

A Love In Germany

by Eleanor Malin

There is a technique in sketching where you place the pen on the page and make a dot, then relate the rest of the drawing to the dot. So many Polish and German films are stories placed in relationship to World War II. That event was such an enormous dot, historically speaking, that it changed everything irretrievably, and left a huge legacy of ideas and attitudes to explore.

World War II has been grinding relentlessly on for some time in the Polish film, *A Love in Germany*. The characters in the story have had their lives put on hold as far as any normal course of events. Hannah Schuygulla, one of the most competent actresses working anywhere, plays a *hausfrau* who must take over the little family grocery store while her husband is away at war. She has the added burden of being a single parent to their young son, from whose retrospective viewpoint the story unfolds.

She uses a neighboring couple's slave laborer to help her load produce crates when he's not busy working for them. He's a 17-year-old Polish hunk, comparing most favorably to her chubby, middle-aged husband, who isn't even around. Soon the young man is hauling more than crates.

The prisoner, Stani, is supposed to be locked up at night, but is allowed to sleep in the barn, which makes it easy for him to get out to see his mistress.

It isn't just that she is married — their relationship is officially *verboten*. Sexual relations with someone of an inferior race is a crime against the state, ranking on the level of sex with animals (also a crime against the state).

It is the case that neighbors in the small town would sooner or later guess the romantic involvement of these two, simply by applying the laws of probability. But the woman and her young man make a public spectacle of themselves. She waits for a quiet moment to order condoms, but by the time she has ordered everything else she can think of, a crowd has gathered. On the way out, she drops the condoms in front of German soldiers. Another time, she keeps customers waiting while she goes to the back of her shop to stack crates with Stani. She goes to the neighbor in the evening to borrow Stani to help her carry more crates. It's a tiny little store. How many crates can there be? The husband gives permission for Stani to help her. His wife chides him. "Are you blind, or are you just being kind?" she asks him. They are breaking the law by allowing him to sleep in the barn, and allowing him to carry on with this affair is a serious crime.

The whole scenario is shored up by the most delicate of supports — the goodwill of friends and neighbors. As the affair rages along, jealousy and fear begin to erode that delicate framework.

A German soldier comes home on leave to visit his young wife, who lives across from the store. This young woman envies Schuygulla for her young lover, who's handsome, hearty,

and always around. She sees how prosperous Schuygulla is becoming and would love to get the store. She is aching to turn in Schuygulla, but promises her husband she won't.

Schuygulla's best friend receives a notice from the front that her fiancé has been killed on the Eastern front. She is furious at Schuygulla for carrying on with the Pole, and not playing the long-suffering soldier's sweetheart, as the other women do. She thinks Schuygulla should go visit her husband, who is soon to be shipped to the Eastern front (one might read this as "soon to be shipped home in a bag.") Schuygulla, her guilt button finally adequately depressed, goes to tell Stani she is breaking off the affair and going to see her husband. This happens during a thunderstorm and lightning strikes (this is the

economic restrictions, but ignores those bonds entirely (buys and sells without ration cards). Soldiers everywhere underscore the bondage shared by all who live in the town, civilians and prisoners alike. And last, but not least, friends and neighbors apply the unspoken, but unsavory, pressures passed from one herd animal to another.

Men and women are not the only species to exert influence over mating and reproduction, yet that influence remains secondary to the bond formed through successful lust. This woman is in her childbearing years, and this young political prisoner is in his prime. They obey their carnal impulses for those impulses serve a more fundamental part of the underlying need, that of survival. Though they use condoms, (as thinking beings, humans are able to mix their metaphors), still

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it"

— George Santayana

movies). The horses are frightened and trample the young man. The next day, on her way to the train, Schuygulla hears that Stani has been taken to a hospital, and detours there to visit him. She plasters herself on him and has to be bodily dragged off. Up to now, the balance might have gone either way, but now she has cast the die. Even though hospital officials do not order her arrest, or even ask her name, the incident is too scandalous to go unnoticed, and they hear about it back at home.

Schuygulla's best friend tells a German officer about the affair. Out of deference to a fellow soldier, the officer tries to help Schuygulla. He arrests the Pole, and tries to get Schuygulla to recant her sins. She stubbornly refuses, asking the record to read that she seduced the young man — not only that — she's not sorry.

The officer takes another tack, deciding to try to pass off the Pole as an Aryan. The officer and his aide administer the test themselves. This is the funniest scene in the film. Their bumbling efforts, on top of the ludicrous premise, are so hilarious even the prisoner has to laugh. At one point, the aide flaps open a case filled with ceramic eyeballs, used to gauge eye color. The prisoner's eyes are blue (C-3), and this, along with a couple of other physical characteristics are close enough for them to offer him official Aryanhood. He refuses the offer (it's a Polish movie). Although he had been able to make peace with his enslavement (it really hadn't been all that bad), he signs his own death warrant by his refusal.

This movie is about bondage and lust. Schuygulla is aware of, but inconsistent in her fulfillment of her bonds. She is married, but flamboyantly unfaithful. She has a son, and is a good mother, but the boy feels neglected because of his mother's extravagant feelings for her lover. She is bound by

the strength of the mating urge is based on survival of the species. Even making sex with unacceptable persons a capital crime won't change people's behavior when it's their turn.

Taken in the largest sense, the whole war was one people's approach to survival. Hitler was able to convince his constituency that it was best to define the species in the narrowest of terms — eye color, hair color, skull measurement. The greater good to the German master race was to enslave and eliminate undesirables. Her husband was away doing just that. He may well have been exercising his biological option amongst the plentiful prostitutes who gather to decorate wartime efforts.

A Love in Germany is romantic, erotic, and funny. Schuygulla and her Stani are a believable and attractive couple. Schuygulla

aces her part. She is beautiful even with no make-up. She delivers an intelligent and sensuous portrayal of a young woman drawn on a delicious, dangerous, yet essential romantic roller coaster ride.

Directed by Andrej Wajda, *A Love in Germany* played several weeks at the 5th Avenue Cinema. It's so good it will show up again, soon. Ask for it at your favorite theatres with suggestion books.

My apologies to NW Film Study Center for not mentioning them in last month's review of *Improper Conduct*. That excellent film ran for one night only in their last series. If you want to see it, write it in the suggestion lists, and watch closely so you don't miss it. There've been inquiries, so there are others who want to see this film.

In retrospect, so much of that film was funny. We never look so silly as a species as when elaborate and restrictive measures are taken against personal rights.

Correction: The detention camps in Cuba were modeled after Bulgaria's, not Yugoslavia's, as reported. I had lost my notes. I was sweating when I wrote that. Goes to show you shouldn't trust your memory at my age.

Some good movies are scheduled in the NW Film Study Center Women Director's film series, which runs through June 23. The Portland Art Association, 221-1156, has schedules, also a lot of other places around town. Everyone turn out and give some support to women directors. (See calendar).

Coming May 26-27 to the 21st Avenue Cinema, *The Mystery of Kaspar Hauser*. Based on a fascinating true story, this film gives a view of the human condition as seen through the eyes of someone new to the game. Funny, extremely touching. Very well acted by whoever it was who played Kaspar. It's playing with *Aguirre, The Wrath of God*, starring Klaus Kinski, who always delivers up some good entertainment.

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