

The Flat: A family examines a Nazi-Zionist friendship

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22 April 2013

Written and directed by Arnon Goldfinger

The Flat, a prize-winning Israeli documentary released in 2011 and now available on DVD, raises important historical issues. While the filmmaker, Arnon Goldfinger, is neither willing nor able to fully explore them, there is still much that is of interest in his story, which deals with experiences of his German-born grandparents that occurred well before he was born.

The documentary begins in the Tel Aviv apartment of Gerda Tuchler. Her grandson has taken on the task, along with his mother Hannah and other relatives, of clearing out his grandmother's flat after her death at the age of 98. She had lived in the same apartment for 70 years, since arriving in Palestine with her husband Kurt in 1937 as refugees from Nazi Germany.

As they proceed with the difficult and sometimes tedious job of sifting through decades of memories, Arnon and his mother come across what seems to them a startling, almost unbelievable discovery—a carefully preserved German newspaper article from 1934 entitled (in English translation), “A Nazi Travels to Palestine.”

The article comes from *Der Angriff* (*The Attack*), a leading Nazi publication. It describes a trip undertaken in 1933 by a high Nazi official, Leopold von Mildenstein, and his wife to Palestine, accompanied by Arnon Goldfinger's grandparents, Kurt and Gerda Tuchler. The article shows the Mildensteins and Tuchlers in Palestine, and includes photos favorably depicting the lives of Jewish settlers.

It is this discovery that leads Goldfinger to make his documentary. He wonders, in his voice-over narration, “What is Nazi propaganda doing in my grandparents' flat?” The apparent mystery is only deepened when he comes across numerous photos and correspondence showing that the Tuchlers and Mildensteins resumed their friendship after the war. His mother says she knows nothing about these friends of her parents, nor is she very interested in finding out more.

Goldfinger's parents' generation as a rule avoided looking too deeply into the fate of their family members in the Holocaust. In fact, it is only during the course of the investigation of his grandparents' history that the filmmaker learns the details of the fate of his great-grandmothers. Kurt's

mother died in the Theresienstadt concentration camp, and Gerda's mother, Susan Lehmann, was deported to the Riga ghetto where she perished.

The issue of his grandparents' friends becomes even more disturbing when Goldfinger examines accounts of the famous 1961 war crimes trial of Adolf Eichmann, which ended with his conviction and execution. Eichmann testified that Mildenstein, an advocate of resettling German Jews in Palestine, was his superior between 1934 and 1937 in the department of the Nazi SS dealing with Jewish affairs.

The relationship between the Tuchlers and Mildensteins obviously haunts Goldfinger. He repeats the above question in different words, and his face registers puzzlement and concern.

The documentary follows Goldfinger's attempts to trace his grandparents' history. The search leads him to the German city of Wuppertal, near Dusseldorf, where he visits the Mildensteins' daughter, Edda Milz von Mildenstein. Edda, a woman who is now about 70 years old, lived in Britain for 30 years after the war and speaks perfect English. She welcomes him warmly and tells him she knew his grandparents quite well, from their frequent visits to her parents in the 1950s and 60s.

This cultured and educated woman, who was only five years old when the war ended, suggests that her father, though he was a Nazi party member early on, left the party and took up a career in journalism during the war. He later became an official for Coca-Cola in West Germany.

Goldfinger finds evidence that contradicts Edda's account. He speaks to a retired journalist, the author of a 1966 article in *Der Spiegel* on von Mildenstein that confirmed his membership in the Nazi SS in the mid-1930s. The filmmaker then examines historical archives in Berlin that provide additional information, showing that Mildenstein joined the Nazis before they took power in 1933, and that he never left the party, instead working in Goebbels's propaganda ministry throughout the war.

As the film proceeds, Goldfinger more and more shifts his emphasis away from examining his grandparents' motives and instead toward exposing the role of Mildenstein. He goes back to visit Edda and confronts her with the evidence of her father's fuller career as a Nazi functionary. She at first resists and then claims she was kept in the dark, which may in fact be the case.

It seems clear that Mildenstein, though probably not an active participant in planning and carrying out the “final solution,” was a longtime Nazi functionary. Like thousands of others who prospered in industry or the state apparatus after the war, including some who occupied far more important postwar positions than he did, Mildenstein paid no penalty.

There is another side to the story, however, one that is also important. Why were the Tuchlers and Mildensteins such good friends in the first place? In the end, Goldfinger settles for a very limited and superficial explanation. He finds a German expert on “Nazi denial,” who speculates that the intense German patriotism of the Tuchlers led them to value their connection to the Mildensteins, and that they “did not know necessarily” that Mildenstein had been a high official.

This may be true. Perhaps Mildenstein resumed the relationship in the postwar period as a way of shielding himself against charges relating to his Nazi past. Perhaps he hid from the Tuchlers the fact that he remained a Nazi until Hitler’s defeat. This still skirts the most important issue: what was the political basis of a relationship that lasted several decades? Why did they hit it off so well? Why were the Tuchlers so willing to accept at face value Mildenstein’s explanation of his wartime career, if that is what happened?

The fact remains that the two couples traveled together on a trip that lasted for months in 1933-1934. This was after the Nazis had come to power, physically smashed the trade unions and the workers’ parties, threw thousands of Communists and other political prisoners into concentration camps and instituted a regime of brutal terror. None of this disturbed the Tuchlers enough to prevent their trip to Palestine with their Nazi friends, a trip that was featured in the fascist press.

Early in the film there is a brief but significant interview, one that Goldfinger chooses not to discuss further. An elderly Israeli historian of German Jewish emigration to Palestine explains that the story of the Tuchlers is not unbelievable at all. He talks about the “common interest” between the National Socialists and the Zionists during the 1930s. Kurt Tuchler, who was a Berlin traffic court judge at the time, was an active member of the German Zionist Federation. This Federation, in an apparent attempt to boost support within Nazi circles for Jewish emigration, sent Tuchler to accompany Mildenstein on the trip to Palestine.

A family memoir cannot deal in depth with historical questions that demand much longer treatment, but the story of the Tuchlers cannot be fully understood without examining the role of Zionism. During this pre-World War II period, it was a distinctly minority viewpoint within the Jewish population, in Germany and everywhere else. Dedicated above all to nationalism and national exclusivism, it drew support primarily from middle class layers, and was hostile to assimilation and above all to a mass socialist movement encompassing all sections of the working class.

It was not unheard of for upper middle class German Jews,

including those, like Kurt Tuchler, who proudly wore their medals from the First World War, to voice some “understanding” of the program and the appeal of the National Socialists. Furthermore, the Tuchlers would have favorably compared the cultivated Mildensteins to the Nazi “rabble,” and perhaps have placed their hopes on a moderation of Nazi policies and the emergence of a more “moderate” German nationalism under people like Mildenstein.

The tragic fate of European Jewry in the Holocaust transformed the fortunes of Zionism. Many, with their hopes for the future shattered after the loss of 6 million Jews, came to embrace the doctrine of an exclusive Jewish homeland. Major sections of world capitalism, above all the United States, which had emerged as the chief victor from the Second World War, transferred their support to the Zionists.

History was rewritten in accord with the need for a Zionist mythology. Zionism, rather than being a minority view, now became officially synonymous with the Jewish people. Anti-Zionists were depicted as anti-Semites or “self-hating Jews.” The leading role of Jewish socialists and communists in the Warsaw Ghetto and other heroic resistance to the Nazis was pushed aside. Not only was Zionist collaboration with the National Socialists erased, as in the relatively minor example of the Tuchlers, but the German people as a whole were portrayed as collectively responsible for Hitler, as in the notorious book *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*.

Arnon Goldfinger and his generation were raised on this myth, and that may be why he reacted to the revelations about his grandparents with shock and incomprehension. Coming to grips with this history, however, will be crucial if Israeli Jews are to find an answer to the blind alley and increasing crisis that Zionism has produced for them, decades after the events discussed in *The Flat*.



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