

An interview with Radu Mihaileanu, the director of *Train of Life*: "We have to learn to articulate these deep emotions"

Stefan Steinberg
31 March 2000

Train of Life (1998) has received international acclaim. The film by Radu Mihaileanu concerns the efforts by the inhabitants of a small Jewish village in Central Europe to escape the Nazis by organising a fake deportation train to get across the Soviet border. Mihaileanu treats terrifying events with humour and sensitivity. The film, far superior to Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*, has recently opened in Germany.

Train of Life was reviewed on the World Socialist Web Site on November 26, 1998: <http://wsws.org/arts/1998/nov1998/tra-n26.shtml>

Mihaileanu was born and brought up in Rumania. A number of his family members died in Nazi concentration camps. In 1980, at the age of 22, he moved to France and studied film. *Train of Life* is his second feature film. He was in Germany recently for two days attending premieres of his film in Berlin and Dresden, and spoke to Stefan Steinberg of the WSWS. The interview was conducted in English.

World Socialist Web Site: It has been one and a half years since the German premiere of your film at the Cottbus Film Festival. Why has the German release of the film taken so long?

Radu Mihaileanu: The objections on the part of the distributors were not really ideological, distributors simply did not believe that the film could work in Germany. They argued that Germany was very difficult for that type of film, Germany will never accept that type of comedy, and so on. Roberto Benigni [Italian director of the film *Life is Beautiful*] had made a very commercial film on the same subject. My own film is funny and serious at the same time. A number of distributors did not believe in the economic possibility of the film, but the current distributors are doing a wonderful job right now in promoting the film.

In a sense it is better that the film comes out now in Germany. In some countries *Train of Life* was released at the same time as Benigni's film and journalists put us in the same basket, i.e., just another comedy about the Holocaust and so audiences did not come to see it. It was like a *Titanic*, but with a smaller boat. Who wants to go to see *Titanic* again—and with a smaller boat? In the end it is better this way—it is a fitting conclusion.

WSWS: You have had just two or three days here in Germany—can you draw any conclusions yet about the reaction by a German audience to the film?

RM: I have met with a reaction here which I have met nowhere else. There has been so much serious discussion concerning the German identity with the Shoah. German and Jewish people are connected to one another by a tragedy. In particular, there is broad confusion and feelings of guilt on the part of the young generation in Germany—a loss of innocence, which we also experienced as Jews.

Let me give you an example. On the first night we were here, we had discussions after the showing of the film with a number of young people which went on until four in the morning. I spoke with a young girl whose father was in the Wehrmacht. It was a very informative and beautiful

encounter. The girl always asked her father the question: what did you do in the Wehrmacht?, and the father never wanted to give an answer. The father conceded that it was terrible what they [the Nazis] did to the Jewish people, but he said (he was Austrian) that the Jews in Vienna always got the best jobs, they were the doctors, lawyers, etc. The daughter lived with a deep sense of pain, a profound problem which I knew existed, but which came up very strikingly and raises the question: how could this happen?

We had the same silences on our side, although not for the same reasons. It is important that we do not deny such problems. German people and Jewish people with the same heritage, we should not deny it. We have to learn to articulate these deep emotions. All the awards I have got for my film are nothing compared to that meeting with this young girl where she laid bear her suffering. She is not a victim, she was not responsible, but nevertheless she is bearing a very difficult burden. These issues have not been resolved.

WSWS: In the public discussion on your film at the Cottbus festival the objection was raised to your film that you cannot make jokes about the Holocaust.

RM: That's right. A girl in the audience asked, "How can you do that? We have been educated that you cannot laugh about such things." This is a normal reaction, although I heard it for the first time in Germany. I understood what she said. You cannot begin an education by saying first of all we have to laugh and afterwards we will be serious about it. It is necessary to take such a subject seriously. But I also understood the dangers, the consequences of forbidding people to make jokes about such an issue, of expressing another form of reflection, another point of view. It can lead to people hating the Jewish people. They will think that Jewish people are not prepared to allow them to speak up about such things in their own way.

WSWS: In Berlin at the Jewish Film Festival there was criticism on the part of an elderly Jewish woman with regard to your portrayal of the Jewish village—the shtetl.

RM: All opinions are good, after all I am not a dictator. It is boring when everybody says they love the film, what can I do? I can learn from criticism. Other people have also said that the shtetl was not like that—of course it was not, it is a fiction. From her point of view she was right. I understand her point of view—she came to the film to see *her* shtetl. But I cannot reproduce everybody's idea of a shtetl or *their* shtetl, I cannot show two million shtetls in one film. It's Chagall. She came to see Rembrandt, my exhibition is Chagall. This is a reaction which has also occasionally come up in America. People expect a certain thing but in fact the shtetls were very different in different countries and differed even inside one country, There were big shtetls, very little shtetls.

But there is also an element of something that also came up in the discussions in Dresden, i.e., we—the Jews—are perfect. We are not perfect,

I hate that. It is important to understand the role of Jewish humour, the role of cliché, the way in which we speak about ourselves. We do not have a documentary-type, objective way of speaking about ourselves. We have a very subjective, funny and extravagant way. This is Jewish humour, we speak a lot about ourselves, we do not criticise others so much. The French criticise the Belgians, the Rumanians the Bulgarians. The Jewish tell a lot of jokes about themselves ... about their mother, about their rabbi, about their accountant, about God. They are always discussing with God.

WSWS: I know that one of your future projects is to do with a hypothetical take-over of France by extreme right-wing, fascist elements. Now there is Haider and his party taking part in government in Austria. What is the role of the extreme right wing in France that now controls a number of towns in France?

RM: In France we were helped by a miracle which happened two years ago. I refer to the soccer world championship. One month previously Le Pen [leader of the fascist Front National—FN] said that there are no French people in the French football team (which contains many coloured players from various French colonies) and they do not sing the French national anthem, the *Marseillaise*. He really did not have a chance when one month later the same team won the world championship. The whole French people recognised and associated themselves with that team, which is a very integrated team.

Currently the FN is split into two with the conflict between Le Pen and a rival faction led by Bruno Megret. But its true and funny at the same time—after the soccer success one million people gathered on the Champs Élysées. There were more people on the streets than at the end of the war following the liberation of France by De Gaulle. For the moment the situation has improved somewhat in France.

But the situation in Austria, Italy and above all in Germany, some of the things that are going on in east Germany, are worrying and have to be watched very closely. Germany and, especially eastern Germany, are close neighbours to Austria. It is worrying because the economic situation in east Germany is bad and extreme right-wing ideas can spread quickly when people do not have money and employment. Based on the lessons of history we have to fight the re-emergence of the extreme right immediately, we cannot wait.

In this respect we cannot penalise individual countries, we cannot say just Austria is a bad country—otherwise they will close in on themselves. They will close their frontier and that will encourage the growth of fascism. It is what the Germans and Americans did in the Yugoslav conflict—supporting Croats against Serbs. It is necessary to support all really genuine democratic forces inside Austria and to do that very quickly.

WSWS: You do not therefore support the European Union sanctions?

RM: I do not support the sanctions in the sense that they are directed against all Austrians and not all Austrians are guilty of supporting Haider and the fascists. It is wrong to reject all of the people in that way. We have to learn from history.

I recall an interesting comment made by my father when we visited the Reichstag in Berlin. He remarked that it is amazing that in Germany there is no museum about the consequences of the Second World War and Hitler's politics for the German people themselves. I am not talking not about the Jewish people or other groups or nations persecuted by the fascists, but the Nazi crimes against the German people itself and German history. Nobody teaches these things.

Fifty years after the war the sickness and the confusion is still there. Berlin was destroyed, Germany was destroyed and the young people of today who did not participate in that war are still trapped. Nobody speaks about it, but in terms of psychology the effects of war and fascism can last fifty or a hundred years.

When I came to Berlin last year my visit corresponded to the bombing of Belgrade and I could not avoid thinking about the similarities of two

destroyed capital cities. For me Berlin is both a city and a non-city, even if it has a very pronounced cultural scene including a non-official underground culture. But when you look at its architecture then the spirit of the city, the spirit of its architecture, has been destroyed. And I imagine that it was the same thing in Belgrade ... it was a punishment. This was NATO's punishment for the fact that the people voted for Milosevic. And you can also really feel it in Berlin.

When I came to Berlin everybody told me that the renovations of the city centre were finished, but then when I see cables hanging everywhere from the buildings in the centre of one of the biggest capitals in one of the biggest countries in Europe ... you just have the feeling it is a mess, it is like a non-city, a city which is still lost. They have been unable to establish any real identity for the city—in fact, the city has so many different identities. The way I see it, this is still a consequence of the war, although we are now living fifty years later.

In common with a whole generation I did not live in those times. I did not kill anybody. But like the young German girl I spoke to, who is still living a trauma, you have to ask yourself do you want that trauma for yourself? For your kids? When a country engages in war or votes in fascism then you have to be aware it will change your country for fifty or a hundred years.

WSWS: I want to ask your opinion on the dangers of growing censorship. You have read the material on the campaign in support of the Indian director Deepa Mehta against the attempt to censor her film work. It is not just openly fascist parties which have been carrying out such measures...

RM: I cannot judge every single case but, of course, I will support the campaign for Deepa Mehta and send a statement of support. I am against all forms of censorship. Everybody can say what they think—thoughts are free.

The exception is when you want to modify something which has been scientifically proved. I am referring here to “historical revisionists” for example, who deny the validity of the Holocaust. They want to modify the memory and the history of the war. I am against that. But that does not mean we should censor them. They are free to say what they want to say, but then we are free to punish them because they are lying.

In France there have been a number of trials concerning university professors who said that the concentration camps never existed. People are free to say anything they want, but we are also free to use the law when it is suitable to punish those who are racist or who abuse history and memory. This is not the same as censorship. Censorship means not letting people speak. We have to let them speak, but then we have to analyse what they say. People are free to say anything they want and then we are free to analyse what they say.



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