



## interview

**A documentary by South London film-makers Jesse and Daniel Quinones about Lithuanian Jews and the Holocaust is likely to spark debate at Cannes this month. DAN FROST meets the two brothers**

**F**OR this year's European Capital Of Culture the EU has chosen Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. Much as it was for Liverpool last year, the hotly sought-after title is a chance for the city to showcase its cultural credentials while boosting its global profile and, according to the official website, "promoting dialogue and tolerance in Europe and other parts of the world".

Well there's no questioning this last point – a laudable aim indeed. The problem is that it seems to be in stark contrast with the situation found by South London documentary-makers Jesse and Daniel Quinones, who went to Lithuania last year to make a film about the experiences of Lithuanian Jews during the Holocaust. Far from the modern, forward-thinking picture-postcard society we are shown, the two brothers encountered an Eastern European country still grappling with its racist past – and a small community of Jews still living in fear of prejudice and attack.

"Of the 240,000 Jews in the region [at the time of the Nazi occupation], 228,000 were murdered," 27-year-old Jesse, of Forest Hill, tells me when I meet the two brothers for coffee in Streatham. "One of the reasons there were so many deaths is that many Lithuanian citizens were complicit with the Nazis and I think there is a great sense of shame about that."

"They don't really talk about the Holocaust in the history books – it's very glossed over – and one of our main aims was to bring that to the fore, to create



**AT WORK:** Jesse and Daniel Quinones, right, in Lithuania



**POIGNANT:** A scene from Surviving History

# Lithuania on screen

some kind of discourse."

The brothers recently took a major step towards this when their film *Surviving History* was accepted for competition in the prestigious Cannes Film Festival, taking place later this month.

As well as the harrowing testimonies of Lithuanian Holocaust survivors, the film also shows hundreds of neo-Nazi marching through Vilnius in March last year, shouting anti-Semitic slogans with a full police escort.

It might not be comfortable viewing for those promoting Vilnius as a "capital of culture", but it is a very real scar on the country's reputation that Jesse and Daniel feel should be exposed.

"There has never been a more important time to make this film. This is a real taboo subject in Lithuania," says Jesse. "To this day, they [Holocaust survivors] do not feel safe over there. There are still attacks on Jews and a lot of the people we interviewed talked about this march and how they feel that this kind of racism is never going away."

The idea for the film came from the brothers' mother Shivaun Woolfson, who is both producer and narrator on the film and whose Jewish ancestors fled Lithuania for Ireland before war broke out. Hearing the traumatic stories of Holocaust survivors was an emotionally taxing experience for Jesse and Daniel, 25, but it was made all the more difficult by their ancestral connections.

"It's hard to imagine that, had my relatives stayed here, this could have been their fate," Jesse says.

Daniel, who lives in East Dulwich, adds: "I guess it makes it extra poignant for us. When you hear that amount of terrible stories in such a short space of time it kind of does something to your sense of humour."

"We heard such horrific stories," continues Jesse. "One example is this young woman who was in a camp with her two-year-old son. Her husband was murdered and one night a small group of people came to her and said, 'We have found a way to escape but we have to leave in half-an-hour and you can't take your son because he will give us away'. It was the hardest half an hour of her life but she decided to leave."

"Two days later she got word that the camp had been liquidated – everyone, including her son [was killed]. When we asked her if she had the chance would she make the same decision again, she said no, because although it was 70 years ago, that decision has haunted her for her entire life."

Jesse pauses, then adds with a sigh: "Every story we heard was just as painful as that."

● Visit [www.livingimprint.org](http://www.livingimprint.org) or [www.survivinghistory.woolfson.com](http://www.survivinghistory.woolfson.com) for more information on *Surviving History* and other work by Jesse and Daniel.