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Fire Sweeps Through Kiev's Oldest Movie Theater During LGBT Movie

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A fireman extinguishes a fire at the Zhovten cinema in Kiev.

A fire has swept through the oldest movie theater in Ukraine's capital Kiev during the showing of an LGBT movie, ravaging the building in what witnesses described as a likely arson attack.

None of the 100 or so people who attended the screening Wednesday night appeared to have been injured, but the landmark movie theater, Zhovten, constructed in 1931, was badly damaged as the flames continued raging for hours, Ukrainian media reported.

The fire started during the screening of French film Les Nuits d'Ete (Summer Nights), which was showing as part of an LGBT program at the Molodist, or Youth, film festival.

Movie-goer Yevhen Zelman said on his Facebook page that the fire broke out when an unidentified man tossed an "incendiary smoke grenade" behind people sitting in back rows, adding that "it was very scary, because it was tossed right behind our backs."

Film festival coordinator Alexei Chaschin, who attended the screening, said that the "film had been playing for 20 minutes already when people in back rows shouted: 'Smoke!'" LB.ua news portal reported.

"We didn't understand at once what happened," he was quoted as saying. "We managed to quickly lead people out from this screening and from other halls in Zhovten. The first fire truck arrived quickly, others came when smoke started billowing out of the windows."

But Zelman, the moviegoer, gave a slightly different account suggesting that the evacuation was disorganized.

After noticing the smoke, "people started running out, there was, of course, a crowd, I started pulling handles on the right — emergency exits — but everything was locked shut," he said on Facebook. He also said that cashiers and security guards told him that they did not know how to switch on a fire alarm, and when asked to use a fire extinguisher, a guard responded: "I don't know how."

Initial media reports cited movie-goers as saying the fire may have been started by arsonists who were outraged by the screening of the gay-themed film. Others in Ukrainian media and politics suggested a connection with a business dispute that saw the movie theater fighting to avoid eviction from its building.

A member of the Kiev municipal legislature, Ihor Lutsenko, said on his Facebook page: "There are legal battles going on over the movie theater now. It is public property, and some want to evict its current renters, who have brought this place a cult following."

The legislature is reviewing an agreement on the movie theater's lease, he said, adding that "everything was to be settled normally, but then — a fire."

In the hours after the fire, Ukrainians began circulating appeals on social networks to organize a fund-raising drive to finance the movie theater's restoration.

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