International. Educational documentary about the importance of friendship in the inclusion of children into community, society and school.

2001 ***THE OPTIMISTS.*** Comforty Media Concepts/The Chambon Foundation. Independent documentary about the rescue of Bulgarian Jewry from the Holocaust. **Peace Prize winner at the Berlin International Film Festival** and **First Prize for “Documenting the Jewish Experience,” the Jerusalem International Film Festival 2000.**

2000 ***INCLUSION HIGH.*** Comforty Media Concepts/Chicago Public Schools. Documentary about the inclusion of students from 60 nations one Chicago high school.

1998 ***IN THE SHADOW OF MEMORY.*** Comforty Media Concepts/The Collected Image. A documentary about living in the aftermath of Lidice, the Catholic Czech town destroyed by the Nazis during World War II for alleged Resistance collaborations. Funding made possible by Chambon Foundation. **CINE Golden Eagle, 1998. Karlovy Vary Film Festival, Jerusalem International Film Festival, Communicator Award, Bronze award.**

1996 ***THROUGH A GLASS, LIGHTLY: THE ARTISTS COMMENT ON RECLAMATION AND TRANSFORMATION.*** Terra Museum of American Art, Chicago, IL. About the lives and work of three outsider-artists who collect what others discard, turn it into sculpture and paintings, and, through art, teach inner city youth to appreciate and care for their surroundings. **1997 CINE Golden Eagle; 1995 First Prize, Arts: Artists Category, American Association of Museums Muse Awards; 1995 Bronze Apple, NEMN.**

1995 ***UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM.*** 54 hours of oral histories conducted with Bulgarian Jews and 58 photos from the **Comforty Collection** of over 5,000 photos for permanent archiving and future use in museum exhibitions.

1995 ***ST. LOUIS HOLOCAUST MUSEUM .*** 30 Hour oral history project. Historical research, archival photo, and film research. Five videos and eight audio programs and their integration into this museum dedicated to Holocaust education.

1992 ***THE FULL CIRCLE: Excerpts from Survivors’ Stories.*** A video programs integrated in the permanent exhibit of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum. Excerpts from oral histories with individuals who benefited from Hoover’s famine relief efforts during the two World Wars, interwoven with archival film footage and photographs.

1991-1997 ***THE INCLUSION SERIES.*** Gold Hugo (Chicago International Film Festival), **1993 Media Award for Contributions to People with Severe Disabilities granted by Illinois-TASH** (The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps, a leading, nation-wide advocacy organization.), for *The Inclusion Series*. This 10 tape best-selling series is distributed to educational institutions nation-wide and internationally by Comforty Media Concepts.

Inclusion Series: Best-Selling Programs

1996 *Step by Step: Heather's Story*. 65-minute documentary video for parents and educators about inclusion over time. This video provides a two-year, longitudinal look at a little girl with Down Syndrome who progresses from special education classroom to neighborhood school. 1997 **Gold Hugo**.

1993 *Families, Friends, Futures*. 23-minute documentary video for general audiences about the need for inclusion of young people with disabilities into both school and community.

1992 *Inclusion: Issues for Educators*. 20-minute documentary video addressing inclusion from the perspective of teachers and administrators.

1991 *Choices*. 30-minute documentary video profiling four individuals with disabilities and their inclusion into regular classrooms.

Publications:

- Humanistic approach to working with children with special educational needs / an example of a day care center in the town of Ashkelon, Israel / for Conference on Early Childhood Education at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", 2009. With Associate Professor Rayna Zaharieva, PhD.
- Inclusion of children with special educational needs in US schools, the "Management of secondary education" issue 5, 2008, pp. 67-74. With Associate Professor Rayna Zaharieva, PhD.
- Issues concerning teachers about inclusion of children with special educational needs in American schools, s.258-263. For the international conference "Humanity and pragmatism in education for the XXI Century", Varna, 2007. With Associate Professor Rayna Zaharieva, PhD
- Including children with special educational needs – the experience in the American schools. Online magazine "E-learning", June 2006/2007g., P 27-44. With Associate Professor Rayna Zaharieva, PhD.
- MEDIA EDUCATION AND MEDIA LITERACY – manual for teachers on understanding media critically and using new and old media in the classroom and as a good tool.



The Optimists

Rachamim Comforty and his “two wives.” His first wife was Rosa (left). Her sister, Rachelle (right), became his second wife when Rosa died.

Dupnitsa, Bulgaria; 1920



The Optimists

The Comfortys, minus one.

Jacky Comforty’s paternal grandfather and his family just before they were to be deported to concentration camps: Rachelle, Mimi, Aaron, and Rachamim Comforty. At home in Plovdiv, Bulgaria.

Not in picture: Bitush, Jacky’s father, who was interned in a forced labor camp.

Note Jewish star on Rachamim.
March, 1943.



The Optimists

Mother and child: Thracian Jews deported through Bulgaria in March, 1943.

They and all those deported with them were murdered shortly after this picture was taken.

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The Optimists

Sisters: Jacky Comforty's mother, Ika, and her sister, Vicki.

The sun is reflecting off Ika's Jewish star.

Photo taken after they and other Sofia Jews were exiled to the provinces.

Pleven, Bulgaria; 1943.



The Optimists

Jewish wedding party, circa early 1920's.

Jacky Comforty's grandfather, Rachamim Comforty, is the third on the right.

Rachelle Beracha Comforty is seated at the far end.

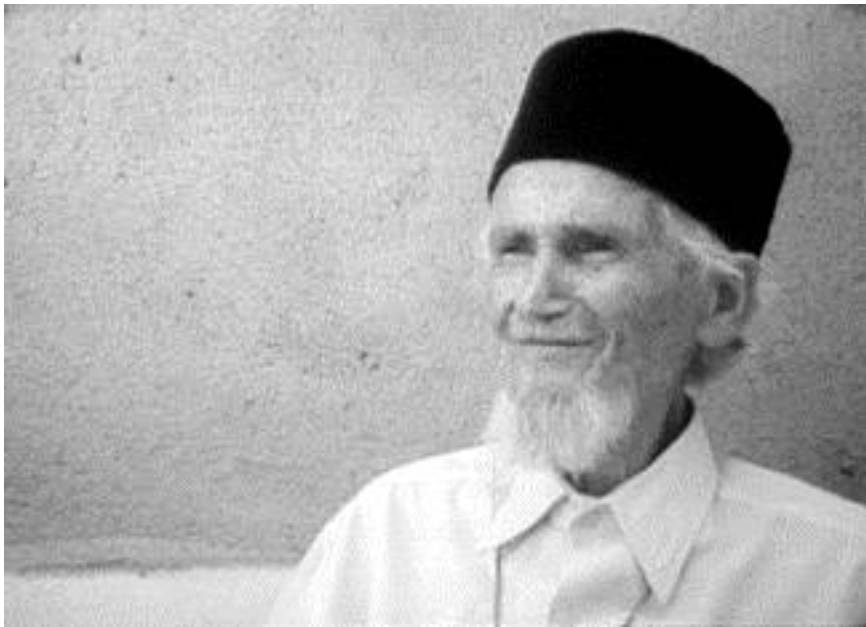


The Optimists

Jewish laborers in a Bulgarian forced labor camp near Greek border. 1942.

Jacky Comforty's father is first on the right.

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The Optimists

Bishop Boris Kharalampiev,

Bishop of Pazardjik, Bulgaria, who helped stop the deportations of Jews from his city in 1943.



The Optimists

The Optimists in concert, Sofia, 1940.

Niko Nissimov, first from Right.



The Optimists


Rubin Dimitrov, Baker, Bulgaria

Mr. Dimitrov hid Jews in the ovens of his bakery during a police raid in Sofia, in May 24 1943,


Mr. Dimitrov is one of 15 Bulgarians recognized by Yad Vashem as "Righteous Among the Nations."

Every one is moved and inspired by
The Optimists

“A rare documentary . . . compact and elegant.”
- Dana Stevens, New York Times

“Uplifting documentary . . . fascinating story.” 
- Ken Fox, TV Guide

“A miraculous sharp movie.” 
- Patrick Z. McGavin, Chicago Tribune

“Individuals triumph over odds in inspiring ‘Optimists’.” 
- Hedy Weiss, Chicago Sun Times

“Potent and gripping. . . . an extraordinary set of circumstances”
- Sarah Madsen Hardy, Boston Globe


“As a human sentiment, it’s touching to behold.”
- James Crawford, Village Voice


“A rare instance of humanity during the Holocaust.”
- Chad Frade, Time Out New York

“This film celebrates the human spirit.
It offers hope that people can learn to live together in peace.”
- Leora Frucht, The Jerusalem Post

“A must see documentary memorable”
- Masha Leon, Forward

“A moving tribute to moral courage”
- George Robinson, Jewish Week

“Spellbinding. . . A message of inspiration and hope.” 
- Bruce Ingram, Pioneer Press.

“The message is so powerful . . . one of the best films of the year.” 
- George O. Singleton, www.ReelMovieCritic.com

“Engaging documentary . . . moving and heartwarming”
- The NYC Movie Guru

“The Optimists is a wonderful film . . . a moving testament to human decency.”
- Annette Insdorf, Author of “Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust.”

“A powerful and heartwarming story which deserves to be seen and discussed.”
- Rabbi Peter Knobel, Beth Emeth, The Free Synagogue.

"A Rare Documentary . . . Compact and Elegant"



Tales of Survival During the Second World War

By DANA STEVENS - New York Times

It's a rare documentary about the Holocaust that would dare call itself "[The Optimists](#)." But in addition to being the name of a 1940's jazz ensemble founded by a man interviewed in the film, the title is oddly fitting for this chronicle of the Bulgarian Jews' near-miraculous survival of the Second World War.

The Bulgarian Jewish population was one of the very few in Europe to survive the Holocaust almost untouched. In 1943, 8,500 Jews, among them the family of the film's director, Jacky Comforty, were rounded up and escorted to schoolyards and other sites around the country to await deportation to Treblinka. But for reasons that remain unclear, after waiting all day, the entire group was sent home.

Even as the government of occupied Bulgaria signed sinister compromises with the Nazis (including a pact allowing its Jewish citizens living in other occupied countries to be sent to death camps), Bulgarians, Christian and Muslim, rose up to protest the persecution, somehow managing to delay the deportation of Jews long enough for the war to come to an end.

The director, who also served as producer along with Lisa Comforty, his wife, spent 12 years compiling the archival clips and photographs that make up this compact and elegant film.

The Optimists: The Story of the Rescue of the Bulgarian Jews From the Holocaust Opens today in Manhattan.

Directed by Jacky Comforty; written and produced by Jacky and Lisa Comforty; directors of photography, Yoav Ben David, Ivan Varimezov and Sid Lubitsch; edited by Jacky Comforty and Lissa Oliver; music by Stuart Rosenberg; released by Castle Hill. At the Quad Cinema, 34 Westth Street, Greenwich Village.

Running time: 82 minutes. This film is not rated.

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MOVIES NOW FILMS: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Review: 'The Optimists' reveals Bulgarians' courage amid cruelty

Jacky Comforty's documentary is a gripping retelling of how one nation's Jews and non-Jews banded together to face down the tyranny of World War II.

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The Comforty family minus one, 1943. (Comforty Media Concepts. / November 16, 2012)

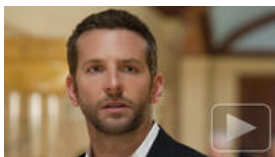
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By Kenneth Turan, Los Angeles Times Film Critic
November 15, 2012 | 4:10 p.m.

"The Optimists" is a simple film, as much family memoir as documentary. But the story it tells is as significant as it is little known: the people of Bulgaria rose up in 1943 and saved the country's Jews from deportation to the death camps of World War II.

Completed several years ago, "The Optimists" (named after a jazz band of the period with Jewish members) is playing in Los Angeles now because of an exhibition at UCLA's Hillel Center titled "Bulgaria and the Holocaust: The Fragility of Goodness." Whatever the reason, this is a tale well worth telling.

Directed by Jacky Comforty, whose family was among those saved, "The Optimists" reveals the sequence of events that kept all 49,000 of Bulgaria's Jews out of the camps. The heart of the reason is that for generations Bulgarian Jews, Muslims and Christians lived together in the kind of multicultural amity that is often talked about but rarely achieved. As Bishop

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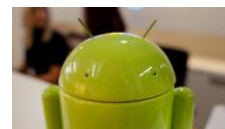
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Boris of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church says with feeling, "it is criminal to impose religious beliefs on your fellow man."

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Once World War II began, Bulgaria's rulers signed an alliance with Germany, which meant among other things that Jews were conscripted into forced labor camps inside the country and were forced to wear yellow stars.

But when word leaked out that 8,500 Jews had been rounded up early on the morning of March 10, 1943, and placed on trains destined for the concentration camp Treblinka, their non-Jewish fellow countrymen made their voices heard. Dimitar Peshev, the deputy speaker of the National Assembly, risked his career and his life by organizing a letter signed by 43 deputies denouncing the deportations and insisted to the country's interior minister that they be stopped.

Similarly, Patriarch Cyril, head of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, said he would be deported along with the Jews if the order stood. By the end of the day, amazingly, all the Jews who'd been rounded up were released.

PHOTOS: Celebrities by The Times

"The Optimists" is filled with first-person testimony from Jews who were saved and non-Jews who saved them, people

like Rubin Dimitrov, a baker who hid Jews in his ovens and says simply, "a true human being is obliged to help." As a rescued Jew says with emotion at the film's conclusion, "to be a Bulgarian is to be a mensch."

kenneth.turan@latimes.com

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'The Optimists'

No MPAA rating

Running time: 1 hour, 22 minutes

Playing: At Laemmle's Music Hall, Beverly Hills and Town Center 5, Encino

PHOTOS AND MORE



VIDEO: A guide to upcoming movies



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MOVIE REVIEWS



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OPTIMISTS, THE
Jacky Comforty, 2000

Our rating: ★ ★ ★ ★

- REVIEW
- SHOWTIME & TICKETS
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REVIEW

Sofia's saints

Jacky Comforty's unexpectedly uplifting documentary about the plight of Bulgarian Jews during the Holocaust begins with an all-too-familiar scenario. In the early morning darkness of March 10, 1943, all the Jews in the Bulgarian town of Pazardjik were roused from their beds, ordered to pack a few of their belongings and marched at gunpoint to a schoolyard to await deportation. Bulgaria had allied itself with Germany's Nazi regime, and Bulgarian Jews living in Nazi-occupied territories such as Greece and Macedonia had already been rounded up and sent to death camps at Auschwitz and Treblinka. But something totally unexpected happened to Pazardjik's Jews: Instead of being packed into trains that would transport them to their deaths, they were simply sent home after an agonizing, day-long wait. In the coming months, Bulgaria's 50,000 Jews, including Comforty's family, were miraculously saved. But why? Digging deep into the past, Comforty tells the fascinating story of Christian and Muslim citizens who refused to abandon their friends and neighbors, even after their government instituted anti-Semitic laws similar to Germany's and made it clear that it was willing to sacrifice Jews to their fates. Comforty outlines the roots of this age-old camaraderie — bonds cemented in the egalitarian language of the country's 1879 constitution — then tells a number of inspiring stories of rescue and extraordinary courage. The vice president of the Bulgarian parliament demanded the deportations be postponed; a humble baker hid Jews in his bread ovens. The bishop of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church threatened to join his friends on the trains if any of Pazardjik's Jews were deported. Ten *thousand* demonstrators who had gathered in Sofia, Bulgaria's capital, rioted when they learned that the city's Jews were to be sent north to Poland and Germany. This is the rare Holocaust documentary that ends on an optimistic note, and Comforty's film might even help reinforce one's faith in humankind, even as it begs the troubling question of why such courage and resistance was in short supply in other European countries. — Ken Fox



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In Theaters

The Optimists

There's much to admire in *The Optimists*, a lean, engrossing documentary about the persecution of Bulgaria's Jews during the Holocaust and the ways in which their multicultural, poly-religious community (Jews, Muslims, and Christians lived side by side) rallied to save them. One moment in particular resonates in the present. An elderly Christian bishop, after detailing how the various communities harmoniously coexisted for centuries before the Nazis arrived, explains his own beliefs and teachings: "It is criminal to impose your spiritual beliefs on your fellow man." With great economy but never skimping on detail, co-directors Jacky and Lisa Comforty outline how their ancestors were driven out of Spain before settling in Bulgaria, bringing with them the Spanish language and elements of Spanish culture, as well as Jewish traditions, all of which they retained as they settled into and absorbed the traditions of Bulgaria. The conscious decision was made to melt into Bulgarian culture in order to stave off a repeat of past Jewish exiles. For years, it worked, but with the rise of Nazism and a Bulgarian government that was enmeshed economically with Germany, the safety net was dangerously frayed. The beauty of *The Optimists* (the title is taken from the name of the jazz band one of the subjects formed in 1937) is in various subjects recounting how non-Jewish friends rose up as protectors. The lesson of the film is the way it illustrates how the monstrous and the sublime, the best and worst of human nature are in a constant tango and what we might all learn from the past.

Ernest Hardy

TICKETS

Movie Details

Genre: Drama
Release Date: 2001-02-08 Limited, 2005-10-21 Limited
Running Time: 83 min.
Director: Jacky Comforty
Producers: Jacky Comforty, Lisa Comforty
Writers: Jacky Comforty, Lisa Comforty
Distributor: Castle Hill Productions

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Theaters showing *The Optimists*
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2. *Flight*, 24.9 mil, 24.9 mil
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4. *The Man with the Iron Fists*, 7.9 mil, 7.9 mil
5. *Taken 2*, 5.9 mil, 125.6 mil
6. *Cloud Atlas*, 5.4 mil, 18.4 mil
7. *Hotel Transylvania*, 4.4 mil, 137.5 mil
8. *Paranormal Activity 4*, 4.3 mil, 49.5 mil
9. *Here Comes the Boom*, 3.5 mil, 35.5 mil
10. *Silent Hill: Revelation 3D*, 3.3 mil, 13.9 mil

Movie Title, Weekly Earnings, Total Earnings

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The Optimists

Dir. Jacky Comforty. 2000. NR. 82mins. In Bulgarian, English and Hebrew, with subtitles. Documentary.

Director Jacky Comforty and his wife and co-writer, Lisa, spent 12 years crafting this documentary about the rescue of 50,000 Bulgarian Jews by their Christian and Muslim neighbors. Utilizing preserved photographs, old newsreels of Nazi rallies and interviews with survivors living in Israel, *The Optimists*, which takes its title from a popular Bulgarian jazz band of the WWII era, uncovers a rare instance of humanity during the Holocaust. The doc occasionally becomes overtly sentimental, even embellishing b&w photographs with color to overemphasize certain dramatic elements. But the interviews are solid and offer insight into the atrocity.—*Chad Frade*

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Tracking Shots

'The Optimists'

by James Crawford

October 18th, 2005 2:00 PM

Less documentary than expansive memoir, Jacky Comforty's *The Optimists* filters stock footage and official history through personal recollection—it's a way of expressing what we might call survivor's disbelief. In World War II, as Europe's conquered nations sent their Jewish citizens to concentration camps, Bulgaria's population of 50,000 Jews miraculously escaped execution. Comforty, a survivor's grandson, asks, "What was it about Bulgaria that allowed our parents' and grandparents' generations to survive, and our generation to be born?" He interviews survivors who awaited deportation only to be sent back, helpless witnesses of those government roundups, and most poignantly, a surviving member of the Bulgarian Orthodox church whose civil disobedience saved thousands of lives. Amid the voluminous recollections, a novel thesis emerges: Bulgarian compassion and religious tolerance, tempered by a half-century-long Turkish occupation, staved off tragedy. Questionable as a theory of history, but as a human sentiment, it's touching to behold.

Holocaust Documentaries Move Toward the Personal

By ANNETTE INSDORF

Among the growing number of films that deal with the Holocaust, a sub-genre of personal documentaries has emerged. One of the best examples is "The Optimists: The Story of the Rescue of the Jews of Bulgaria," which the New York Jewish Film Festival presents January 22 and 23 at the Walter Reade Theater. As in other films of return, a child of survivors journeys with a camera not only into Europe but into the past.

In these riveting documentaries, the director goes back to the scene of the crime, or of the rescue. Some are investigative, such as Mira Hamermesh's "Loving the Dead" (1991) and Pavel Lozinski's "Birthplace" (1992), in which the subjects attempt to find out how their Polish-Jewish parents were murdered. Others are commemorative, from "The Last Days" (1999) to "Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the *Kindertransport*." And a few are celebratory, such as "The Children of Chabannes" (2000) and "The Optimists," which chronicle the rescue of Jews in France and Bulgaria.

The physical return of a survivor to ghostly killing fields was first presented in fairly straightforward documentaries such as "Kitty: Return to Auschwitz" (1980) and "Return to Poland" (1981). In 1984, Robert Clary (the actor who played Louis Lebeau in the popular TV series "Hogan's Heroes") went back to his former homes of Paris, the Drancy internment camp and Buchenwald for the film "Robert Clary 5714: A Memoir of Liberation." One year later, the actor and teacher Jack Garfien was the focus of "A Journey Back" (1985), in which he returns to Auschwitz as well as his Slovakian hometown (whose synagogue had become an abandoned warehouse for ovens).

By the late 1980s, films narrated by second-generation voices also sought out those who hid and saved their parents. For example, "The Righteous Enemy" (1987), directed by Joseph Rochlitz, begins with the story of his father — who was interned by the Italians — and proceeds to explore the Italian resistance that kept 40,000 Jews from being deported to concentration camps.

The attempt of a child of survivors to grasp and make sense of a parent's legacy is also found in "Voices from the Attic" (1988), in which director Debbie Goodstein returns to

the Polish attic where her mother was hidden for two years with 15 other Jews. Accompanied by her aunt, Ms. Goodstein not only commemorates the past but confronts contemporary anti-Semitism in Poland, found in the form of swastikas and verbal slurs.

Similarly, Melissa Hacker's "My Knees Were Jumping: Remembering the *Kindertransports*" (1986) centers on the Holocaust survival of her mother, famed costume designer Ruth Morley, before expanding to others lucky enough to be in the *Kindertransports*. Interspersed are scenes of their reunion, acknowledging not only their good fortune to be taken in by England between December 1938 and August 1939, but their ruptured childhoods. And in the Emmy award-winning "Children of Chabannes," Lisa Gossels and Dean Wetherell tell the story of a French village whose population of roughly 300 managed to save nearly 400 Jewish children — mainly refugees from Germany and Austria — including Ms. Gossels's father and uncle.

This recent emphasis on rescue and resistance offers, of course, a painfully partial picture of European response during World War II. A more typical example of wartime behavior can be found in Jacky Comforty's previous film, "In the Shadow of Memory: Legacies of Lidice" (1999). Unlike Bulgaria's comparatively uplifting Holocaust story, the Czech town of Lidice was the site of extreme Nazi barbarism. In retaliation for the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich in 1942 — and to deter further acts of resistance in Czechoslovakia — the Nazis killed the Catholic village's 192 men, sent the 203 women to Ravensbruck, murdered 82 children (giving 16 for adoption by German families through the *Lebensborn* program) and destroyed the landscape of Lidice.

"The Optimists," on the other hand, is a compelling reminder of how ordinary people acted with atypical decency. It moves from the personal to the universal, as Mr. Comforty returns to Bulgaria. We see a photo of his father and the two sisters he married; Mr. Comforty's gentle voice-over narration explains how, after his first wife died, his father married her surviving sister. Given the silence he grew up with in Israel vis-à-vis the Holocaust — "each generation tried to protect the other from memories of the past" — his return goes beyond the investigative to the triumphant.

The story he tells, interwoven with revealing interviews, is quite amazing. Because Bulgaria was officially Germany's ally, it enjoyed more leeway to protect Jews than occupied countries did. We see the tension between policy and polis, between secret deportation orders to ship out all the Jews and the refusal of the population to comply. Bulgaria became Germany's ally because of the political promise of occupying three neighboring territories — Macedonia, Yugoslavia and Thrace. Despite the sorrowful fact that more than 11,000 "Aegean Jews" were indeed deported and killed, about 50,000 Bulgarian Jews slated for extermination were ultimately saved.

Why did the Bulgarians refuse to hand over their neighbors? Why was there not even a ghetto? "The Optimists" demonstrates that it was partly because Bulgaria had been oppressed by the Turks for 500 years and, as a rabbi says, Bulgarian Jews always invited Christians to synagogue, and attended church on Easter. Anti-Semitism simply wasn't part of their lives (even if it existed in the ancestral memory of this Sephardic population who originally escaped from the Spanish inquisition).

Mr. Comforty seeks out and honors the daily resistance of the population. For example, a teacher allowed four Jewish girls — including his mother — to become kindergarten teachers even though Jews were not permitted in the classroom; in a moving moment, we see the two women, both approaching the end of their lives, reunited. And, ironically enough, where did a baker hide a few Jews? In his oven.

Jewish men did go to a forced labor camp, but the details they recall (heightened by evocative photographs) are filled with paradoxes. Niko, a musician, recalls putting on an opera in the labor camp. He is connected to the film's title, as "The Optimists" was the name of his jazz band. The title might also refer to how the audience feels after watching such a moving testament to human decency.

Ms. Insdorf is the author of "Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust" — whose updated third edition will be published by Cambridge University in late 2002 — and of "Double Lives, Second Chances: The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieslowski," which Talk/Miramax Books is publishing in paperback in April.

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Individuals triumph over odds in inspiring 'Optimists'

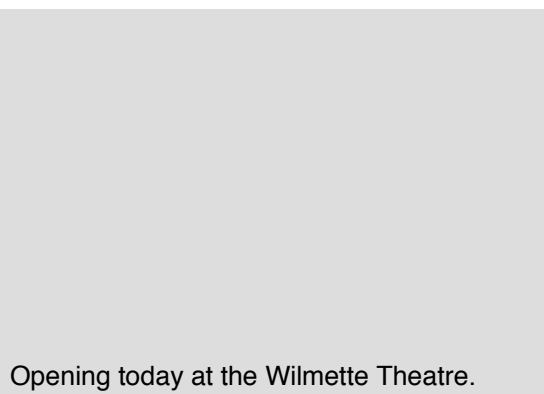
October 18, 2002

BY **HEDY WEISS** STAFF REPORTER

In many ways, "The Optimists": The Story of the Rescue of the Bulgarian Jews from the Holocaust," is an all too horrifyingly familiar look at how the Jewish population of Europe was methodically robbed of its rights, isolated, terrorized, sent into desperate exile (the lucky ones), or packed onto trains and taken to such Nazi death camps as Treblinka, Auschwitz and Buchenwald.

What sets the film apart from this larger story, however, is the fact that the majority of Bulgarian Jews--of which there were about 50,000 in 1943--miraculously managed to elude the death camps even as their immediate neighbors in Yugoslavia, Greece and Romania--as well as the 11,500 Jews of Bulgarian-occupied Thrace and Macedonia--did not.

According to the decidedly optimistic interpretation put forth in this prize-winning documentary by the husband-and-wife team of Jacky and Lisa Comforty, the salvation of the Bulgarian Jews was possible primarily because a large enough number of their countrymen--intellectuals, teachers and tradesmen, Orthodox Christians and Muslims, and even a few Parliamentarians--had the courage and decency to protest their treatment. Even more crucially, a number of those with real influence managed to reach the highest levels of power and pressure those in charge to delay the mass deportations of the Jews that were just one order away from taking place.



Cynics in the audience may applaud the heroic actions of a bold minority but just as easily pick up on other decidedly less uplifting factors that clearly contributed to the anomaly of the Bulgarian Jews--a combination of factors, including luck, timing and, ironically, the Bulgarian government's early alliance with the Nazis, which gave its officials a certain level of autonomy.

Opening today at the Wilmette Theatre.

To their credit, the Comfortys (he is the Israeli-born son of Bulgarian survivors whose story is central to the film; his wife was born in Chicago) do not downplay the easy alliance of the Bulgarian government with the Nazis, or the spirit of anti-Semitism that quickly swept the country.

But the film's reason for being is, as its title suggests, a more optimistic one. It is to show how even under the most repressive and dangerous conditions, the valiant efforts of individual people of conscience can have a powerful effect.

The film takes its title from the name of a popular, multicultural jazz band that thrived in Bulgaria in the years before the war, and exists to this day. Its music and its musicians--a Balkan stew with a touch of Greek, Arabic and klezmer seasoning--serves as a metaphor for the better nature of the region, and its "strange, beautiful harmonies." One of its original Jewish members, Niko Nissimov (a Jewish pharmacist and musician who is a vibrant presence in the documentary), was saved by Christian friends who tracked him down in Thrace and got him transferred to Bulgaria proper.

The Bulgarian Jewish community was comprised primarily of Sephardic Jews who had settled there nearly five centuries earlier after another major expulsion--the Spanish Inquisition. There was never a Jewish ghetto in the country. And in the years before the war, as several elderly people in the film explain, people participated in each other's religious holiday celebrations and many other aspects of daily life. Cultural pluralism was the rule rather than the exception.

Yet by 1936, the Bulgarian government had allied itself with Hitler's Germany, enticed by promises that it would regain previously lost territory. Within the next few years the Jews began feeling threatened with ever-escalating restrictions, and anti-Semitic propaganda was in full force. Jewish men were sent to forced labor camps by the early 1940s. And by 1942, when "The Final Solution" was devised in Germany, fear was palpable. By March 1943, when the Comfortys and other Jewish families heard a knock on their doors and were escorted to the playground of the local Jewish school, they were sure the end had come.

In the years leading up to that moment there had been laudable individual acts of courage. A school principal hired Jewish teachers for her kindergarten, even though this was not permitted. A baker hid Jews in, of all places, his oven. Anonymous Christians banded together to wash away Nazi slogans scrawled on buildings in the Bulgarian capital, Sofia. An influential priest pledged that if the Jews were deported he would board the train to Treblinka along with them. And perhaps most crucially, a deputy speaker of the Bulgarian Parliament risked his life and sabotaged his career to mobilize fellow Parliament members to stop the deportations.

The plight of Jacky Comforty's Bulgarian Jewish family, which settled in Israel after the war, anchors the documentary, with extensive archival material and enthralling interviews collected after the changes in post-1990 Eastern Europe. This material is supplemented by a personal archive of 2,000 photos that was hidden away by Comforty's grandmother. Chicago-based musician-composer Stuart Rosenberg has supplied much of the film's score.

The Comfortys are keenly attuned to many of the ironies of the post-Holocaust fates of Bulgarian Jews. Those who did not leave the country endured a half-century of Soviet oppression. Those who fled to Israel have watched the inevitable loss of their specifically Bulgarian Jewish identity and, although it is never verbalized, ended up in yet another tumultuous situation.

In such a world, perhaps it is only the optimists who can prevail.

Chicago Tribune

Movie review, 'The Optimists'

By Patrick Z. McGavin

Any suspicion that Holocaust documentaries have been thoroughly exhausted is contradicted by the miraculous, sharp movie "The Optimists."

Made by the Israel-born documentarian Jacky Comforty and his wife, Chicago native Lisa Comforty, the movie recounts a remarkable story not widely known: the intervention of Bulgaria's Christian and Muslim communities to secure the safety of 50,000 Bulgarian Jews who had been earmarked for extermination in Nazi death camps.

Comforty draws on haunting, evocative photographs, newsreel footage, contemporary interviews and family history in granting this astonishing story weight and resonance. The movie's title references the name of a Bulgarian jazz band Comforty's grandfather played in.

3 stars (out of 4)

"The Optimists"

In German, Bulgarian and Hebrew; English subtitled. Running time: 1:24. No MPAA rating (no objectionable material).



A&E / FESTIVAL FEVER

Jewish stories, not victims

By Sarah Madsen Hardy, Globe Correspondent, 4/15/2001

It is fitting that the opening of Jewishfilm.2001: From Vilna to Jaffa – a series showcasing independent Jewish film from around the world – is scheduled to coincide with Holocaust Remembrance Day, April 19. This year's program, featuring seven formidable films and a number of shorts, proves that in 2001 there are still new stories about the Holocaust to be told.

Despite its up-to-the-minute name, many of Jewishfilm.2001's offerings reflect back on this defining event of 20th-century history. But the festival also highlights the need to move beyond the perception of Jews as history's victims.

Images of goose-stepping Nazis and emaciated concentration camp prisoners are few and far between. Instead, the films represent Jews fiercely, and sometimes triumphantly, resisting oppression and moving on.

This year's documentary selections, in particular, surprise with moments of power and light: An elderly Jewish tailor recounts how he felt, as a teenager, lobbing a pipe bomb into a nightclub crowded with German officers in 1943 France. A Bulgarian Jew describes the solidarity of her childhood girlfriend, a Christian, who walked with her, hand in hand, to the train when she was deported.

Most potent and gripping are two documentaries telling stories of heroism from the World War II era that have, until now, remained obscure. "Terrorists in Retirement" (April 21) is about a group of Jewish immigrants who participated in armed resistance against the Nazis in occupied France. "The Optimists" (April 29) explores the extraordinary set of circumstances that allowed all of Bulgaria's 50,000 Jews to survive the Holocaust.

"The Optimists" offers another example of how individuals' acts of heroism can be skewed for political purposes. Few people know the full story of Bulgaria's Jews, according to filmmaker Jacky Comforty, because both the Bulgarian monarchy and the Communists tried to claim credit for their rescue and exploit it politically after the war.

Comforty interviewed hundreds of people of his Bulgarian grandfather's generation in order to get the story straight. They testify to the fact that, while their government collaborated with the Nazis, many Bulgarians stood up publicly for their Jewish friends and neighbors.

These were not activists or partisans, but people who simply did not let go of their humanity in an inhumane political situation. One important factor was that Bulgarian society was integrated and relatively secular: Bulgarian Jews who fled the Inquisition and relocated to Bulgaria some 500 years earlier had not settled into ghettos; rather, the mixed Christian–Muslim social fabric invited them into existing neighborhoods.



Jacky Comforty's grandparents Rachamim & Rochelle Comforty and two of their children.

'To be a Bulgarian is to be a mensch'

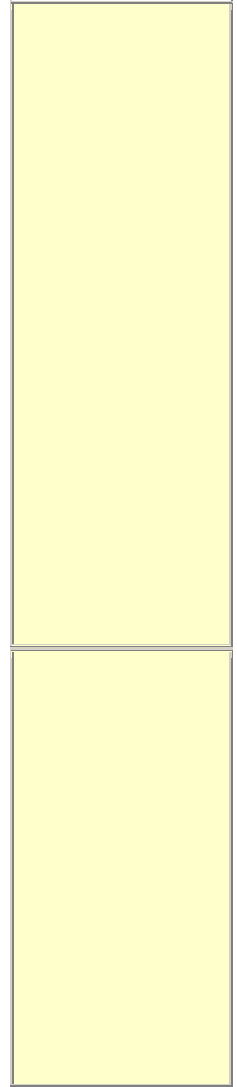
By Leora Eren Frucht

(July 11) - It is 1943, and thousands of European Jews have been rounded up and are being held for deportation to Auschwitz.

What if you could freeze that moment, rewind the film and watch as the Jews simply returned home? It sounds like the stuff of dreams or movies. But that is just what happened to thousands of Jews in Bulgaria during World War II, among them Rachamim and Rachelle Comforty.

"Because those Jews were saved ... on that day, I'm here to tell their story," explains their grandson, director Jacky Comforty, in his film *The Optimists: The Story of the Rescue of the Bulgarian Jews from the Holocaust*. The 90-minute documentary, which premieres at the Jerusalem Film Festival on Friday, tells one of the most remarkable and little-known episodes of the Holocaust: how the entire Jewish population of Bulgaria, some 50,000 people, was saved - despite Bulgaria's pact with Nazi Germany.

Comforty, a Tel Aviv-born documentary filmmaker, who traces his



family roots in Bulgaria back 500 years, meshes his own family's history with that of Bulgaria's to tell the larger story of the rescue.

Through a collection of first-person testimony and historical film footage, he tries to explain what should need no explanation: why Bulgaria did not allow its Jewish citizens to be sent to their deaths.

There are stories of individual human kindness, such as Christians who wore the yellow Star of David in solidarity with their Jewish friends.

There are stories of political courage, like that of the vice president of the Bulgarian parliament, who mobilized other members of parliament to oppose a plan to deport Jews to death camps.

And there is the role of the church. One Bulgarian Jew, quoted in the film, recalls hearing an influential bishop say in public that if the Jews were deported, he would join them.

In the film, Rabbi Avraham Bechar, who now lives in Jaffa, recalls his harmonious ties with Christian leaders in Bulgaria and offers this simple explanation for the rescue of the Jews: "To be a Bulgarian is to be a mensch."

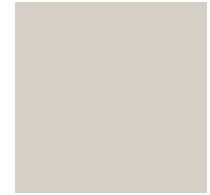
BUT BULGARIA'S record is far from unblemished - as the film makes clear.

The country had its share of virulent antisemites in government and Nuremberg-type laws were enacted during the war. One reason Bulgaria allied itself with Nazi Germany was a promise - which Germany kept - to transfer Greek and Yugoslavian territory to Bulgaria. Later, the Bulgarian king consented to deport Jews living in those occupied territories, resulting in the deaths of all but 12 of the 11,362 Jews there.

Among the survivors was Niko Nissimov, a member of an American-style big-band jazz group called "The Optimists" - which lends the film its name.

Nissimov, who worked as a pharmacist, was interned in a labor camp in Bulgarian-occupied Thrace when his Christian friends tracked him down and arranged to transfer him and 11 other pharmacists and doctors back to the relative safety of Bulgaria.

The government had planned to deport the 50,000 Jews within Bulgaria itself as well, but was forced to delay implementation of that plan in the face of vigorous opposition from parliament, the



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church and grass roots. That delay ultimately saved the Jewish population.

The director's father, Bitush Comforty, was interned in a forced labor camp in Bulgaria, but as a child Jacky Comforty was only vaguely aware of his family's story.

"It was only when I was already a filmmaker that my parents said to me one day: 'You must do a film about how we were saved.'"

Not long after that, Comforty discovered a treasure trove of historic photos in his grandmother's apartment in Jaffa, providing a rare glimpse into the life of Bulgarian Jewry.

Two years later he arrived in Bulgaria just before the country's first democratic elections to examine the state archives which had just opened up. He watched nearly 80 hours of motion-picture newsreels - and chose to copy about three hours of footage.

"The footage never said anything like 'forced labor camp.' It said: 'Minister of construction visits site where new trains are being built.' For just one second, you'd see a building where the laborers were housed. I managed to fish out things like that," explains Comforty, who wrote and produced the film together with his wife and partner Lisa Vogel Comforty.

Comforty compiled 155 hours of interviews, 5,000 photos and 10 hours of archival footage from Germany and Bulgaria in order to tell the story of how his parents - and 50,000 other Jews - were saved.

- The film will be screened at the Jerusalem Cinematheque on Friday at 4:45, and at the Tel Aviv Cinematheque on July 18 at 6 p.m.

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The Optimists

As unlikely as it may seem in a film about the Nazi Holocaust of World War II, this spellbinding documentary offers a message of inspiration and hope. "The Optimists" illuminates an almost forgotten chapter of history: the survival of the Sephardic Jewish population of Bulgaria thanks to the courageous opposition to SS orders to transport them to death camps. Evanston filmmaker Jacky Comforty, whose family was among those saved, and his wife and partner Lisa, spent 12 years working on this film after the startling discovery of 2,500 photographs from that era saved by his grandmothers. Years of exhaustive research and hundreds interviews are evident in the rich texture of this film, recalling not only the life and times of Comforty's family but the entire Bulgarian Jewish community — long since relocated to Israel. (BI) (85 min.) No MPAA rating.

— Review by **Bruce Ingram** of Pioneer Press —

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Reel Movie Critic.com

The Optimists

4 stars

Rating

Not Rated

Director

Jacky Comforty

The meaning of humanism

Starring

The People of Bulgaria

Political and military oppression has a way of hiding stories on topics that we think have been told so many times that there is nothing new to say. Currently on the film festival circuit is the documentary "Blind Spot: Hitler's Secretary," a film about the German dictator's last days as told by his young, impressionable assistant in her dying days as an old woman. While that film is a definite downer, "The Optimists," as the name so aptly implies, is a celebration of the human spirit. It is a story not only about the 50,000 Jews who were slated for extermination and ultimately saved but also of the Bulgarian (non Jewish) citizens and politicians who stood in the face of Nazism to prevent what was certain deportation and death of their friends.

Hitler came to power in 1933 and soon after books were being burned. Later, radios were taken so that it would be difficult for Jews to know what was going on in the "outside" world. Prior films on the Holocaust document the step by step process to the "final solution"-death camps. This film poises us on the "slippery slope," where you wake up one day and realize that your worse fears have not so suddenly become a reality.

Jacky and Lisa Comforty, residents of Evanston, have worked on the film for over 12 years. They have collected 155 hours of interviews, over 5,000 photos of pre-war and wartime Bulgaria, many hours of archival footage as well as documents, artifacts and sound recordings. Jacky found more than 2,000 photos from his deceased grandmother, stored away in plastic bags and shoe boxes; and the archival rolling and still film of the era gives the film a unique personal touch.

As Hitler conquered Poland and France, and other regions, Bulgaria became their ally, in part because they were Germany's main trading partner.

We know about citizens that hid Jews but what is striking about this story is that because of a history of integration of Jews in Bulgaria, the non Jewish Bulgarians did things such as participate in spontaneous marches of protest in numbers exceeding 10,000. They also urged their politicians to confront the installed Nazi

leaders, which resulted in the delay of planned deportations and exterminations long enough for the war to come to an end.

The key question is why would they do this in the face of so much raw power? The often scoffed at notion of integration and diversity appears to be the answer. Jews and Bulgarians, among other things, celebrated each other's religious holidays. They had friendships that mattered. There existed a mentality similar to that Americans have regarding the United We Stand concept following the events of 9/11. A key factor that allowed that to happen, was the history of Bulgaria. They had been under oppressive rule from the Turks for over 500 years and had come to believe that "...everyone is entitled to have their own faith." This country had been independent for only 50 years yet they had developed a sense of true loyalty to their friends and believed in the concept of humanism for all. They respected diversity and theirs is a lesson to learn.

The World Premier of "The Optimists" will be at the Wilmette Theater starting today. This is a film that should not be missed. The message is so powerful that this is one of the best films of the year.

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Listings for Friday, October 18, through Thursday October 24, 2002

The Optimists

Capsule by J.R. Jones

From the Chicago Reader

A family memoir that opens out into the larger currents of history, this 2001 film by Jacky and Lisa Comforty uses a treasure trove of photographs recovered from the home of Jacky's late grandmother to document the experience of Bulgarian Jews during the Holocaust. While some 12,000 Jews in Bulgarian-occupied Thrace and Macedonia were deported to death camps in the summer of 1943, the Comfortys were among 50,000 Bulgarian citizens who escaped, largely through the offices of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, but also through pressure from trade unions, professional guilds, and a handful of courageous men in parliament. A key difference between Bulgaria and other countries of eastern Europe was its integration; as one interviewee points out, there were no Jewish ghettos in Bulgaria, and the country's Muslim and Christian citizens were well acquainted with neighbors who were being targeted for genocide. This rare victory of decency over depravity lies at the center of the film, though it's dwarfed by anecdotal testimony from Jewish survivors that echoes numerous other treatments of the Holocaust. In the end, this admirably broadens our knowledge of the era but doesn't much deepen it. 82 min.

This movie is currently playing at: [Wilmette](#).

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Happy ending: Film tells a little-known Jewish story
By Pauline Dubkin Yearwood

Filmmaker Jacky Comforty put nearly 20 years of his life and several centuries of his family's history into

his documentary "The Optimists."

The film, subtitled "The Story of the Rescue of the Bulgarian Jews from the Holocaust," is having its world- premiere theatrical release at the Wilmette Theater.

"The Optimists" has already won a number of awards at film festivals, including the Peace Prize at the Berlin International Film Festival. It was directed by Comforty and written and produced by Comforty and his wife, Lisa. The couple lives in Evanston.

The full-length documentary tells two interwoven stories, one of Comforty's own grandfather, Rachamim Comforty, and one of his fellow Jews of Bulgaria. It's one of the lesser-known and more inspirational stories of the Holocaust: how all 50,000 Jews were able to survive despite the intensive efforts of the Bulgarian government to deport them to death camps. Some of the men spent time in labor camps, but most were protected and saved by their Christian and Muslim neighbors and eventually made their way to Israel.

On a deeper level, the film is an examination of the nature of good and evil and why some people go out of their way to help their neighbors even when doing so puts them at risk.

Israeli-born Jacky Comforty had been working in TV and film, making comedies, short subjects and documentaries, for more than 20 years when the idea for "The Optimists" was born. It came from his father, who, after his retirement, began acting in some of his son's films.

"One day he said, 'There is one story you really should tell-the story of how we were rescued during the war,'" Comforty related during a recent interview. It was a story that was new to him. Like many Holocaust survivors, his parents had told their children little about their wartime experiences. But on that day in 1984, "I took a little

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tape recorder and he and my mom began telling their stories," Comforty says.

He immediately decided to make a film based on their recollections, but knew he needed more information. So he spent the next four years "reading everything I could get my hands on about the Holocaust in Bulgaria." During that time, his father died.

Comforty was in Israel, going through his father's and grandmother's things, when he came upon a treasure stashed away in an apartment that had belonged to his grandmother: shoeboxes filled with photographs from her early life in Bulgaria, some 1,500 of them.

"There were beautiful postcards and photos," Comforty says, "including postcards from all my grandmother's admirers who wrote her from the front during World War I. A lot of museums wanted us to donate the collection to them." But he knew that he could use the photos in the film that was now becoming more of a reality to him.

"Once we had the photos, we were aware that we had a huge treasure here, and the journey began," Comforty says. That journey took him to Bulgaria, where- speaking his first language, Bulgarian- he interviewed more than 100 citizens and researched the history of the country's Jews not just during the Holocaust but much farther back.

What he found was a unique community that traced its roots to an ancient tribe of Jews called Romaniots who spoke a Greek dialect and came to the country during King Solomon's time. Even centuries later, Bulgarian Jews considered themselves Sephardic. They spoke Ladino, an ancient Jewish-Spanish language, and had an advanced and highly sophisticated culture. In the 14th century there was even a Jewish queen of Bulgaria, Comforty relates.

The history transfixed him. "It's truly a fairy tale," he says. "It's a story I could work the rest of my life-an unknown story."

Comforty was still learning Bulgarian history when the demise of communism provided him with another windfall. "The doors of archives that had been closed for 50 years swung widely open," he says. "I was very lucky to be there at that time." He ended up with 5,000 more photographs relating to the Bulgarian Jewish experience. He also spent months going through film archives viewing "everything that was done on film in Bulgaria from the beginning of motion pictures that had to do with Jewish subjects."

Although he was still working on other films to make a living and to finance his research in Bulgaria, that undertaking became his obsession.

"Growing up in Israel, you go to archaeological sites, you look on the ground and hope to find maybe a coin, but you never do," he says. "In Bulgaria, everywhere I found treasures. I went to a synagogue that was closed for 50 years and found manuscripts, ancient books with layers of dust on them. It was like in a fairy tale.

"Once you get into the mood of a collector, you cannot stop," he says. "I was trying to satisfy a hunger that would not calm down."

Over the next 12 years, Comforty and his wife, whom he calls "Bulgarian by marriage," worked slowly on the film while making 40 unrelated documentaries to finance their work. (Even so, he says, "I was barely paying my bills. I felt like I was digging a tunnel out of jail.") Originally Comforty planned to make a four-part series. "There were so many things I wanted to tell," he says. "The rescue of the Jews during the war was the result of all the history that went before it. I needed to explore it all."

He suggests that one of the reasons Bulgarians refused to hand their Jewish neighbors over to the government can be found in the centuries

of peaceful coexistence between Jews, Christians and Muslims in Bulgaria and the fact that they faced a common enemy, the Turks, who oppressed the country for nearly 500 years.

Finally, he decided that such a big project was unmanageable and settled for making one film, with hopes to do the series eventually.

Even filming "The Optimists" was a huge job. "It really was like archaeology- taking something apart in tiny little shreds and trying to put it all together and make a very small piece," Comforty says. "It was overwhelming." The film took four years to edit and had 6,000 cuts-Comforty says 500 to 800 is the average.

The final version has received awards and praise at a number of film festivals, but Comforty says he can't take all the credit for that.

"When you make a film, there is a certain group dynamic that is beyond your control," he says. "It's not just me or my skill or my art, but the personalities in the film, the people who were rescuers, the people whose hearts were in the right place."

Those people included a teacher who allowed four Jewish girls- including Comforty's mother- to become kindergarten teachers even though Jews were officially not allowed into the classroom. Another story details the efforts of a baker, who, ironically, hid Jews in his oven.

The title was chosen to work on several levels, Comforty says. The Optimists was the name of a jazz band that was highly successful in Bulgaria before the war. One of the heroes of the film is the sax player, who tells of how a friend saved him at the last minute, just before he was about to be put on a train and deported. Later, he recalls putting on an opera in a labor camp.

The title also has a symbolic level, Comforty says. It refers to the rescue of the entire community. "The film is dedicated to those who are optimists," he says.

Of course, that would include the Comfortys. Jacky Comforty gives a special nod to his wife, who, he says, "suffered quietly through this for many many years," writing "hundreds" of grants and making suggestions at every stage.

Now that the film has been released theatrically, Jacky Comforty's role in it is not finished, he says. He plans to be present at many of the screenings at the Wilmette Theater and to organize events around the film, bring in school groups, answer audience members' questions and engage in dialogues with viewers.

He stresses that "The Optimists" is not directed solely to Jews. "It's a film that's meant for all audiences, for all people," he says. "It's a unique story of individuals who resisted the government successfully. We don't have many people who do that."

"The Optimists" is playing at the Wilmette Theater, 1122 Central Ave., Wilmette. Screenings are at 2, 4, 6 and 8 p.m. daily. For directions call (847) 251-2474. For more information, visit www.theoptimists.com.

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Ever ‘The Optimists’

BY BRUCE INGRAM
ASSISTANT EDITOR

Jacky Comforty has become quite familiar with the weapons of mass dissemination.

After working more than 12 years and spending in excess of \$1-million, much of it raised from family and friends, the Evanston documentarian’s magnum opus, “The Optimists,” has its theatrical world premiere Friday at the Wilmette Theater.

Comforty is not about to let that event go unnoticed. In the past few weeks, he has fired off some 3,000 e-mails and whipped out 10,000 posters, flyers and postcards.

“I’m doing a lot of guerrilla marketing,” he said with an easy-going smile, momentarily relaxed in his home office in Evanston.

The smile masks great determination. Comforty declares he is so eager for people to see this film, the story of how Bulgaria’s Sephardic Jewish population, including his parents, were saved from extermination by the Nazis during World War II, that he would track people down and screen it for them one at a time for 20 years if necessary.

That may sound like hyperbole — one hopes it is — but given Comforty’s unrelenting purposefulness in completing “The Optimists,” the image of him chasing a viewer down the street, pulling a cart with a projector behind him, does come to mind.

Back to the beginning

Pioneer Press first wrote about “The Optimists” four years ago, when Comforty and his wife and partner, Lisa, were putting finishing touches on a video version for screenings at film festivals around the world.

His parents had always asked him to tell the story of how the Jews of Bulgaria survived, but the best he had been able to do was record his father’s memories of imprisonment in a forced labor camp on audio tape. The 1940s population of Bulgarian Jews — long since emigrated to Israel — had left little record on film.

One afternoon in 1988, however, Comforty and his wife were cleaning out his late grandmother’s apartment when they made an astonishing discovery: 1,500 photographs of Bulgarian friends and family stored in dust-covered

shoe boxes. Then they learned his maternal grandmother also had saved 1,000 photos from the same period.

Comforty suddenly had a very big job on his hands. Beginning with those photos, he and Lisa worked for years to piece together how acts of conscience by individuals in the Bulgarian Parliament, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and sympathetic lawyers, writers, educators and trade unionists, had thwarted the Nazi final solution.

"The Optimists" records the harrowing events of March 10, 1943, when 8,500 prominent Jews including Comforty's father and his family, were rounded up to be shipped on trains to the Treblinka death camps. At the end of the day, they were simply told to go back home. Government officials had used bureaucratic technicalities to deny the deportation.

"This is what should have happened everywhere," said Comforty of the acts of courage documented in "The Optimists," which has drawn standing ovations from audiences at film festivals around the world. "This should not have been the exception. This should have been the norm.

"That's especially important today, where there is a lot of similarly bad stuff going on in the world. I hope this film will have the power to motivate people to be good and courageous and to stand for what they believe in."

"The Optimists" has racked up more than 20 awards since 1998 including the Peace Prize at the 2001 Berlin Film Festival, but it also has left the Comforty family more than \$300,000 in debt. Yet Comforty was willing to spend another \$100,000 to have a color-corrected, audio-filtered 35mm print made for theatrical distribution.

"It's been a little Don Quixotean," admitted Comforty, who has some solace in the knowledge that a theatrical run qualifies the film for long shots like consideration for an Oscar. "But I knew if I did not finish this now I would not be able to move beyond it.

"When you realize you're alone on a project, it can be a powerful motivation. You know if you don't do it, it won't get done."

Jacky Comforty will speak at the 6 and 8 p.m. screenings of "The Optimists" Friday-Sunday and on subsequent weekends during the film's run at the Wilmette Theater, 1122 Central Ave., Wilmette. Call (847) 251-7411.

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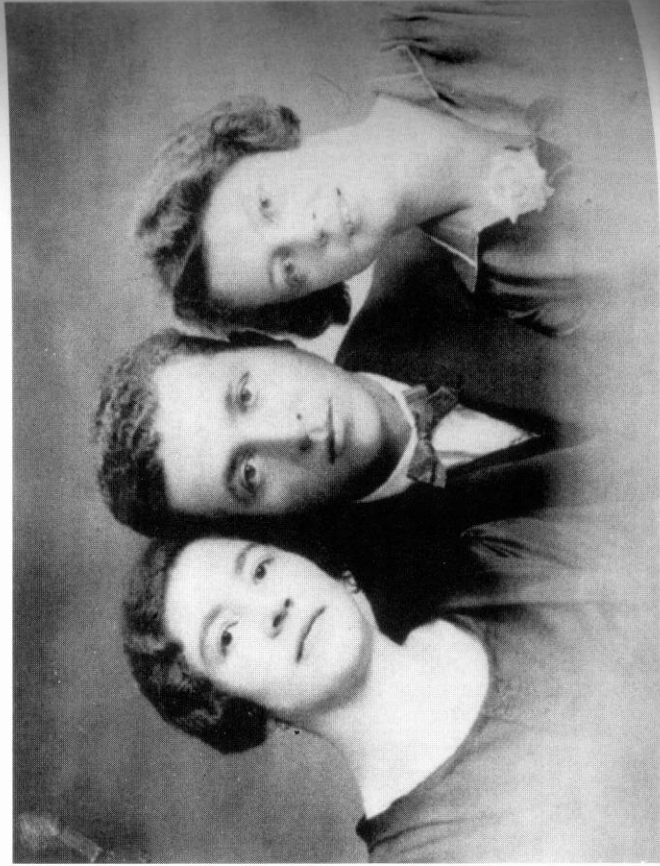
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to remember has more recently been taken up in smaller, more individuated acts of commemoration. %\vspace*6pt

Another inspiring filmic commemoration is *The Optimists: The Story of the Rescue of the Bulgarian Jews from the Holocaust* (2001), directed by Jacky and Lisa Comforty. Like *The Children of Chabannes*, it moves from the personal – Jacky’s family photo shows his father and two wives! – to the universal, namely how ordinary people acted with atypical decency toward their Jewish neighbors. Jacky Comforty returns to Bulgaria, blending his own narration with compelling interviews. Given the silence he grew up with in Israel vis-a-vis the Holocaust – “each generation tried to protect the other from memories of the past” – his return is both investigative and celebratory. The story he tells is quite amazing: because Bulgaria was officially Germany’s ally, it enjoyed more leeway to protect Jews than did an occupied country. We see the tension between policy and polis, between secret deportation orders to ship out all the Jews and the refusal of the population to comply. Bulgaria became Germany’s ally because of the political promise of occupying three neighboring territories – Macedonia, Yugoslavia, and Thrace. Despite the sorrowful fact that more than eleven thousand “Aegean Jews” were indeed deported and killed, approximately fifty thousand Bulgarian Jews slated for extermination were ultimately saved.

In March 1943, the deportation orders were foiled by two groups: four Christian men went to see the decent vice president of the Bulgarian parliament, Peshev, who was appalled enough by the news that he began a petition to halt the deportation,

From *The Optimists*, Rachamim Comforty and his two wives: he married Rachelle (right) after his first wife Rosa (left) died. Photo taken in Bulgaria, 1920. PHOTO COURTESY OF JACKY AND LISA COMFORTY. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.



From *The Optimists*, Jewish laborers in a Bulgarian forced-labor camp near the Greek border in 1942. Jacky Comforty’s father is first on the right. PHOTO COURTESY OF JACKY AND LISA COMFORTY. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

supported by one-third of the parliament. (He was forced out of office afterward.) Simultaneously, Bishop Kharalampiev (now a gently formidable ninety-two-year-old interviewee) called upon Bishop Kiril to save the Jews; Kiril announced that if they were deported, he would go with them.

Why did the Bulgarians refuse to hand over their neighbors? Why was there not even a ghetto there? *The Optimists* suggests that it was partly because Bulgaria had been oppressed by the Turks for five hundred years. And, as a rabbi says, Bulgarian Jews always invited Christians to synagogue, while they went to church on Easter. Anti-Semitism simply was not part of their lives (even if it existed in the ancestral memory of this Sephardic population, who originally escaped from the Spanish Inquisition).

Comforty seeks out the simple daily resistance of the population. For example, a teacher allowed four Jewish girls – including his mother – to become kindergarten teachers even though Jews were not permitted in the classroom; in a moving moment, we see both now aged women reunited. And, ironically enough, where did a baker hide a few Jews? In his oven. Jewish men did go to a forced labor camp, but the details they recall (heightened by evocative photographs) are filled with paradoxes. One tells of having had a phonograph with new American records as we hear “Indian Summer.”

Niko, a musician, recalls putting on an opera – Offenbach's *La Belle Hélène* – in the labor camp! Niko is connected to the film's title, as The Optimists was the name of his jazz band. The title might also refer to how the audience feels after watching such a moving testament to human decency.

Comforty's previous film, *In the Shadow of Memory: Legacies of Lidice* (1999), can also be considered a documentary of return, with two crucial differences. Unlike Bulgaria's comparatively uplifting Holocaust story, the Czech town of Lidice was the site of extreme Nazi barbarism. In retaliation for the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich in 1942 – and to deter further acts of resistance in Czechoslovakia – the Nazis killed the Catholic village's 192 men, sent the 203 women to Ravensbruck concentration camp, murdered 82 children – giving up 16 for adoption by German families through the Lebensborn program – and destroyed the landscape of Lidice. When I asked the director why this town was singled out for annihilation, he replied, “two Czech pilots who escaped to London came from Lidice. Heydrich's assassins were paratroopers who came from London. At first Hitler wanted to kill thirty thousand people in retaliation, but he was warned of the effects on the Czech industrial production. So they did a ‘smaller’ act of revenge.”

The other major difference in this documentary is that Jerri Zbiral, the “second-generation” center of the film who goes back to Lidice, is a non-Jewish sister to the children of Holocaust survivors in other documentaries. About her mother's wartime experience, we hear the familiar words, “she wants to forget about it; I have a real need to know.” Her Jewish husband, Alan, accompanies her on the return voyage.

As in *The Optimists*, Comforty moves from the personal to the collective, intertwining Jerri's commemorative/investigative journey with stories of Lidice's other survivors. These include the now elderly Marie, who tearfully recalls how her husband was taken from her, and then her daughter. Jerri joins in the annual memorial at the gym, the place where the Nazis wrenched children from their mothers. She also speaks frankly of the hatred she felt for Germans during her youth – to members of the Bremen Peace Initiative. Like the German professor and students Comforty interviews when visiting the Lidice Museum, these representatives of an anti-Nazi German culture try to convince Jerri that they are as eager to confront – and transcend – the past as she is.

One of the central themes throughout *In the Shadow of Memory* is the relation of parent and child. For Marie, it is simply loss, as the last scene makes clear: when she returned from the concentration camp, she fixed up a room for her daughter – white, clean, and still empty. For Jerri as daughter, it is more complex, as her mother told her enough about the war to make Jerri resentful of Germans. However, Jerri is also the mother of an eight-year-old boy who excels at a computer game. When she is horrified to see that he is “destroying a city,” he counters, “but it's Hamburg!” The end credits are accompanied by his sensitive rendition of a melody on hammered dulcimer: since it's “Für Elise,” a rapprochement with German culture is at least suggested as a possibility.

The recent emphasis on rescue and resistance, especially in films of return, offers a painfully partial picture, however. Bulgaria and Chabannes were the exceptions

while Europe's pervasive ghettos and concentration camps – from which a tiny fraction survived – were the rule. It is much more difficult to tell the stories of the millions who perished, those who left no trace, and not simply because of the lack of records: who can watch the reconstruction of torture and murder? But a few films have risen to the challenge of using facts and figures in a creatively illuminating way. One of the best recent examples is *Photographer* (*Fotografator*, Poland, 1998), directed by Dariusz Jablonski, who was Krzysztof Kieslowski's second assistant director on *The Decalogue* ten years earlier. This kaleidoscope in Polish, German, and Yiddish yokes diverse visual and aural elements into a haunting exploration of at least three subjects: the Lodz Ghetto during World War II; photography; and how we bear witness.

Photographer builds on the strengths of a previous Polish documentary, *Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising according to Marek Edelman* (1993). Where Jablonski's points of departure were slides of the Lodz Ghetto – together with the testimony of survivor Arnold Mostowicz – Jolanta Dylewska begins with archival footage of the Warsaw Ghetto, followed by an interview with Edelman. This former leader of the Jewish resistance is filmed in close-up in partial light: with half of his face in the dark, the film suggests that not everything can be revealed to the camera. The first seventeen minutes of *Chronicle* make us see the Warsaw Ghetto fresh, even if the images are familiar: they are slowed down – suggesting still'd lives – and seem ghostly because they are silent. The music of Jan Kanty Pawluskiewicz, like the footage, stops and starts. This counterpoint of movement and stasis, of sound and silence, makes us aware of the mediation not only of Nazi cameras, but of Dylewska's manipulation of the results. Even if the intention of the German occupiers was to chronicle their subjugation of what they considered subhumans, that is not the effect of the Ghetto's Jewish faces today. For example, shots of children accompanied by a female voice-over singing “Raisins and Almonds” in Yiddish are poignant. There is a commemorative aspect throughout *Chronicle* that culminates in two endings: in the first, the camera moves in on grainy photos of the resistance fighters, each identified by name; in the second ending, the groups carrying their small bags during the Warsaw Ghetto deportation – to the death camp of Treblinka – remain nameless.

Whereas most films about the Holocaust show the present in color and the past in black-and-white, *Photographer* reverses the strategy: the most vivid part is the past in color slides that were discovered in a Viennese bookstore in 1987. These four hundred images – among the first ever made with color stock – were taken by Walter Genewein, the Lodz Ghetto's chief accountant. He was an Austrian national appointed by the Nazis to ensure maximum productivity in this prison. From 1939 to 1944, the Lodz Ghetto was the largest work camp established by the Nazis for Poland's Jews. As many as three hundred thousand – slave laborers for the Nazi war effort – were imprisoned there at its peak.

For the duration of the seventy-six-minute film, Jablonski works in a poetically investigative style. Present-day Lodz in black-and-white looks ghostly, as does the Jewish survivor Dr. Arnold Mostowicz, whose interview punctuates the film. Shadows play on his face – part of him is always in the dark, like a reminder of what we cannot see – as he quietly recalls horrific stories that counterpoint the placid photos and dry official reports in German voice-over.



A film by
Jacky and Lisa Comforty

The Optimists

The Story of the Rescue of the Bulgarian Jews
From the Holocaust



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