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Facing the Past
Representations of the Holocaust
in German Cinema Since 1945

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WASHINGTON, D. C.

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JOSEPH AND REBECCA MEYERHOFF ANNUAL LECTURE
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THE JOSEPH AND REBECCA MEYERHOFF ANNUAL LECTURE on the Holocaust has been endowed by a 1994 grant from the Meyerhoff family to promote excellence in and to disseminate Holocaust research. Life-long residents of Baltimore, Joseph and Rebecca Meyerhoff were involved in philanthropic activities in the United States and overseas in music and the arts, Jewish learning and scholarship, and human services, among other concerns. Jewish history and education were a primary focus in their philanthropic efforts. This tradition has been upheld and enhanced by their children and their children's children. Their son, Harvey M. Meyerhoff, is Chairman Emeritus of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council. The annual lecture is held in the Joseph and Rebecca Meyerhoff Theater of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

IT IS MY PRIVILEGE and my pleasure to speak to you about an intriguing question that accompanied me during my childhood in postwar Berlin, and that has since influenced my academic work and writing. This question is at the very center of today's lecture. How much of the past is present in contemporary German culture and everyday life? By extension, do memories of German Jews and non-Jewish Germans coincide? Do they have the same contents, the same moral message, and do they cause the same pain? As a child in postwar Berlin I asked my mother, who had come from Königsberg, and my father, who had come from Breslau, "Why are we here in Berlin, after everything?" As I grew up, I continued to wonder why we had remained in that city of physical and spiritual ruins. Why is it that German Jews who survived Nazism and the Holocaust inside Germany, inside the "vicious heart" as Meyer Levin has called it, stayed in Germany and rebuilt Jewish life, Jewish communities and a German-Jewish relationship?¹ Why is it that many exiled Jews returned to Germany with the Allied troops, or later on from their countries of refuge, from Eastern Europe and even from the fledging State of

Israel? And finally: Why did many of those Jews who were part of the democratic reconstruction of Germany become active in theater, literature, the media, education, music and film?

Do not expect me to elaborate on all of those problems in this lecture, except for one question: How has German cinema grappled with the legacy of the Jews remaining in Germany and with the impact of the Holocaust? I will deal not with academic debates, questions of research or German-Jewish confrontations in the media but rather with that sphere of modern culture that has an enormous impact on the minds of millions – cinema. I will highlight films that have been produced in Germany since 1946, that have represented the Holocaust and Jewish topics, and that have been seen by millions of Germans. Throughout the five decades since the liberation of the remnant of German Jewry and of the survivors in the East, several hundred relevant films on the subject have been produced in both Germanys. The discussion of films produced in the two German states thus implicitly unites the separated German screens. Basically, no other film culture has produced as many films dealing with the Holocaust, Jewish issues and Nazism as has Germany's.

Cinema is the centerpiece of our visual culture. The term “visual culture” refers to film and television and their impact on our minds, perceptions, knowledge and emotions. From both a Jewish and a German perspective, the Holocaust poses one of the most fascinating challenges to creators of visual culture. How can the actor or director represent images of the Holocaust without offending survivors? Which images are necessary to convey the horror, the suffering, and the daily struggle to survive? Which cinematic elements are able to create a visual legacy that will convincingly tell generations to come about this immense rupture in European, German and Jewish history and culture?

I.

Within this context of facing the past, we should also look at the role of the Holocaust as it is reflected in German culture and history since 1945. To determine this role, we must first ask whether the remembrance of the Holocaust has become an integral part of postwar and even post-Wall historical consciousness and identity in Germany beyond the arena of public commemorations and memorial sites. The answer to this question will help us to understand the ambiguities of the modern German-Jewish experience. Second, we must refer to the identity of

Jews in Germany. Is their perception and self-perception “on the inside,” as it were, defined exclusively by the memory of the Holocaust? How do they participate in public life and culture of united Germany? Exploring these questions will sharpen our understanding of the German-Jewish experience in Germany, and the influence of its legacy on society, politics, culture—and of course, cinema.

A few weeks before the Allies occupied Germany and freed the last remnants of German Jewry, a small group of Jewish inmates of the Jewish hospital in Berlin were ordered to prepare newly sewn Yellow Stars. In a complete misinterpretation of the military situation, the Gestapo had wanted to prepare Berlin for the period after the *Endsieg*, the final victory. It had become obvious that Berlin was not *judenrein*, free of Jews, as Goebbels had once proclaimed. In the Jewish Hospital alone, 800 Jewish inmates, among them one hundred children, hoped for the quick arrival of the Allied troops.² Once Berlin had been occupied by the Soviet army, the yellow stars could be forgotten, and a small remnant of German Jewry could begin to reconstruct Jewish life in almost all fields of society. Others, who had served in the Allied forces or come back from concentration camps or exile, now stayed in Germany in positions of leadership.³ American research showed in September 1945 that approximately 6000 Jews were living in the city of Berlin.⁴ By the end of 1945, a mere six months after Germany’s unconditional surrender, Allied administrations had to deal with Jews of German and Eastern European origin in about 500 German communities and cities. The politics of annihilation of Nazi Germany had effected the end of German Jewry as a social, religious and cultural entity; but Nazism had failed to erase Jewish life from the German lands.

Victor Klemperer describes in his diary in 1945 that, from a Jewish community numbering over 5000 in Dresden in 1933, just 100 German Jews could be counted—and these immediately became active in public functions.⁵ The same happened in Berlin, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Munich and other cities. Among those who returned were many artists, actors, directors, writers, journalists or German Jews who had been active in politics or anti-Nazi organizations.

Others who had survived the Nazi period but were not allowed to work in their professions because of Nazi racial laws now tried to return to their work. From the very beginning after liberation, Jewish directors, scriptwriters and actors were involved in the making

of films or theater productions. This was not a return to the outstanding pre-war Berlin or Viennese German-Jewish and Austrian-Jewish film and theater scenes, but it would be wrong to ignore the fact that Jewish artists had an immediate impact on postwar German cinema. Members of the Berlin film community, among them artists of Jewish origin who had lived through the war in Berlin, decided to produce a film that would tell the truth about the German-Jewish experience since 1933 and show how non-Jewish Germans had failed to preserve their humanism, morality and decency. The film was titled *Marriage in the Shadows*⁶ and depicted the fate of the Gottschalk couple, both popular actors in Berlin who committed suicide when she was threatened with deportation. The film depicts in an almost semi-documentary manner the deterioration of the status of the Jews in Berlin and the opportunism of most Germans who turned their face away. In one scene, Berlin Jews who are married to non-Jews are at a German office that distributes ration cards for food. Young German women work there, and one Gestapo officer can be seen in the background. The female official calls the Gestapo officer matter-of-factly when she sees in her files that the non-Jewish husband of one of the women who stands in line with her daughter has died. Hence, she no longer can receive the ration cards and will be deported. Her daughter yells for help, but to no avail. The daughter of this so-called mixed marriage will not yet be deported. In the film almost nothing is explained because there was no need for lengthy dialogue or explanation. The filmmakers could rightfully assume that everyone in the audience in the late 1940s understood, because everybody knew or had been witness to similar scenes in everyday life. Within four years more than twelve million Germans had seen this film, which is immense for the time and can only be explained by the public's need for entertainment, and with the fact that a few thousand movie theaters had not been destroyed in the war.

Immediately after the war, the writer Alfred Döblin returned in a French army uniform, and the writers Stefan Heym and Hans Habe returned with the U.S. army. The writer Friedrich Wolf and his son Konrad, who later became one of the most outstanding German film directors, returned from Moscow, Anna Seghers from Mexico, Arnold Zweig and the painter Lea Grundig from Palestine.⁷ The writer Wolfgang Hildesheimer became an interpreter at the Nuremberg Trials. Actresses and actors such as Ida Ehre, Elisabeth Bergner, Lilli Palmer, Peter Lorre, Curt Bois, Ernst Deutsch, the director Fritz Kortner, and for a period even the famous director Fritz

Lang tried to reenter professional life in postwar Germany. They and other returned exiles had an immense impact on the *re*-presentation and representation of Jewish topics within the emerging postwar culture. Many of the films mentioned below are not just about Jews and the Holocaust but are produced with the participation of actors, directors, composers or producers of Jewish origin. The problem is that most of these films were never brought to America and screened in movie theaters.

One film, however, was also shown in North America. Israel Becker's movie *Long Is the Path*⁸ from 1948 depicted the fate of a Polish Jewish family from 1939 on, and focused on the postwar experience of the survivors, mother and son, as Jewish displaced persons in Germany. It is a film produced by Jewish displaced persons so that a German and international audience would be confronted with the plight of the quarter of a million Jewish D.P.s in Germany at that time. The film revolves around the love story of the young hero and a German-Jewish woman who has been liberated in a camp. In this respect, the film is exceptional because in most of the later films the gendered situations deal with Jewish–non-Jewish-German relationships. Both survivors want to leave Germany because, as the young woman says: “Here I cannot forget.”

Around the same time, another Jewish survivor of the death camps, the young Artur Brauner, started his career as a film producer in Berlin. He wanted to produce a movie about the recent past, a film that would reach out to millions and convey a democratic, anti-racist, humanistic and spiritual message. This 1948 film is almost forgotten. Entitled *MORITURI*,⁹ “those who are bound to die,” it begins with a concentration camp scene set in occupied Poland. In the opening sequence the audience is confronted with a *Selektion*.

This “selection,” however, which drew on a common base of knowledge in the German population of 1948, had a meaning different from those of the deadly selections in the concentration camps. The doctor selects as not fit for work those men whom he believes are strong enough to escape the very same night to freedom. Images on the screen and connotations in the minds of the audience can have a very complicated relationship.

Since the early postwar documentaries about the annihilation camps, any image that refers to the Holocaust draws on a cultural blueprint that exists in the minds of millions of Germans. The images of discrimination, isolation, of social death, and the ensuing deportation

and murder are not cinematic imaginations but reflections of collective experiences—and thus collective memories—that invaded all strata of cultural creativity and social life.¹⁰

Films that face the past in the two German states have to be seen within their cultural and political contexts. Mainstream politics and ideologies also influenced film production. The Cold War shaped the cinematic imagination not only in the East, but also in the West. While West German films in the 1950s and early 1960s grappled with the problem of how to establish the image of the decent German soldier, East German films turned to heroicizing the antifascist and communist resistance to Hitler. In both cases, however, one can find fascinating subversive elements whenever Jewish topics either propel a film or pass by like shadows of the past.

The 1963 film *Naked Among Wolves*, directed by Frank Beyer and based on the novel by Bruno Apitz, shows how inmates of the Buchenwald concentration camp hide a child in the last few weeks before liberation.¹¹ In one scene that takes place in March of 1945, a death march from Auschwitz arrives in Buchenwald. Among the new prisoners is a Polish Jew carrying a suitcase. He has to leave the suitcase outside the barracks, and inmates of the camp discover a little boy inside. They take care of him. The father is deported, but the child lives, which, of course, is a basic constellation in recent films such as Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful* or the French *Je suis vivante et je vous aime/I'm alive and I love you*.¹² Another important film of the early 1960s contributed immensely to a new film language in the German representation of the Holocaust. Camerawork and historical research, sound and image, text and acting were admirably combined in Konrad Wolf's film *Sterne/Stars*.¹³ The film depicts an episode in the deportation of Jews from Saloniki, an episode that implies the awakening of the moral consciousness of an ordinary German soldier. The opening sequence of the film creates images of deportation trains that can be traced forward and found, for instance, in *Schindler's List*. The song by the famous Yiddish folk-poet composer Mordecai Gebirtig, "Undzer shtetl brent! (Es brent)," is sung in a way that even a German audience that does not understand Yiddish will understand.

Holocaust films are replete with references, visual quotes, back- and foreshadowing of images that haunt our imaginations. Before the audience can analyze and discuss such films, these "cinematic memories" are already freely crossing borders in a virtual cinematic world. As images, they subtly construct our visual memory. In the future, the memory of the Holocaust will be defined less by the recollections of the survivors than by the representations of the

filmmakers. This is even happening to some extent today. With distance, in time the virtual becomes increasingly the real.

II.

Beyond issues of deportation and concentration camp horrors, postwar German films also deal with the period before 1939. It was characteristic of German historical consciousness in the first three postwar decades after 1945 that the cultural discourse, including the cinematic discourse, centered on the pre-war years and particularly on the events surrounding the November pogrom of 1938, the so-called *Kristallnacht*, or Night of the Broken Glass. A recurring topic, which sometimes unfolded from the perspective of children or youth, was the depiction of the help—or failure to help—of non-Jewish Germans, and of the horror that Jewish life faced. These films portrayed growing up in Germany, desperation, loss and emigration.

With the increasing importance of television, many productions were initiated by German TV stations, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. Television became a central medium for imagining the so-called German-Jewish symbiosis, for representing Jewish history in Germany, and particularly for depicting the fate of the Jews in Nazi Germany. Many of these fiction and non-fiction films incorporated images of exile and of Israel. Sometimes it seemed as if the German Jews had vanished one day in the late 1930s and reappeared in New York and Tel-Aviv. Usually this was a cinema of reconciliation, void of the terror of extermination, void of the individual faces of perpetrators. Films about Jewish suffering were almost a welcome salve for the living-room audience, as they often conveyed to the spectator the message that he or she could switch over and identify with the victim. In short, these served a welcome redemptive function, one of the reasons why the film *Europa, Europa* about the Jewish Hitler Youth Salomon was not really successful in Germany when it appeared in the 1990s. This film spoiled the myth of the “decent” *Wehrmacht Soldat* with the depiction of a homosexual soldier, as it questioned the idea of the “innocent” Jewish victim by depicting scenes of sexual desire, opportunism, and the ambiguities of a survival that was lacking in heroism but nevertheless very real.¹⁴

Facing the perpetrators, though, became central for smaller productions, often documentaries or docu-dramas. The most outstanding documentaries or nonfiction films were

produced by Erwin Leiser. One remarkable docu-drama that has to be mentioned is Theodor Kotulla's 1977 film about the SS officer who was in charge of the annihilation at Auschwitz, *Aus einem deutschen Leben/From a German Life*. The film depicted scenes outside the gas chambers and the infamous visit by Heinrich Himmler. In this and many other films the casting is an important element, since the actor who plays the SS officer is a very popular actor in Germany. Films concentrating on the perpetrators are rare, though, a fact that points to problems in the German politics of remembering. It is often easier to depict the suffering of the victims than to individualize, to give name and identity to, the perpetrators.

This problem also illuminates the existence of an antagonistic cultural context. The discourse of antagonistic memories—in which memory of the perpetrator usually is suppressed—is characteristic of a number of films produced in the 1980s. Only the more recent movie *After the Truth*, about the physician of death, Dr. Mengele, who fictitiously returns to Germany and seeks justice at court, deals extensively with the perpetrator confronting the younger German generations. The new German-Russian co-production *The Moloch*, about the private lives of Adolf Hitler and Eva Braun, goes in the same direction. The timing of these films reminds us that it has taken many years for a new generation of filmmakers to broach the topic of perpetrators, either in their historical settings or contemporary society.

After the 1950s, the aesthetics of visually remembering on the screen were sometimes a hidden and sometimes an open discourse that transformed the Iron Curtain in Germany into a filter of cultural confrontation between the politics of memory in the East, and those in the West. One could observe two major tendencies: either the search for new cinematic ways to vary Holocaust narratives, or the imaginative use of elements of the Holocaust to come to terms with more recent social or political problems in postwar Germany. Some films in the 1950s tried to use Jewish characters to restore the image of the decent soldier. Others combined concepts of antifascism and philosemitism with subplots that involved Jews, or mixed social critique with things Jewish. This was very often the case with directors of the so-called New German Film of the 1970s. There is almost no film by Rainer Werner Fassbinder or Wim Wenders or Volker Schlöndorff without such Jewish references, usually leading to contextual problems. Certain elements, key words, or images became stock representations of the past in Germany, and very

often the term “memory” became almost automatically loaded with meanings related either to the Holocaust or to the war.

In the mid-1970s, the high noon of the postwar era, one of the more outstanding German films about the Holocaust was produced in East Germany. It captured many awards, including an Oscar nomination for best foreign film. Its depiction of life in a ghetto makes it an exception to the trend of using the Holocaust to fit a contemporary political or social agenda. Today, after more than twenty-five years, the 1974 film *Jacob the Liar*, directed by Frank Beyer, has not lost its power. The film was based on a bestseller written by Jurek Becker who, as a child together with his father, had survived the Lodz ghetto and then grew up in Berlin to become one of the most important German-Jewish writers of the postwar period.¹⁵ The film was a watershed, and since then, films about the Holocaust have to be measured against this cinematic backdrop. Though full of humor and irony, the film does not indulge in false happy-endings. In this respect it is a thoughtful product of European cinematic culture. It does not yield easy answers, but it does insist on humanity and hope. In the closing scene of the film all of the protagonists are deported, and from inside the train we see them remembering the distant past and imagining the unfulfilled future.

III.

Widely received films such as *Jacob the Liar* establish cinematic images of memories and remembrance. They resist tendencies of amnesia and intentional forgetting. Within this context of amnesia and memory, cinematic references to the Holocaust are not at all limited to a specific type of narrative or film genre in Germany—or even to the mainstream, internationally acclaimed German film production. Two lesser-known films, in particular, have to be mentioned. These deal with the public German discourse on remembering and representing the Holocaust and “things Jewish” in contemporary Germany. The first is the 1988 film by Thomas Brasch, co-written by Jurek Becker, *The Passenger - Welcome to Germany*. This, in fact, is an extraordinary cinematic work on film as a medium of memory and, at the same time, a fundamental critique of Nazi cinema. A Nazi filmmaker, supposedly Veit Harlan, selects Jewish inmates of a concentration camp as extras for an antisemitic movie. The audience does not really know whether this is a memory or the realistic depiction of past events, because the whole film is about

making a movie about a movie about perishing in the Holocaust, and about survival, and about the eventual memory of these past events. Through these obscuring layers, the film, in fact, questions our whole concept of memory—and memory on a public level. Until now the film has been shown in America only at film festivals in Boston and Los Angeles. Tony Curtis plays the leading role as an American film director who comes to Berlin to rediscover his Jewish past and his moral responsibility. Thomas Brasch, the director, and Jurek Becker, the scriptwriter, are both of Jewish origin.

Jurek Becker published another novel, *Bronstein's Children*, that was transformed into a movie for German television in 1990.¹⁶ The film tells the story of Jewish families in East Berlin in the 1970s. Through the eyes of an eighteen-year-old boy and his girlfriend, both Jewish, past and present are interwoven. The narration is unpretentious, the story familiar to every Jew who has lived or has grown up in postwar Germany. The film plays in 1970s East Berlin. In a crucial scene, the two young Jewish heroes of the movie meet on a film set where she is playing the role of a deported Jewish girl. As they leave the set together, he tells her that she should only have agreed to play a Jewish woman if the SS men were played by real SS men. The whole dilemma of depicting Jews in German and Austrian cinema is given its visual and verbal denouement. She plays a dark-eyed and dark-haired beauty. But when wig and make-up are removed, we see a blonde-haired, bright-eyed girl who has been “deconstructed.” The imagined, abstract Jew has become a real Jew, who lives in Germany before and after unification. The film indicates the new self-consciousness of a younger generation of German Jews—and quashes any residual stereotyping that might occur on the public level.

Together with a relevant number of other cinematic representations, most films that I have mentioned thus far inform an ongoing cultural debate about two crucial problems in Germany: the generational dimension of memory, and the pitfalls of constantly surpassing the limits of representing the Holocaust and German-Jewish themes on the screen. The 1980s culturally set the stage for what has become the renewed German-Jewish experience since German unification. Since then, we have increasingly dealt with cinematic images of German-Jewish *self*-understanding in a German civil society. The Jewish perspective is focused on Germany not only from the outside, either from America or Israel, but also increasingly from inside Germany. As they face the past in their own cultural productions, Jews in Germany do not

need deputies any more. As we can see in many European countries, this aspect of the postwar period is over. Below, I will refer back to contemporary films produced from this insider's perspective, but I first would like to present one counter-example to this new idea of Jewish self-representation in Germany.

An outspoken and highly problematic non-Jewish German perspective was developed in Volker Schlöndorff's 1996 film *Der Unhold/The Ogre*. This film reintroduces both the aesthetics of Fritz Lang's mythical epos *Siegfried* and those of Leni Riefenstahl's never-ending commitment to the heroic.¹⁷ The plot unfolds in an East Prussian forest where, towards the end of the war, a Nazi elite school is destroyed by the advancing Russian army. As the finishing touch to the story, the hero has hidden a Jewish child, dressed in concentration camp garments and appearing as a *deus ex machina* from nowhere. The hero carries the child on his shoulders as he tries to escape from the inferno. Murmuring Hebrew words, the Jewish child is safely carried by this new incarnation of Saint Christopher through the fire of Russian soldiers, flames, an ice-cold river, and the Prussian woods. Germany explodes in flames, but the Jewish child is redeemed. Paradise is lost, but with the Jewish savior on his shoulders, the hero strides toward the sun that rises into the future.

Schlöndorff's film endured many cuts by the director, and it indicates a tendency to view the narratives and the film aesthetics of the 1920s and 1930s through a prism that, in fact, seemed to be shattered by the Holocaust. Joseph Vilsmaier's 1998 reconstruction of the famous *cappella* band, the *Comedian Harmonists* (released in the United States as *Harmonists*), is another example of a convenient representation of the past. The immense conflicts between the Jewish and non-Jewish members of this group at the time of the Nazis' rise to power are smoothed down and polished for the sake of an idealized German-Jewish past. Films like these, as entertaining as they may be, always flirt with the danger that the aesthetically brilliant and pleasing representation of a bygone world may turn out to be a one-way road out of history, where remembering becomes a means by which to forget.

A further illustration of this new wave of entertaining movies is of course the widely debated 1998 film *Aimée and Jaguar*, which won two prizes at the 1999 Berlin Film Festival for the leading female actresses. The film is based on the memoir of a young German woman, married to a Nazi, and mother of four. She falls in love with a beautiful Jewish woman who lives

illegally in Berlin, works for a newspaper, helps the underground, and is the strong personality in a group of lesbians.¹⁸ It is 1943-44 in Berlin, time for love, time for *Götterdämmerung*, time for the last Jews of Berlin to survive the Nazi ambitions to transform Berlin into an Aryan city. It is a film of strong emotions, of eroticism and sex. In fact, after the memoirs of Gad Beck and others, the time has come for films that show love and sexuality as means of survival, and therewith overcome the tendency to look with voyeurism and sexism at the Holocaust and issues of sexuality.¹⁹

The contribution of *Aimée and Jaguar* lies in the fact that it shows the life of young secular Berlin Jews who, except for the Jewishness forced upon them, do not seem to be different from others of their age. In this sense, the film comes from the “insider’s” perspective. However, it is not a docu-drama, and both book and film are increasingly discussed in German media in terms of historical accuracy where the two heroines and their story are concerned. The Jewish woman is caught, deported to Theresienstadt and perishes. In one of the central scenes, the young Jewish woman has her “coming out” as a Jew. The reaction of her non-Jewish lover, though, is affection, not rejection. “Do not leave me alone,” uttered by the German side in this German-Jewish relationship, has highly symbolic meaning, ambiguous meaning. Even today we have to ask who has left whom in the overall tragic German-Jewish love story behind this micro-tragedy.

Many of these entertainment films doubtless trivialize the Jewish experience, but we should never forget that on this subject there exist many other movies that do not trivialize, and that do not reach the American movie theaters. German films about the Holocaust are part of a cinematic and broader cultural discourse. Many are referential and self-critical. There can be no doubt that the films *Comedian Harmonists* and *Aimée and Jaguar* are, in a broad sense, cinematic contributions to the serious debate on Holocaust remembrance in Berlin, even though both films also harbor distortions of the lives of the historical individuals whose stories they tell.

In the 1980s, films like *Star Without a Sky* and *The Passenger* or *The Actress* dealt with the antagonistic character of memories in German society, while films like *Leni* and *Three Days in April* depicted problems of individual responsibility and memory outside the urban centers.²⁰ Films such as these last two countered the growing wave of German *Heimat* films, homeland films that basically show a *Heimat* void of Jews. The film *Leni* tells the story of a Jewish baby

hidden with a peasant family in Bavaria. The child is denounced by neighbors and deported to Auschwitz. *Three Days in April* recalls the memories of German citizens who were involved in the fate of a train full of Jewish deportees that, for three days, was kept on the railway tracks in their village. These films are self-critical and painful visual discussions of ethical and historical aspects of the relation of ordinary German civilians to the persecution of the Jews. They avoid harmonizing images or the representation of cathartic heroes with whom the audience can identify. These films are not easy to watch, and they could be produced or screened only because German public television stations sponsored such productions. More recent films such as *Left Luggage*, *Gloomy Sunday* or Istvan Szabo's masterpiece *Sunshine* all stretch into today's world of European-Jewish experiences. Their images remind us of the Holocaust but also move beyond it.

That the German and German-Jewish project of representing the Holocaust is occasionally ambiguous in form and intent lies not in the fact that there is a tendency in some corners to cater to those parts of the population who would love to draw a bottom line and push the Holocaust back into German pre-history. The recent debates over the Holocaust memorial, the *Wehrmacht* exhibition, the Berlin Jewish Museum, over the speeches by Martin Walser and Ernst Nolte and above all over the reception of the diaries of Victor Klemperer, have revealed an ongoing interest in Holocaust-related issues. There may be ambiguous attitudes in these discussions, in some of the cultural crystallizations of these discussions, but these can also be seen in a positive light. These ambiguities highlight the very existence of ongoing productive endeavors to remember the pain and the feeling of loss. Remembering always implies a process of forgetting, and we have to be conscious of the fact that we do not know all the time what to remember and what to forget.

Images of Jewish women, men and children on the German screens fill a real void that exists in German society. Such films revitalize images of the past for popular imagination. They create a whole world of imagined Jews that may perhaps not always live up to historical research or to our knowledge of German-Jewish social life and culture. Younger German generations, however, may find here sources for learning about their own families, and emotional resources for the post-unification development of their identities. We know that neither the grandparents of the generation of younger Germans nor elementary or higher education can provide what all of

these films, regardless of their educational or entertainment value, try to establish—images of something that today’s Germans can never be part of, namely, the German-Jewish experience of the past. These films fill a cultural and social void. They are the visual German cure for a German *Schmerz*, a painful representation of a cultural longing. It might seem base that films that face the past actually serve this sort of purpose. But, in fact, that is the essence of art, cinematic aesthetics, and movies about the Holocaust.

There can be no doubt that in the years to come more stories will be told about the German-Jewish encounter, about the Holocaust. At the same time, we will witness a younger generation of Jews living in Germany and becoming part of the film community. Maybe this is *meschugge*, and *Meschugge*²¹ is also the title of a new film directed by Dani Levy, a member of this younger generation. His film jumps from Germany to America, two of the centers where the German-Jewish legacy is kept alive.

The film *Meschugge* constructs a brilliant metaphor for the ambivalence of this renewed German-Jewish experience. Towards the end of the film, the young Jewish lovers have to discover that the woman is not Jewish at all but that her grandfather was a brutal SS man. Her identity has vanished with this growing knowledge about the role of her family in the Holocaust. She climbs the tree of her childhood, a symbol of lost innocence, and a reminder that this postwar generation has lost its innocence too. David, the Jewish hero of the film, follows her. She hands him her necklace with the Star of David, and he starts to tell her a riddle: “Dog is standing on one side of a pond, and wants to get to the other side. But he is not allowed to swim and to walk around it. So, how does he reach the other side?” She looks at him and says: “I don’t know.” “Very simple,” he says. “He swims.” “But he is not allowed to swim.” He looks at her and says, “Well, he swims anyway.”

And that is where we are fifty years after everything, maybe only on the screen, in the movies, but maybe in real life as well. Cinema is always the mind’s eye seeing beyond the mirrors of reality. It might force an encounter with a painful past; it might serve a redemptive function; it might trivialize; it might deconstruct stereotypes. But through cinema, no matter what its purpose, we start to swim again. We face the past. But then, as in one of the final scenes of *Meschugge*, after the lovers kiss, a shot is heard from the family’s house nearby. Someone has committed suicide. The shadow of the past extends far into the future.

This future, however, now the present, will show us the most dynamic and growing Jewish community in Europe. In the year 2000, about 100,000 Jews live in Germany, and it is obvious that the development from a small group of Jews in postwar Germany, to a growing number of German Jews in the 1990s, will eventually lead again to an important and thriving community. With the huge immigration of Jews from Russia it will take some time, but there can be no doubt that a new and different German Jewry will spread roots in the next few decades. In short, my talk ends on an optimistic note. The past is present, but a positive force for shaping the future. We witness in Germany a transition that will lead to a renewed German-Jewish experience; and cinema, the virtual world of the movies, is a continuing part of this cultural revival.

(I want to thank Jessica Nash for the careful editing of the manuscript.)

Notes

- ¹ Meyer Levin, *In Search: An Autobiography* (New York: Horizon, 1950).
- ² See the memoir of Charlotte Holzer, member of the Berlin-based Jewish resistance group led by Herbert Baum, author's archive.
- ³ Andreas Nachama and Julius Schoeps, eds., *Aufbau nach dem Untergang: Deutsch-Jüdische Geschichte nach 1945. In memoriam für Heinz Galinski* (Berlin: Argon, 1992).
- ⁴ See OMGUS, Report on Conditions of Jews in Berlin (15.9.1945), National Archives, Washington, Register Number 260, 44-45/6/9.
- ⁵ Victor Klemperer, *So sitze ich denn zwischen allen Stühlen: Tagebücher 1945-1949* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1999).
- ⁶ *Marriage in the Shadows* (Germ. 1947, dir. Kurt Maetzig).
- ⁷ See Frank Stern, "'And when I returned—I didn't return.': German-Jewish Writers after 1945," in Sander L. Gilman and Jack Zipes, eds., *Yale Companion to Jewish Writing and Thought in German Culture, 1096-1996* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 634f., and F. Stern, "The Return to the Disowned Home—German Jews and the Other Germany," *New German Critique* 67 (1996), 57f.
- ⁸ *Lang ist der Weg*, (Germ. 1948, dir. Herbert F. Fredersdorf and Marek Goldstein, based on ideas by Israel Becker, who later emigrated to Palestine and became a prominent actor at the Habima Theater).
- ⁹ *MORITURI* (Germ. 1948, dir. Eugen York, produced and based on an idea by Artur Brauner).
- ¹⁰ Marion Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- ¹¹ *Nackt unter Wölfen*, (GDR 1963, dir. Frank Beyer, based on the novel by Bruno Apitz).
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- ¹⁵ Jurek Becker, *Jacob the Liar: A Novel* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975).

¹⁶ *Bronsteins Kinder* (FRG 1991, dir. Jerzy Kawalerowicz).

¹⁷ See Volker Schlöndorff, *Der Unhold*, Göttingen: 1996. The movie is based on the novel by Michel Tournier, *Le roi des Aulnes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

¹⁸ Erica Fischer, *Aimée and Jaguar: A Love Story, Berlin 1943* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995).

¹⁹ Gad Beck, *An Underground Life: Memoirs of a Gay Jew in Nazi Berlin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), and Larry Orbach, Vivien Orbach-Smith, *Soaring Underground: A Young Fugitive's Life in Nazi Berlin* (Washington: Compass Press, 1996).

²⁰ *Star Without a Sky*, (1981, dir. Ottokar Runze), *The Passenger*, (1988, dir. Thomas Brasch), *The Actress*, (1988, dir. Siegfried Kühn), *Leni*, (1994, dir. Leo Hiemer), *Three Days in April*, (1995, dir. Oliver Storz).

²¹ *Meschugge* (Germ. 1998, dir. Dani Levy, Maria Schrader). The Yiddish word “*meschugge*” means crazy.

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