

Their Mothers, Their Fathers

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IT IS THE SUMMER of 1941. Five youngsters—three young men and two young women—meet in a bar and spend a happy evening, flirting with each other, getting drunk, dancing forbidden foreign dances. They have grown up together in the same neighborhood of Berlin.

It is a happy time. The war started by Adolf Hitler a year and a half before has progressed incredibly well. In this short time Germany has conquered Poland, Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium and France. The Wehrmacht is invincible. The Führer is a genius, “*the greatest military strategist of all times*”.

So starts the film that is running now in our cinemas—a unique historical document. It goes on for five breathless hours, and continues to occupy the thoughts and emotions of its viewers for days and weeks.

Basically it is a film made by Germans for Germans. The German title says it all: “Our Mothers, Our Fathers”. The purpose is to answer the questions troubling many of the young Germans of today: Who were our parents and grandparents? What did they do during the terrible war? What did they feel? What was their part in the horrible crimes committed by the Nazis?

These questions are not asked in the film explicitly. But every German viewer is compelled to ask them. There are no clear answers. The film does not probe the depths. Rather, it shows a broad panorama of the German people in wartime, the various sections of society, the different types, from the war criminals, through the passive onlookers, to the victims.

The Holocaust is not the center of events, but it is there all the time, not as a separate event but woven into the fabric of reality.

THE FILM starts in 1941, and therefore cannot answer the question which, to my mind, is the most important one: How could a civilized nation, perhaps the most cultured in the world, elect a government whose program was blatantly criminal?

True, Hitler was never elected by an absolute majority in free elections. But he came very close to it. And he easily found political partners who were ready to help him form a government.

Some said at the time that it was a uniquely German

phenomenon, the expression of the particular German mentality, formed during centuries of history. That theory has been discredited by now. But if so, can it happen in any other country? Can it happen in our own country? Can it happen today? What are the circumstances that make it possible?

The film does not answer these question. It leaves the answers to the viewer.

The young heroes of the film do not ask. They were ten years old when the Nazis came to power, and for them the “Thousand-Year Reich” (as the Nazis called it) was the only reality they knew. It was the natural state of things. That’s where the plot starts.

TWO OF the youngsters were soldiers. One had already seen war and was wearing a medal for valor. His brother had just been called up. The third young man was a Jew. Like the two girls, they are full of youthful exuberance. Everything was looking fine.

The war? Well, it can’t last much longer, can it? The Führer himself has promised that by Christmas the Final Victory will be won. The five young people promise each other to meet again at Christmas. No one has the slightest premonition of the terrible experiences in store for each of them.

While viewing the scene, I could not help thinking about my former class. A few weeks after the Nazis’ assumption of power, I became a pupil in the first class of high school in Hanover. My schoolmates were the same age as the heroes of the film. They would have been called up in 1941, and because it was an elitist school, all of them would probably have become officers.

Half way through the first year in high school, my family took me to Palestine. I never met any of my schoolmates again, except one (Rudolf Augstein, the founder of the magazine *Der Spiegel*, whom I met years after the war and who became my friend again.) What happened to all the others? How many survived the war? How many were maimed? How many had become war criminals?

In the summer of 1941 they were probably as happy as the youngsters in the film, hoping to be home by Christmas.

THE TWO brothers were sent to the Russian front, an unimaginable hell. The film succeeds in showing the

realities of war, easily recognizable by anyone who has been a soldier in combat. Only that this combat was a hundredfold worse, and the film shows it brilliantly.

The older brother, a lieutenant, tries to shield the younger one. The bloodbath that goes on for four more years, day after day, hour after hour, changes their character. They become brutalized. Death is all around them, they see horrible war crimes, they are commanded to shoot prisoners, they see Jewish children butchered. In the beginning they still dare to protest feebly, then they keep their doubts to themselves, then they take part in the crimes as a matter of course.

One of the young women volunteers for a frontline military hospital, witnesses the awful agonies of the wounded, denounces a Jewish fellow nurse and immediately feels remorse, and in the end is raped by Soviet soldiers near Berlin, as were almost all German women in the areas conquered by the revenge-thirsty Soviet army.

Israeli viewers might be more interested in the fate of the Jewish boy, who took part in the happy feast at the beginning. His father is a proud German, who cannot imagine Germans doing the bad things threatened by Hitler. He does not dream of leaving his beloved fatherland. But he warns his son about having sexual relations with his Aryan girlfriend. "It's against the law!"

When the son tries to flee abroad, "aided" by a treacherous Gestapo officer, he is caught, sent to the death camps, succeeds in escaping on the way, joins the Polish partisans (who hate the Jews more than the Nazis) and in the end survives.

Perhaps the most tragic figure is the second girl, a frivolous, carefree singer who sleeps with a senior SS officer to further her career, is sent with her troupe to entertain the troops at the front, sees what is really happening, speaks out about the war, is sent to prison and executed in the last hours of the war.

BUT THE fate of the heroes is only the skeleton of the film. More important are the little moments, the daily life, the portrayal of the various characters of German society.

For example, when a friend visits the apartment where the Jewish family had been living, the blond Aryan woman who was allotted the place complains about the state of the apartment from which the Jews had been fetched and sent to their death: "*They didn't even clean up before they left! That's how the Jews are, dirty people!*"

Everyone lives in constant fear of being denounced. It is a pervading terror, which nobody can escape. Even at the front, with death staring them in the face, a hint of doubt about the Final Victory uttered by a soldier is immediately silenced by his comrades. "*Are you crazy?*"

Even worse is the deadening atmosphere of universal agreement. From the highest officer to the lowliest maid, everybody is repeating endlessly the propaganda slogans of the regime. Not out of fear, but because they believe ev-

ery word of the all-pervading propaganda machine. They hear nothing else.

It is immensely important to understand this. In the totalitarian state, fascist or communist or whatever, only the very few free spirits can withstand the endlessly repeated slogans of the government. Everything else sounds unreal, abnormal, crazy. When the Soviet army was already fighting its way through Poland and nearing Berlin, people were unwavering in their belief in the Final Victory. After all, the Führer says so, and the Führer is never wrong. The very idea is preposterous.

It is this element of the situation that is difficult for many people to grasp. A citizen under a criminal totalitarian regime becomes a child. Propaganda becomes for him reality, the only reality he knows. It is more effective than even the terror.

THIS IS the answer to the question we cannot abstain from asking again and again: How was the Holocaust possible? It was planned by a few, but it was implemented by hundreds of thousands of Germans, from the engine driver of the train to the officials who shuffled the papers. How could they do it?

They could, because it was the natural thing to do. After all, the Jews were out to destroy Germany. The communist hordes were threatening the life of every true Aryan. Germany needed more living space. The Führer has said so.

That's why the film is so important, not only for the Germans, but for every people, including our own.

People who carelessly play with ultra-nationalist, fascist, racist, or other anti-democratic ideas don't realize that they are playing with fire. They cannot even imagine what it means to live in a country that tramples on human rights, that despises democracy, that oppresses another people, that demonizes minorities. The film shows what it is like: hell.

THE FILM does not hide that the Jews were the main victims of the Nazi Reich, and nothing comes near their sufferings. But the second victim was the German people, victims of themselves.

Many people insist that after this trauma, Jews cannot behave like a normal people, and that therefore Israel cannot be judged by the standards of normal states. They are traumatized.

This is true for the German people, too. The very need to produce this unusual film proves that the Nazi specter is still haunting the Germans, that they are still traumatized by their past.

When Angela Merkel came this week to see Binyamin Netanyahu, the whole world laughed at the photo of our Prime Minister's finger inadvertently painting a moustache on the Kanzlerin's face.

But the relationship between our two traumatized peoples is far from a joke.