

Poetry^{of} resilience

still

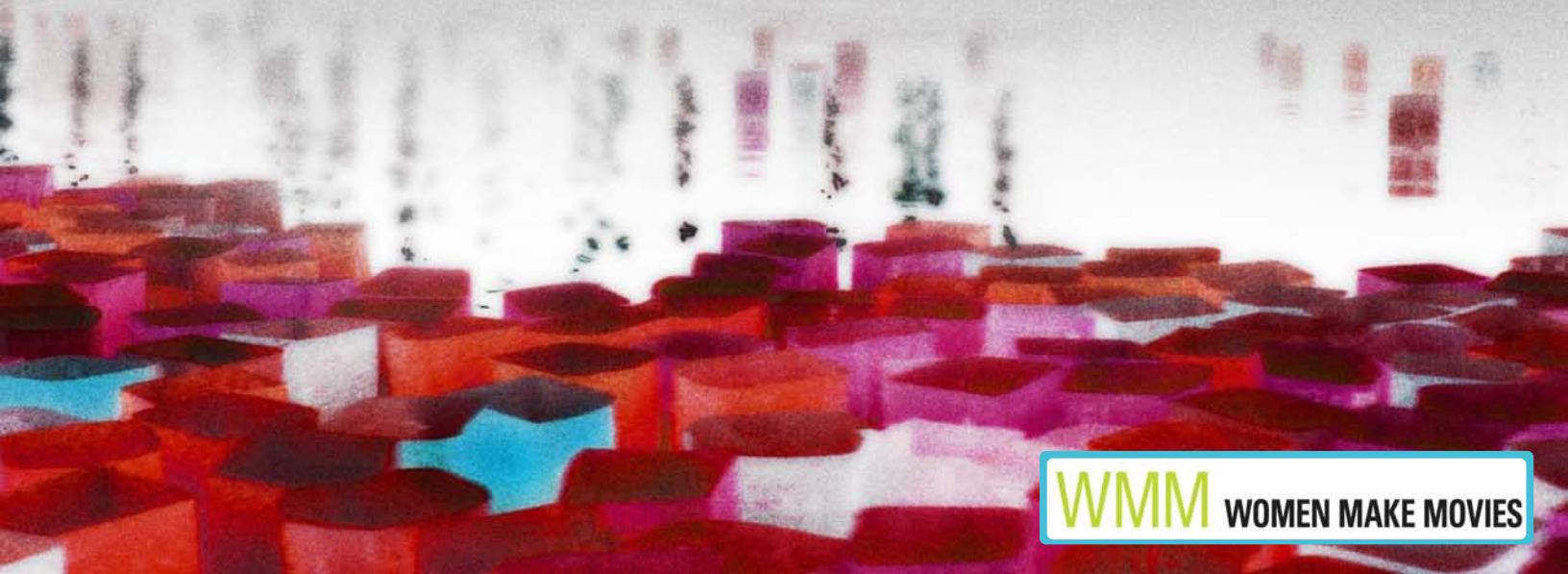
being
alive

seems

to be

a sin

for me



Poetry^{of} resilience

A FILM BY KATJA ESSON

It is difficult
To get the news from poems
Yet men die miserably every day
For lack
Of what is found there.

William Carlos Williams (1955)

SYNOPSIS

POETRY OF RESILIENCE is a 40-minute documentary about six poets who survived some of the worst political atrocities of the 20th century: Hiroshima, the Holocaust, China's Cultural Revolution, the Kurdish Genocide in Iraq, the Rwandan Genocide, the Iranian Revolution. By summoning the creative voice of poetry to tell stories of survival and witness, each reclaims humanity and dignity in the wake of some of history's most dehumanizing circumstances. With grace and humor, the film explores language as an internal means of survival—for the poet and the readers of poems.

40 minutes | HD | 2011 | USA

PREMIERE

International Documentary
Association's Docu Weeks 2011



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CREDITS

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FEATURED POETS AND POETRY



LI-YOUNG LEE

China/Chicago, USA

After The Pyre
Self Help for Fellow Refugees
Immigrant Blues



LILLIAN BORAKS-NEMETZ

Poland/Vancouver, Canada

Jerusalem Street
A Walk Through The Warsaw Ghetto
Laughing Skeletons



YASUHIKO SHIGEMOTO

Hiroshima, Japan

Haiku



ALEXANDRE KIMENYI

Rwanda/Sacramento, USA

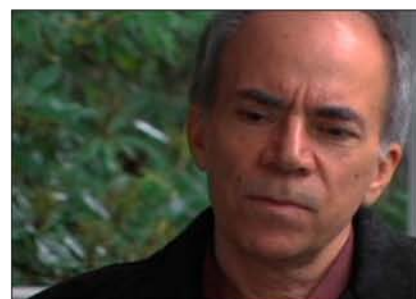
War
Muogo



CHOMAN HARDI

Kurdistan/London, England

The Spoils, 1988



MAJID NAFICY

Iran/Los Angeles, USA

To the Children of Prison and Exile
Ah, Los Angeles!

OTHER POETS include:

CLARIBEL ALEGRÍA **Nicaragua**

NGUYEN CHIEN THIEN **Vietnam**

ORLANDO RICARDO MENES **Cuba/Peru**

DUNYA MIKHAIL **Iraq**

VALZHYNA MORT **Belarus**

NAOMI SHIHAB NYE **Palestine/USA**



FILM DESCRIPTION

POETRY OF RESILIENCE is a documentary by Academy Award®-nominated director Katja Esson about six international poets who individually survived Hiroshima, the Holocaust, China's Cultural Revolution, the Kurdish Genocide in Iraq, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Iranian Revolution.

These six artists present us with a close-up perspective of the "wide shot" of political violence. Each story is powerful, but the film's strength comes from its collective voice: different political conflicts, cultures, genders, ages, races – one shared human narrative.

Majid Naficy, who fought the Shah in Iran and then witnessed the murder of his family by forces of Ayatollah Khomeini, states: "Artistic creativity is the only thing left to you as a survivor."

"I wish I could say the human spirit is resilient," says Chinese poet Li-Young Lee, "some days I don't think so."

Lillian Boraks-Nemetz knows why she survived the Holocaust: "I am a witness and I am telling the story."

Japanese poet, Yasuhiko Shigemoto, sums up his experience in one haiku:

"Still being alive / seems to be a sin for me / Hiroshima Day."

The film takes us to memorial sites in Poland, Rwanda, and Hiroshima; we also travel to the clogged streets of New York City's Chinatown and the boardwalks of Venice Beach. We witness the contrast between the voyages back to the poets' home countries with their experiences of immigration and exile.

As we follow these survivors into their past and present lives we learn that they write for different reasons: to remember, to take revenge, to curse, to forgive, to honor, to commemorate, to transcend. For all, poetry was the gift that restored.

FILMMAKER STATEMENT

In September of 2006, I was invited to Massachusetts to document a conference of poets from around the world. I have to admit, my first thought was "Oh boy, filming people reading poetry.... how boring!" But as soon as these extraordinary individuals stepped on stage and spoke less about the atrocities they endured but rather about the will to survive spiritually and artistically – I was humbled and inspired. I knew that this was a film I needed to make.

Poetry and resilience—two intangible yet utterly powerful forces—fused together to provoke my own creative thinking. The poets' stories demand new ways of interweaving cinematic and written language, challenging me to find new forms of visual storytelling. I was deeply moved by what developed for me as the film's primary thematic concerns: What is the resilience of the human spirit? And how does art (in this case poetry), as a deeply felt, yet ineffable expression of our common humanity, help transform lives?

The making of the film has taken me on a five-year journey of discovery. Through poetry, my understanding of stories I thought I understood became increasingly enriched. I began to feel the power of language, how complex realities and emotions can be conveyed in a few lines. I began to see what it is about language itself that helps us be resilient as human beings.

With POETRY OF RESILIENCE, I want to portray more than an individual story of survival or even a single historical event. The film draws parallels among people of diverse nationalities, ages and gender. Poets come from countries including Japan, Rwanda, Poland, Kurdistan, Vietnam, Iran, and China. Some are the last living witnesses while others are just beginning adulthood.

Lillian Boraks-Nemetz told me about an interview in which a journalist questioned: "Can we really write poems about the Holocaust?" German philosopher Theodore W. Adorno said: "To write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric." This question and response has figured largely in my mind during the filming of POETRY OF RESILIENCE.

Carolyn Forché, a poet and scholar who coined the term 'Poetry of Witness', observes that in many cultures poetry plays an important political role while in the United States literary circles largely distinguish between the "personal" and the "political" and feel the poetic and the political should not mix. She posits that poets can suffer and resist through poetry itself, and that, "extremity can be translated the world over."

While working on the film, I was surprised to hear that poems by detainees at the US detention center at Guantánamo Bay had to be cleared by the Pentagon. Did poetry suddenly pose a danger? Was it taken more seriously, as it might already be in other countries – countries in which poets are imprisoned and sometime assassinated for writing poems? "Poetry cannot block a bullet," wrote Nelson Mandela, "but it can bear witness to brutality."

I strongly feel it is the right time to make a film about poetry. While filming on location in Poland, we walked through the former Warsaw Ghetto. On a plaque on one of the few buildings that survived from that time, I came across the words of Leopold Staff, a Polish poet who survived the German occupation: "Even more than bread we now need poetry, in a time when it seems that it is not needed at all."

POETRY OF RESILIENCE examines how human beings re-claim humanity and dignity in the wake of some of history's most dehumanizing circumstances. It is a significant time in contemporary culture to appreciate and recognize poetic language as a powerful conduit of emotional truth and resilience.

KATJA ESSON BIO

Katja Esson was nominated for an Academy Award® for her film FERRY TALES, which turns the unlikely setting of the Staten Island Ferry women's bathroom into a celebration of sisterhood. Her most recent film, SKYDANCER, is about the Mohawk ironworkers who are responsible for constructing America's cityscape; the film is a provocative examination of Native American life in the 21st century. Other credits include VERTICAL TRAVELER, which explores the pioneering spirit of New York City through the metaphoric story of the city's unique relationship with elevators; HOLE IN THE SKY, a portrait of New York five years after 9/11; LATCHING ON about the politics of breastfeeding in America; and HOOKER, HARLOT, WHORE, about the history of prostitution in Europe. Esson's recent film POETRY OF RESILIENCE is about six international poets who have survived – and written about – some of the world's most unspeakable crimes against humanity. Esson's films have screened at film festivals around the world and been broadcast on HBO, PBS and ARTE among others. Esson lives in Brooklyn, New York and divides her time between Germany and the United States.

In many cultures poetry is esteemed as a means of elevation. Perhaps it elevates the tribe to the realm of the gods. Perhaps it elevates the tribe to the realm of collective imagination. It is an indispensable part of tribal life. In post-Medieval English-speaking culture, however, poetry's purpose has been less clear. In his "An Apology for Poetry," Renaissance sonneteer Sir Philip Sidney pleads with the reader to view poetry as being more than a drunken indulgence. He offers that it awakens civility. In "In Defense of Poesy", the Romantic poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley—for whom "civility" was not high on the list of creative priority—proposes that poetry expands consciousness and, thereby, facilitates Enlightenment.

Jump ahead two centuries and Lawrence Ferlinghetti shouts out that "poetry is news," grounding verse in worldly necessity. Not all bought into Ferlinghetti's view, and newspapers kept it, for the most part, out of column inches.

In a virtual cry out for meaning, in 1991, Dana Gioia begged the question on the cover of *The Atlantic*: "Can Poetry Matter?" Had it not given the civility, enlightenment, and news that his predecessors had said it would? The question hung in the poetic air for a matter of months before Carolyn Forché published "Against Forgetting: Poetry of Witness". Poetry had moved from a place of having to apologize for its existence to being a force of justice.

Katja Esson's searching, challenging and ambitious documentary *POETRY OF RESILIENCE* takes the conversation one step further, exploring poetry as an internal means of survival—for the poet and the readers of poems. The featured poets illustrate, each in a mystifyingly heart-centered honesty, that poetry needs neither apology nor defense. It simply lives within each of us carrying us through our deaths back and back into life again.

www.poetryofresilience.com

