

66th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 4:

Flight and persecution—yesterday and today (*The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Meteorstraße*)

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This is the fourth and final article on the recent 66th Berlin International Film Festival

“Only a few subjects in the world are known globally. Anne Frank is someone who one can speak to a Muslim about, and they know who you are talking about. Or people from Africa, they also know Anne Frank,” observed director Hans Steinbichler about his new and valuable film version of Anne Frank’s diary.

Frank’s *The Diary of a Young Girl* appeared for the first time in German in 1950 (and in English in 1952) and has moved generations ever since. It has been translated into more than 60 languages.

Little more than 70 years after the death of the refugee Jewish girl—arrested in the Netherlands after escaping the Nazi threat in her native Germany—at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1944, millions of people are now fleeing from war and the lack of hope for the future around the world.

Refugees stranded in Germany with no perspective is the subject of a second memorable film, *Meteorstraße* by Aline Fischer.

The Diary of Anne Frank

The Diary of Anne Frank is one of the best known and moving testimonies of life under Nazi rule in Europe. Together with her parents Otto Frank (Ulrich Noethen) and Edith (Martina Gedeck), and sister Margot (Stella Kunkat), Anne (Lea van Acken) flees from Frankfurt in 1933 to the Netherlands to escape the Hitler regime. No longer safe in Amsterdam, the Jewish family conceal themselves in 1942 in the back rooms of an unused part of Otto Frank’s business.

Two families and a Jewish dentist from Berlin, a total of eight people, live in 50 square metres for two years until their hideout is betrayed and discovered in August 1944. Only Anne’s father Otto survived the concentration camp and ensured the publication of the diary.

The material has been adapted for the theatre and filmed numerous times. The George Stevens’ film with Millie Perkins (1959), based on a play, is one of the most prominent. There is also an opera based on Anne’s story.

Hans Steinbichler’s moving new version focuses directly on the ever-present lack of space: darkened windows, hardly any private sphere, rarely any relaxation. There is always the fear that workers in the floors below will hear something. Only during their dinner break, at nights and weekends is it possible to move freely and speak normally. Even the use of the toilet is strictly regulated due to the sound of flushing. The only contact with the outside is via a radio and with close collaborators, who at extreme risk procure the daily necessities of life for the hidden families. The atmosphere becomes increasingly tense as time passes, arguments break out over trivialities and the group become less careful.

Lea van Acken is very convincing as Anne Frank, an adolescent girl for whom any kind of confinement is insufferable. She resists regulations, and is also firmly against any intellectual restraints. Her entire being is directed towards life, to the future. She is contemptuous of her mother due to her patience and Petronella van Daan (Margarita Broich) for her narrow-mindedness. Anne stubbornly defends her writing as it becomes clear to her that her diaries are more than just a pastime. The actress’ sensitive portrayal focuses on the fragile, uncertain and unforgiving in Anne. It is precisely her contradictions that reveal her potential. The ending is thus even more brutal, when Anne peers at the camera with a shaved head.

The film makes clear that people who were in all respects no different from other Germans were turned into the hunted and into victims by the obligation of wearing a yellow star on their clothing. Only such a star on clothes left on a beach incites a group of young Dutch Nazis to force a girl swimming in the sea to leave.

Jewish traditions play a very subordinate role in the Frank family. At birthdays, the popular German song “Many best wishes and blessings” is sung. Anne goes to a Montessori school until the Nazis ban it. Otto fought as a German patriot in

the First World War. When it emerges during their arrest that the man standing before the SS soldier is a former German officer who fought for his “fatherland,” the soldier is somewhat confused, and even shows a certain respect.

In a morbid way, the arrest initially appears for a short moment to be somewhat liberating, from the unbearable and inhumane situation. One of the Nazis cannot believe the family lived concealed for two years. Bathed in sunlight, they emerge onto the street for the first time after this long period, only shortly afterwards to climb into a darkened truck to be deported.

The contemporary significance of the film is obvious and also intentional. Walid Nakschbandi, one of the producers, was born in Afghanistan. In the early 1980s, his parents sent him and his siblings to Germany for a better future. A German teacher recommended Anne Frank’s diary to the 14-year-old Walid to help improve his German language skills. Prior to this film, he helped produce the television series *My Daughter Anne Frank* (directed by Raymond Ley, 2015) about Otto Frank.

This January, on the occasion of Holocaust Memorial Day, Eva Schloss, the step-sister of Anne Frank who lives in London, publicly compared the situation facing Syrian refugees with her own during the Nazi era. The Auschwitz survivor declared that she was shocked that so many countries were closing their borders. “Fewer people would have died in the Holocaust if the world had accepted more Jewish refugees.” Eva Schloss stated that Anne Frank and her family would probably not have died if the United States had approved Otto Frank’s desperate application in 1940.

This fact is hardly known and not referred to in the film. It also emerged only a few years ago that the Gestapo officer Karl Josef Silberbauer, who arrested the Frank family, was able to continue to work in his area of expertise after the war. Now under a “democratic” flag. He worked for the notorious Gehlen organisation (named after Wehrmacht general Reinhard Gehlen, one of the leading figures in German intelligence during World War II), the West German spy agency set up by the CIA in 1946 to spy on the USSR and Eastern Europe. The Gehlen organisation employed many former Nazis, including several implicated in war crimes. Silberbauer later worked directly for the BND, Germany’s foreign intelligence service.

Hardly anyone was held accountable for the Frank arrests and deaths. An investigation into Silberbauer was halted in 1964 because the SS man had acted under orders. He died in Vienna in 1972 without ever having been convicted. According to *Enttarnt* by Peter-Ferdinand Koch, Silberbauer’s boss in Amsterdam, only known as Wilhelm H., continued working for the BND after the war. Later, the jurist became a senior government official in the Bavarian ministry of the interior.

The German feature film *Meteorstraße* (*Meteor Street*), by the French writer-director Aline Fischer, could be the sequel to *Fuocoammare* (*Fire at Sea*, Gianfranco Rosi), the Italian documentary about desperate refugees in Sicily.

Fischer’s film deals with Palestinian refugees who fled the war in Lebanon and made it to Berlin. Now, Mohammed (Hussein Eliraqui) is 18 and lives on the run-down Meteorstraße near the city’s Tegel airport. His parents have been deported back to Lebanon. Only he and his older brother Lakhdar (Oktay Inanç Özdemir) received permanent residency permits.

Mohammed is attracted to the world of German bikers, who bring their large motorcycles to the workshop where he does simple jobs. The shop is in the process of establishing itself and the German boss does him a favour by allowing him to work. Like the others, he knows that Mohammed must have experienced terrible things during the war in Lebanon. Two of the Germans have experience in the Foreign Legion. Today, they would only fight for their “own blood.”

The director manages to convey the idea of the lack of perspective, without sentimentality, through close observation. As long as Mohammed has hopes the unofficial job could lead to something permanent, he is able to resist his erratic older brother. But will the workshop actually ever open? At one point his boss, who is trying to encourage him, says he would like more than anything to give it all up. The greater the uncertainty, the less is Mohammed able to lead a normal life. His brother criticises him by saying that he has no pride and is allowing himself to be exploited. Eventually, Mohammed loses his power to resist.

Together, they break into the workshop. The theft of its safe marks the end of the workshop, and the employees lose their precarious employment. Although it is not possible to prove Mohammed is responsible, he gets beaten up. The former legionnaires suddenly remember the “deceitful Arabs” from the war and that only one’s own survival matters.

The pressing threat to survival on all sides is conveyed aesthetically. The camera only shows a small, limited space, whether in the apartment or workshop. Aircraft are always taking off. The brothers live right next to a runway. At night, it truly appears like a “meteor street.” They are only left with the ugly side of this apparent freedom, the ear-splitting, never-ending noise, day and night.



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