

**Interview with Agnieszka Holland1**

**United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

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**January 18, 2012**

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## **Interview with Agnieszka Holland2**

### **PREFACE**

The following interview is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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## **Interview with Agnieszka Holland<sup>3</sup>**

### **AGNIESZKA HOLLAND January 18th, 2012**

Question: This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Agnieszka Holland on January 18th, 2012. Welcome to the museum. Thank you for being here. Thank you for agreeing to speak with us today.

Answer: Thank you.

Q: When we do interviews with survivors, we try to capture a life story of the person, not only what happened to them at the during the Holocaust, but also to provide a context of what was their world like before all of this took place, and what happened after Holocaust to them. Here we are going to do it a little bit differently, but follow a similar pattern because we would really like to know a little bit about your family, your life, what your roots are, what were the forces and the factors that molded you. So I'll start with those questions. Can you tell me where you were born, when you were born and who your parents were, and we'll take it from there.

A: I was born in Warsaw, Poland on November 28th, 1948. My mother's name is \_\_+. She married my father whose name was \_\_+ and who was a Jew from Warsaw. Probably a year or so I was born. And they have been my father spent the war in the Soviet Union. He escaped Poland when the war started went towards the east. He been involved when the Soviet forces came there. And after he enrolled to the Soviet Army and from the Soviet Army he moved to the Polish Army in Soviet Union, which was run mostly by the communists, communist military. And my father before the war for one

year was a student of the medicine in Warsaw. I think he was pretty intelligent and talented man because was admitted to the medical academy and when \_\_\_+ for the Jewish students. He was also in several communist youth organizations. And he was very \_\_\_+ how to tell over spoken. He was very \_\_\_+ he was very present in the discussions in the intellectual life of this Jewish youth in Warsaw. He was collaborating as a child even \_\_\_+ when he was eight years old with the Jewish newspapers for the children and run by the children who was created by \_\_\_+ with called \_\_\_+. And so he participated as a young journalist in the production of this newspaper. When the war started he tried to convince his family to also to move to \_\_\_+. I think he felt that Poland can fall in the hands of the Nazis and it was dangerous. But they didn't feel in the same way.

Q: Was his family also were they a well to do family? Were they a working class family? Who were your grandparents?

A: They been like lower middle class family. My grandparent was a tailor. They had enough money to educate the children, the boy. The boy was my father. But also my aunt finished the gymnasium, the kind of the high school. And my other aunt, I don't know exactly, but she was also anyway they been schooling the children with education, was very important for them. But they were not wealthy. My grand grandmother was paralyzed, and she was living with them. And it was also one of the reasons why they could not imagine to move from Warsaw.

Q: So he had two siblings?

A: Yes, he had two sisters. He was the only boy.

Q: And was he the only one who moved east?

A: Yes, and other ones stayed behind and \_\_\_+ died in the war \_\_\_+ except the one sister who survived and she escaped the ghetto in peculiar way. She was transported out of the ghetto in the coffin of her sister who died of pneumonia or tuberculosis so something like that.

Q: How did you hear the story. Did he tell you?

A: My aunt told me the story. My father never spoke about it. He died when I was 13. And when he was alive, he never told me about the war, nothing. And never mentioned \_\_\_+ family didn't know I didn't know what name what was the first name of my grandparents. And after only after his death, my aunt started to tell me those stories, but I think they have been in some way traumatized. They didn't want to talk about it. They talked among them. My aunt my aunt escaped ghetto, and then she contacted one family friend, Polish guy was the engineer. And he was helping not only her, but also another cousin, two cousins, young girls who escaped from Vangloff (ph) which was some kind of a family town close to us. In Vangloff, my grandfather had four brothers and two sisters. No, three brothers, four boys and two sisters. One of the brothers immigrated to Argentina before the war, and three other brothers stayed, and then two sisters stayed in Poland. And they all died in the Holocaust. The most educated was Mendel who was, I think, the lawyer. He stayed in Vangloff and was actually quite respectful citizen of the city. He was in the city council and his daughter who survived and was in Argentina now told me that he was as respected \_\_\_+ birthday, the mayor of the city came to have the dinner with him. And they all have been hiding in the in their house, which was on the main square in the attic. It was I don't know how many people exactly, probably 12 or

15 or 16 people hiding there. After when the liquidation of the lock out Jewish community. And they've been shot on the main square mainly. And he decided that he doesn't want to hide anymore and he he went down and he like, you know, in some way faced the squads and was talking apparently. The legend said was talking to the people, to the Jewish people that we have to do something. We have to try it, to die with dignity, this kind of thing. The rest of the family remained for a few days more in the attic. And then the younger boys, the younger decided that they have to try to save two girls, the youngest girls, the daughter of Mendel and another cousin. And they've been blond and blue eyed so they decide they have the chance probably to survive. And they gave them the address of this engineer, and then told them to go to a train station and try to go to Warsaw. The girls didn't want to leave the family. They've been crying and they've been they didn't want it. And so one of the brother of little Curstis(ph), this woman who is now in Argentina kicked them out, kicked them out from the stairs. And when little \_\_\_+ many years later told me the story, she was still angry with her brother that he did it. So they've been walking through Vangloof. And I think everybody knew them in the city. And they've been crying. And no one saw them, so it was some kind of, you know, miracle. They came to the station. They took the train. They found the engineer. And the engineer and my aunt from Warsaw ghetto probably she was already there. And she provided the fake papers for my aunt and for older of those two girls, and the younger girls been adopted by his fiancée.

Q: The engineer's fiancé?

## Interview with Agnieszka Holland

7

A: Yes. Risha (ph) was her name. It means fiance's name. My aunt who looked quite Jewish, she was wearing some kind of you know

Q: Your father's sister?

A: Yes, my father's sister, Marilka (ph).

Q: Marilka. She decided and under the advice of this engineer also, another cousin decided also to enroll as a volunteer to German, to the first labor. And I think it was choice of several Jewish people there because they knew that the German don't recognize the Jews and \_\_\_+ claim the Jews, so they felt much safer in Germany than Poland.

Q: Can I ask? Can I interrupt on this? You heard this story only after your father's death?

A: Yes.

Q: So until that time, all of this was incognito. It was completely unknown?

A: Yes, I didn't know those stories before.

Q: Were you

A: I knew that my grandparents died, and I knew that my father had another sister who died in the ghetto, but I didn't know the details. And I didn't know the names.

Q: When did your interest become when did your interest become piqued? Were you always interested or was it you only became interested later?

A: Well, I don't remember how it was. I remember perfectly well the moment when I learned about the origin of my father and his \_\_\_+ as well. And I was six. I was playing with the children in the courtyard and some child was like screaming at me that I'm a Jew. I didn't know exactly what the Jew is. So I came back to the apartment. And I

asked my mother what did that mean? And she said that yeah, that's true. My father is Jew. And my grandfather died in the Warsaw ghetto, that I don't have to be ashamed of being Jewish, that it's a part of the great history, the great nation, and that I never have to hide. It means she gave me some kind of, you know, courage to face it, which was actually quite rare because most of my parents' friends, Jewish friends, they didn't talk about it with the children, and mostly have been hiding, you know, this reality from the children. They've been mostly involved in some kind of the activities with the connected with the regime. And they wanted probably they didn't want to put the burden on the children. Also they didn't they didn't consider probably themselves as Jews anymore. It was very complex and complicated situation, and many of them had their names changed.

Q: But your father didn't?

A: No, my father didn't. So I didn't I didn't feel that he's hiding something. I just he probably didn't feel like to talk about it. And they didn't ask him. I had quite complicated relationship with my father. He didn't talk to other children too much. He started only when my parents divorced. After, he started to be very active father, before he was pretty much absent father.

Q: That was one of my questions is what was your father like and what kind of relationship you had with him?

A: He was very you know he was very intelligent, very very extrovert in some way, man partying a lot, telling a lot of stories. Having a lot of friends and but in the same time it was something, I think, fragile human, you know. He was intellectual, very bright. And on the beginning he was very much involved in the Marxist ideology, and slowly but



surely he became quiet, you know, disillusioned by the regime and by the way it's going on. Not in Soviet Union, although it's interesting. In Soviet Union, I think he had such a goodness among the ordinary people that he's a member of the Soviet Union, have been quite positive, but after when he became better connected and better educated.

End of File One

Beginning File Two

Q: When we talk about these films, when we talk about the stories that you are trying to tell, that there are complexities. There are many layers to them. How do you think people in the east I'm being very stereotypical here, how do you think people in the east look at the world, the term of complexities and deal with that, your audiences in the east or your public, and how do they do in the west, and do you think that there's something there? So that's one. The other is we have our character from In Darkness who is who is an anti hero as we've been talking as \_\_ says. And at some point he becomes a rescuer, and what compels him to do that? What do you think compels him to do that, and I'll stop with those two, and we'll see what happens in ten minutes. Okay?

A: You know when we can talk, yeah?

Q: Yes.

A: When somebody asks me what is the most important in my movies or what I want to tell in this movie, I mostly answer that I want to tell the life is complicated. And the complexities for me like, you know, the only tool I have, you know, to face the subject of the work. And in the same time, yes, you are asking you have been asking me how the audience reacts. It's changing. I think that, you know, for example, Polish audience in

the times of the communists, they have been accepting complexity very easily, and not only accepting the realities as presented as complex, but also the language is complex, that the style is complex, that they are using metaphors and symbols and so on. So it was very you know \_\_\_ and very curious audience, and they wanted to understand something about themselves. Now, it's a little different, you know, actually after the communists fell apart, it became much more consumer kind of a society. A little same situation happened in the west. What I remember coming first with my movies to France or to the United States, I thought that the audience, which is interested in this kind of a story much wider. Now you really have the last Mohicans in some ways, the distributors who have been doing it. But it can change again, you know, I think it can change with the state of the society, you know? And you know you have the moments when the people want to be cradled, they want to be, you know, put to sleep in some way. They want to be entertained.

Q: That's right.

A: Like children that are little, tell me another, tell me another. I'm bored. I'm bored, I'm bored. And actually, you know, the situation changes because the world suddenly becomes very dangerous place. And you have to deal with that. And you are looking for some kind of the \_\_\_+ fears and to your, you know, frustrations. So I don't think that it will be now forever. It will be always more stupid, I think, will be actually at some point maybe wiser than now. And so it was for me fascinating hero. And not only because he's going through the change because, you know, change in some ways it's stereotyping, you know, the hero is mostly going through the change.

Q: Yes.

A: Especially in America storytelling, right.

Q: Has to change, has to change.

A: And what I will like that you cannot really say why and in which point this change appears. It's \_\_\_+ change. He's very ambiguous about what he's doing, and because he's not intellectual, he doesn't have he's very simple man. And, you know, a lot of reason why he decides in this very moment to do what he's doing. But it can change the minute later, so he's like somebody who is who is walking on the rope, the wire, and he can slip in any moment of the side of the good or bad. And in some point, in some point I think he feels and it's because also he wants to look at himself as he is smart or that he can be successful, he does something well. So he feels sometimes the weight of the responsibility. And I think that responsibility has left. That in some way the moment when you are responsible for somebody, it's something which is which created this strong attachment. And for him it becomes a kind of obsession. In some ways he is obsessed by that, like the gambler, you know, at some point he's acting in irrational way. It doesn't make sense what he's doing, you know, it's against his interest. It's against the safety of himself and his family, and also it's against his world of values because no matter for him the Jews, no matter \_\_\_+ and not \_\_\_\* paid for it, what the \_\_\_\* you know, it means it's interesting to watch it because it's so unpredictable in some way, you know? And I think that it makes this character in some way very real and very symbolic in the same time like, you know, like this kind of the confusion. I think most of the people are going not only during the wartime, but especially in those dangerous circumstances

through the process of the confusion. And at sometimes who decide to do something just by chance, something good, the mystery of the good, you know, how the people are doing acting altruistic. It's quite easy to understand why they're acting in a terrible way, why they are cruel, why they are murderers, but why they are good, you know, I don't know. It is a mystery so, you know, explore this mystery with a character, which is not angelic at all. It's interesting. And also the \_\_\_\_+ the people are all stereotypes. He's watching of the Jews in a very stereotype of way, and he expresses it through his language, but the Jews watch him in the same way, you know? They don't watch him as a human being, you know, so they are both in some way mirroring this kind of the judges. And it's very difficult and complicated and it's so much when it breaks. And when it breaks down, suddenly they are naked, you know, they are standing naked Jews standing like, you know, next to the naked \_\_\_\_ and they are like looking into the mirror, you know, I thought that, you know that it's actually very touching without being, you know, emotionally judgmental or something.

Q: Wow. Another word pops into my head and that's victim and how do you define a victim? How do you how do victims define themselves? And when they have competitions as to who is the greater victim, and who owes whom? And they are often tied in with stereotypes. It also gets expressed in times of extreme what's the word I'm searching for? When life is so extreme, where you may lose life, when you really are a victim, you know, the associate, the one who says I'm not going to take part in this anymore is ends up being an innocent victim.

A: Right.

Q: You know I don't know what question I wanted to ask with that. But then it comes up from what you were saying. Is there anything that you would like our audience, our researchers to know and to understand about what motivates your work? What motivates you to look at these particular stories for this kernel, that you say this I can talk about, and this is a story I can tell?

A: I don't want to be \_\_\_+ like patterns and I don't want to be pretentious, and I don't want to speak about building bridges or something like that because then I don't believe really that the cinema or any movie can change the world, but I really believe that even if it opens eyes to some, I don't know, to some reality that is not obvious it's already good. And I try to make my movie as communicative as possible and as complex as possible. Telling complex stories in a simple way in some way. And probably I have this I have this I have this urge to do it this way because I have some kind of pathological pathological, you know, ambitions without being preachy. Because I receive some, you know, things like that from the movies, from the books, from the you know from the art and from the storytelling. And I felt like it changed me, shaped me, you know?

Q: It also sounds like from your nanny and from your parents is that they weren't preachy.

A: Right.

Q: They shared what was real for them.

A: Right. So, for example, in *Darkness*, premiered ten days ago in Poland. And it was first country, I didn't have the high hopes. I thought that if we succeed to create some kind of you know, excitement, Polish stars and then, you know, it would have good

critics in American press already, it will have maybe 100,000 of the viewers, which is okay, you know, but suddenly it became huge success, and no one could understand way. Suddenly it's the top box office movie for the second week. And with the young audience, you know, the multiplex audience. And it's better than Sherlock Holmes. It's better than Spielberg's movie. And it's better even than the Cat and Boots, and not only the theaters are fooled, but the people are extremely like receptive, you know, several people wrote to me and the people I don't know, and told the story about they tried three times to go through the theater and found out when they went, and that they seen the viewers who have been buying, you know, popcorn at the beginning before the show and who have been coming out from the theater with a cup full of popcorn. They didn't touch it even. So, you know, I told myself, what it is, you know, it is mysterious, you know, when you can really touch the people, as I say touch some kind of audience \_\_ very young audience and not only Jewish audience but German Jewish audience as well. I didn't expect it, but here it's even much more of a mystery because \_\_+ had a lot of entertainment. It was light in some way, you know, very heavy subject and it was kind of light story like \_\_ tale. And this one is really, you know, it's really harsh, it means it's really it is real experience of going through the very, you know, very difficult thing. And still like people are open to it and in Poland, you know.

Q: Well, congratulations, it's wonderful news.

A: Yeah, it makes me very happy and a little shocked. I still don't know what to do with that.

Q: Well, I have on that was going to be my last question, but I have sort of another last question, but it sounds to me that one has to be not afraid to be lonely, to have a double identity, to look for these controversies. And I wondered whether or not you've experienced that and, yeah, when you have, yeah.

A: I think I like the situation. I accept the situation. And I try to make my best, you know, out of the situation. Tired of being lonely. I'm never exactly thinking the same thing, you know, as the mainstream of this or this, you know, side. It's interesting, you know, because on the occasion of this last movie in Poland I did a lot of promotion. And I was in a lot of TV shows and a lot, mostly talking about this, you know, complex and complicated issue of Polish Jewish relationship and the Polish guilt and the facts which appeared not so long time ago like ten years ago about like participation in

Q: \_\_+

WOMAN: \_\_+ for example and, you know, I can talk about it to any Polish person, you know, and without, of course, sometimes when you have the real fascists in front of you, you are losing the kind of cold blood, but I try to come to this extreme. I try to be as open and as receptive of his, you know, fears and his, you know, prejudice and his frustration as possible. And in some way it works, you know, at least it works for the other people who are watching it. And, you know, it's I don't know. I never I never I never hide it, you know, my Jewish side, which makes my enemies a little speechless because they've been writing terrible things about me in those Internets, you know, Internet sites, in Poland I mean. But at the same time what can they tell? You know, I'm just--

## **Interview with Agnieszka Holland**

**16**

(Video cuts off)

End of File Two

Conclusion of Interview