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—film culture

Crime and punishment

Reconstruction re-creates a family's tragedy

BY GERALD PEARY

A Zionist female Robin Hood? A sorrowful victim of Stalinism? A selfish criminal? The abiding mystery for Boston-area filmmaker Irene Lusztig has been the true story of her long-deceased maternal grandmother, Monica Sevienu, who was imprisoned in Bucharest for a notorious

photo

MYSTERY WOMAN: maybe Monica and company stole the money so they could send Jews to Israel?

1959 bank heist. After interviewing Monica's surviving relatives — her own mother and Monica's sister and brother-in-law — Lusztig taught herself Romanian and spent months in Bucharest in pursuit of the truth. The result is a vivid, thrilling feature documentary, *Reconstruction*, that will have its world premiere (with Lusztig present) this Saturday, October 6, at the MFA.

Monica as photographed in her prime was a dark-eyed beauty; men swooned and she chased after them, swept up in their causes. When Romania fell under a pro-Hitler regime, she joined the clandestine Communist Party, thinking that here was a place where being Jewish was okay. She was also a left-wing Zionist. Yet her sister remains skeptical of Monica's convictions, asserting that Monica embraced anything that smacked of being anti-bourgeois.

During the war, Bucharest suffered pogroms, but it was the only major European city where the Jewish populace was not deported en masse to Nazi concentration camps. (I know first-hand: my grandmother, two aunts, and two uncles all survived without arrest in Bucharest, coming to America in the 1950s.) Monica also survived, and after the war she emigrated to Israel with a husband and lived on a kibbutz. The aging ex-spouse, still in Israel, refused to be interviewed for the movie, except to mutter, Lusztig says, that "marrying my grandmother was the biggest mistake of his life." As for Monica, she became irritated with tent life and other kibbutz hardships, so she decided to return in 1948 to Bucharest and a post-war Romania under Communism.

Reconstruction is a film of ambition and scope: Lusztig weaves Monica's personal story with terrific footage of Romania in the throes of Stalinism. Uncle Joe's smiling visage lords over a left-wing fascist regime in which equality is an Orwellian joke, purges are the norm, and anti-Semitism is implied by the Marxist rhetoric about decadent enemies of the state. Monica lay low for years, a slacker living at home off her parents. Then she met Gugu and went ga-ga over this slick-haired womanizing ne'er-do-well.

Gugu! Monica's sister and husband shake their heads, still aghast at this awful guy who became Monica's husband. Monica and Gugu moved in together, and soon rugs were missing from her parents' apartment. And then on July 28, 1959, a bank was robbed of a million lei. Five men were arrested and charged, including Gugu. One woman was arrested: Monica.

The longer Lusztiq spent in Romania, the more convinced she became that the secret police may have grabbed the right people. Could Monica and company have stolen the money to donate it (a prevailing rumor) to Zionist organizations and send Jews to Israel? Maybe — but there's that sudden explosion of cash they had and the expensive presents they gave themselves. Yet whatever Monica and Gugu did, they didn't deserve to be coerced into starring as themselves in a state-produced fake documentary re-creation of their arrest and day in kangaroo court.

After months of searching in Romania, Lusztiq found a print of this creepy "show trial" film, and she copied and reproduced scenes for her own movie.

Reconstruction (that's what it's also called) celebrates the sly detective work of Romanian cops as they get these fascist culprits to confess they've stolen bank money meant for honest Romanian workers! Gugu shivers like a wet rat. Monica, disheveled, unglamorous, is in shock.

The five men — all Jews! — were found guilty and shot. Monica was sent to prison for life, though she was pardoned during a 1964 amnesty. Following Monica's trail, Lusztiq visits the dank jail and even locates her freed one-time cellmate — the only person in the film with nice words for Monica!

Forgotten in my narrative, forgotten mostly by Monica: her daughter, who is Lusztiq's bitter mother. Neglected in her childhood by self-absorbed parents, she romanticized Monica, dreaming of the beautiful sophisticated lady who would come home from jail. Instead, she was greeted one day with a sight from the Brothers Grimm: "a hunchback with greenish, lifeless skin." Yes, that was mama, who then fled alone to Israel and died at age 53 of a heart attack, housekeeper to a rich man in Tel Aviv. Oy, what a strange life!

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