

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 28. 8. 2025

War documentaries by Jiří Weiss

At the state funeral of President Masaryk in September 1937, Edvard Beneš delivered a eulogy on behalf of the entire republic. He concluded his speech by expressing loyalty to TGM's legacy and, by extension, to humane democracy. During the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, Beneš's words 'we will remain faithful' (věrni zůstaneme) would become the name of one of the most active clandestine resistance groups, Petiční výbor věrni zůstaneme (Petition Organisation We Will Remain Faithful). It is also the name of a documentary film by Jiří Weiss finished right after the war.

This suggestive eighty-minute-long summary of the entire war, emphasising in particular the contributions of the Second Czechoslovak Resistance on various fronts, was premiered in October 1945. Although Weiss would later work on several more socialism-building documentaries, *We Will Remain Faithful* can be considered the highlight of his non-fiction work. While making this documentary, he was able to utilise the experience and contacts gained during the previous years.

Weiss got into film as an amateur in the mid-1930s when he made a report about river boating titled *People in the Sun* (Lidé na slunci, 1935). For the rest of the 1930s, as an employee of the Department of Short Films of the Barrandov company A.B., Weiss would focus on documentaries and educational films often with a message and patriotic tone. He directed films about aviation (*Give us Wings* [Dejte nám křídla], 1936; *Port on the Air Sea* [Přístav vzdušného moře], 1937), scouting (*Come With Us!* [Pojď s námi!], 1937) and social policies in Prague (*Out of the Shadow* [Cesta ze stínu], 1938). The production of his documentary about the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the republic *Twenty Years of Freedom* was interrupted by the Munich Agreement. He only managed to complete a part titled *Our Land* (Naše země, 1938). However, the rise of anti-Semitism and the occupation of the republic by the German

army meant that the Jewish director had to decide whether to stay in the country. After an unpleasant experience with Václav Bínovéc, who allegedly said in March 1939 that he will under no circumstances work with 'the Jew' on set (the rest of the crew responded with embarrassed silence), Weiss understood that nothing good awaited him in Czechoslovakia.

In April 1939, Weiss crossed the border into the Netherlands and was immediately arrested for entering the country without a visa. He spent twelve days in prison in Oldenzaal. Later, thanks to the efforts of several renowned British documentarists John Grierson, Basil Wright and Paul Rotha, he could flee to England. In the country where he would spend most of the war, he immediately began working on a documentary that would explain Masaryk's ideals to foreign audiences, what preceded the recent annexation and why is Czechoslovakia an equally developed country to other European countries.

Weiss used First Republic archive footage he had brought from Prague to compile a documentary titled *The Rape of Czechoslovakia* (Uloupení Československa, 1939). The commentary to this poem about the Czech people, landscape and the fragility of democracy was written by the Anglo-Irish poet Cecil Day-Lewis. Weiss got the funds for producing the documentary from Jan Masaryk, who was also in London at the time (although he was not yet a Minister of the Government-in-exile). Masaryk would later be the protagonist of Weiss' documentary *Letter from Prague* (Dopis z Prahy, 1945).

Weiss also tried to appeal to foreign audiences unfamiliar with the life and institutions in Czechoslovakia with his following nine-minute film *Eternal Prague* (Věčná Praha, 1940). It takes viewers on a journey through the picturesque streets of Prague accompanied by classical music and off-screen commentary.

In the meantime, Jan Masaryk became the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Government-in-exile in London. Thanks to his support, Weiss, who had barely been making ends meet as a freelancer, was accepted into the British Army and took up the position of war correspondent and documentarist in The Crown Film Unit operating under the British Ministry of Information. Its task was to make information, documentary and rarely also live-action films for the general public at home and abroad. The character of the films was often determined by their music composed by

renowned composers such as Walter Leigh, Benjamin Britten and Richard Addinsell. The war documentaries produced by The Crown Film Unit were conceived in the tradition of British civilism, represented in documentary filmmaking by Grierson and Wright. They put ordinary soldiers in the spotlight and showed their preparation for battle – often staged for the purposes of the film – or the lives of British citizens in the country devastated by air raids.

With the Army's support, Weiss was able to film for instance Czechoslovak fighter pilots in the RAF. The footage would become the basis for documentaries *Fighter Pilot* (Stíhač, 1943) and *Night and Day* (Noc a den, 1945) and part of it would also be used in *We Will Remain Faithful*. *Night and Day* follows the 311th Czechoslovak Bomber Squadron RAF. The film begins with the crew of a patrol aircraft waking up and having breakfast. After a brief introduction of their lives before the war, the narrative focuses on their day: patrolling, training, aircraft maintenance, destruction of a U-boat...

Weiss' medium-length documentary *Before the Raid* (Ohnivý rybolov, 1941) about the Norwegian resistance against the Nazi occupation is largely staged. The film depicts a Norwegian fishing village occupied by the Nazis. Local fishermen returning from a successful fishing trip revolt and dump the fish back into the water. After this incident, the Nazis issued an order that all future fishing activities will be conducted under their supervision. However, during a secret meeting, the fishermen come up with a plan to pacify the Germans and throw them overboard.

Before the Raid was originally a part of a four-episode semi-staged project titled *Calling All People* which was supposed to portray the resistance movement in Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, France and Norway based on real events. But some conservative members of the British government allegedly had their reservations against the glorification of partisans and so only the Norwegian story was finished. Filming with non-professional actors recruited from emigrants speaking out against Fascism took place in a small Scottish village.

An example of a live-action film produced by The Crown Film Unit is Weiss' satirical comedy *John Smith Wakes Up* (John Smith se probouzí, 1941). This film also contained an educational appeal that matched the requirements of the period propaganda. Its

protagonist is a bookseller who constantly underestimates the dangers of Fascism. One time, when he loses consciousness, he dreams that the Nazis have reached England. After waking up, he finally realizes how serious the situation actually is.

During the war, Weiss made news reports and live-action, propaganda, and documentary films. And not just for the British. For the Soviet Embassy in London, he made short films about the fight of the Soviet people against Fascism (*The Soviet Union Attacks*, 1942) and about the heroic efforts of Soviet women on the front and in the rear (*100 Million Women*, 1942). In addition to flying with RAF pilots and being able to film air raids directly from the cockpit, Weiss joined the allied forces at the end of the war and documented, for example, the siege of the French port fortress in Dunkirk and the liberation of the Buchenwald concentration camp.

Weiss also filmed in Belgium and the Netherlands, was present when the Allied forces crossed the Rhein and spent the end of the war near the 21st Army Group led by General Patton which reached Czechoslovakia. Due to the dangerous nature of filming on the battlefield, and with a camera with a low capacity, most 'action' sequences were staged ex-post, after the gunfire and explosions ceased.

As the war drew to a close, the Czechoslovak government-in-exile in London provided Weiss with the funds for *We Will Remain Faithful*. It was now supposed to increase its appeal to the Czechoslovak audiences. The film begins with the death of President Masaryk in the autumn of 1937, continues with the drastic events of the Munich Agreement, the rise of the Nazi Army and the defence of other nations, and culminates with the speech of Edvard Beneš and the first efforts to restore Czechoslovak democracy in the liberated homeland.

Masaryk's democratic-humanist legacy and the Czechoslovak participation in the victorious armies' campaigns are continuously brought to the forefront. Whether it's the participation of Czechoslovak volunteers in fights all over Europe, on the Eastern Front and North Africa, or the activities of the Czechoslovak Red Cross.

In addition to documentary footage he made with various British cinematographers, Weiss also used archive footage from Allied and enemy newsreels. The film thus depicts the invasion of Poland, capitulation of France and the Battle of Stalingrad. The score uses compositions by exiled composer Vítězslav Tauský recorded with the

London Philharmonic Orchestra and the film has an emotional commentary, which does not simply describe the facts, but rather immerses into the depicted events and enhances the atmosphere with quoting the works of František Halas and Svatopluk Čech.

The footage isn't organised with emphasis on factual accuracy (as was the case in the American documentary series *Why We Fight* screened in Czechoslovak cinemas at the same time). The priority is given to the narrative dynamics and poetic metaphors. After Masaryk's death, the wheels in the factories stop turning, people in the fields take off their caps and clasp their hands. After the conclusion of the Munich Agreement, we see a rush of water biting into masses of clay...

The premiere was held on 12th October in the Blaník Cinema. In various interviews, however, Weiss recalled that in 1944, during the Slovak National Uprising, he dropped three copies on Slovak territory from a British bomber. He had no idea whether the film was ever screened in the occupied territory, but he perceived the act as an expression of his belief that engaged art is capable of changing the world. He would stick to this belief after the liberation of Czechoslovakia where he returned as a seasoned documentary filmmaker with extensive experience from the editing room and the battlefields of the Second World War.

After the warm reception of *We Will Remain Faithful*, Weiss was offered to lead the Department of Documentary Film at Barrandov in the newly nationalised Czechoslovak film industry. But as he wanted to film live-action films, he turned the offer down. But even in his live-action films, he didn't fully abandon war themes. See for instance his story taking place in the Ore Mountains *The Stolen Frontier* (Uloupená Hranice, 1947) and one of the highlights of his filmography, a drama set during the occupation of Czechoslovakia, titled *Romeo, Juliet and Darkness* (Romeo, Julie a tma, 1959). In terms of style, Weiss generally continued to stick to what he learned in England, a non-pathetic, civilian approach.

Literature:

Antonín J. Liehm, Jiří Weiss. *International Journal of Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 1/2, Closely Watched Films: Filmmaking and Politics in Czechoslovakia 1973, pp. 40–69.

Elmar Klos, Interview with Jiří Weiss, 8th April 1984. National Archive, Oral History Collection.

Václav Merhaut, *Jiří Weiss*. Praha: Čs. filmový ústav 1988.

Antonín Navrátil, *Cesty k pravdě či lži: 70 let československého dokumentárního filmu*. Prague: Akademie múzických umění v Praze, Filmová a televizní fakulta v Nakladatelství AMU 2002.

-rt-, Premiéra prvního českého filmu našeho odboje. *Rudé právo* no. 132 (12th October), 1945, p. 3.

-van-, Věrní zůstaneme, *My: týdeník Svazu české mládeže* no. 6 (20th October), 1945, p. 4.

Jiří Weiss, *Bílý mercedes*. Praha: Victoria Publishing 1995.