

The 51st Berlinale: Part 4

Revealing old and enduring horrors

Spiegelgrund by Angelika Schuster and Tristan Sindelgruber

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The Punishment, directed by young Austrian filmmaker Goran Rebic, stood out at last year's Berlin film festival through its exposure of the consequences of the NATO war in Kosovo. At a time when the official media in Europe sought to justify the mass bombing by presenting the entire Serb people as a bloodthirsty mob, Rebic's film, shot directly after the war, gave a very different portrayal of the Serbs, which countered the widespread official propaganda.

Another equally admirable film with the courage to flow against the stream is a new Austrian documentary, *Spiegelgrund*, directed by two young filmmakers: Angelika Schuster and Tristan Sindelgruber. Completed in 1999, the film takes up a theme of burning significance in modern Austria, the case of Dr. Heinrich Gross, who, in a 1981 trial, was proven to be involved "in the killing of several hundred mentally deformed children" under Nazi rule in Vienna. His signature was found on more than 200 documents, declaring a child "unfit to live." Despite the court decision, Gross was able to continue his work as a doctor without consequences.

Am Spiegelgrund was a clinic for socially deprived children in Vienna during the Nazi dictatorship. The clinic, the children's section of Vienna's Neurology Institute, was a collecting place for abandoned, so-called "anti-social" or "problem" children who failed to measure up to what was regarded as the norm for "socially acceptable" behaviour. Parallel to the Nazi invasion of Poland a programme of systematic execution of such children began throughout the entire occupied German Reich. The children were moved in order to hide what was taking place from their parents and those who, over the years, had grown attached to

the children in their respective institutions. By such means, for example, children from Hamburg ended up in a clinic in Vienna without their parents knowing anything about it.

In their film Schuster and Sindelgruber interview victims of the clinic and their relatives. One survivor describes the way in which ethnic prejudices were stoked up. Together with other children he was harassed by staff at the Vienna school and called a "Prussian pig." The same survivor describes how 55 children were squeezed into a single room. Many of them were weak with hunger. Whoever failed to jump to attention when members of staff issued orders was singled out for "feeding up."

A former inhabitant of the house explains what that meant. The children received cocoa powder, which had been treated with Luminal, a sleeping potion that attacks the bronchial system over time and can lead to infections of the lungs. Eyewitnesses explain that the process of lung infection was accelerated by positioning the already drowsy children in front of open windows during cold spells. Then when the time came "the children were given an injection," according to a woman whose slightly handicapped sister Irma was assessed to be suffering from "idiotism" and was killed at the clinic. Gross personally pointed to children slated for euthanasia under Hitler's *Lebensunwertes Leben* (Life Unworthy of Life) programme.

Other experiments carried out at *Am Spiegelgrund*, reminiscent of the infamous work conducted by Josef Mengele at Auschwitz, involved dunking children in ice-cold water and then wrapping them up like mummies, to test their resistance to cold.

Following the end of the war the director of the home

and two members of staff were arrested and convicted for their role in the executions. The rest, including Gross, kept their jobs. One former inhabitant describes how after the war everything stayed essentially the same at the institution, with one exception: there was no more killing.

In 1949 former Nazis were once again given the right to vote and the main political parties competed for the favours of this part of the electorate. The trials and investigations into Nazi collaborators came to a stop. In discussion after the showing of their film in Berlin, the two directors explained that the former Nazis were regarded as an important bulwark against the influence of the Soviet Union and were rehabilitated as Austrian patriots in the period of the Cold War.

Gross received his own institute from the Austrian Socialist Party, which he joined, and was able to continue the work which he had carried out under the Nazis. The film reports that amongst the samples he used for experiments in his institute were the brains of children and youth who had been killed in *Am Spiegelgrund* during the war. The findings published by Dr. Gross, based on his experiments, were widely recognised in professional circles. Up until 1998 Gross was one of the most commonly used court experts in Austria.

In 1996, and in the face of opposition from medical circles, Irma's sister was able to insist that the remains of 10 Hamburg victims, identified by painstaking examination of the text on medical jars, be transported and buried back home. They were all exhibits used for medical experiments up until the 1980s and were then transferred (in 1989) into a so-called chamber of remembrance in the Baumgarten psychiatric hospital. The directors explained to the evidently shocked audience at the film's premiere in Berlin that up to the present the relatives of the deceased have been refused the right to claim the remains because the authorities, with breathtaking cynicism, were looking at means of burying them “with a view to being able to recover them for medical purposes at a later date.”

The survivors of the *Spiegelgrund* have up until now been denied any recognition as victims of the Nazi regime. None of them has received any sort of compensation for his or her torment. A psychologist in the film states bluntly: “It seems the state is on the side of those responsible for the suffering.”

For decades Austrian politics have been dominated by the reformist Socialist Party (SPÖ). Through its straight-forward presentation the film sheds light on the character of post-war bourgeois democracy in Austria, revealing traits that the country shares with Germany and other European states. Against such a background, it is not really surprising that there were also those in the Socialist Party calling for a coalition with the extreme rightist Jörg Haider and his Freedom Party (FPÖ), before the latter decided to join forces with the conservative People's Party (ÖVP).

A contributor to the *WSWS* was able to interview the two directors during the course of the festival about their film and the current situation in Austria (*see accompanying article*).



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