

When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit: A child's-eye view of the Nazis' crimes

Stefan Steinberg
22 January 2020

Directed by Caroline Link; written by Link and Anna Brüggemann, based on a novel by Judith Kerr

For several generations of children in Germany and the English-speaking world, one of the first and most vivid introductions to the crimes of the Nazis has been the *Out of the Hitler Time* trilogy of books by the German-born British writer and illustrator Judith Kerr (1923-2019).

The trilogy commences with *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*, first published in English in 1971 and in German two years later in a translation by Annemarie Böll, the wife of author and Nobel laureate Heinrich Böll.

The other titles in the trilogy are *Bombs on Aunt Dainty* (originally published as *The Other Way Round* in 1975) and *A Small Person Far Away* (1978).

Now a splendid movie adaption of *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* has opened in Germany.

The book and film are based on the experiences of the author, who as a young child was forced to flee Germany with her family after Hitler was appointed chancellor by the German president Paul von Hindenburg at the start of 1933.

Judith's father was the renowned drama critic, journalist and screenwriter Alfred Kerr (1867-1948), known as the "Culture pope," who was of Jewish descent. Alfred Kerr was one of the first journalists in Germany to take the threat of National Socialism seriously. Based in Berlin, he wrote a number of articles warning of the dangers posed by Hitler and the Nazis. Hitler responded by placing Alfred Kerr high on the list of enemies to be dealt with after he took power. Kerr's writings were among those publicly burned in central Berlin in May 1933 by a mob of Nazi students and professors.

Alfred Kerr had left Berlin for Switzerland in January 1933. His family, including nine-year-old Judith (in the book and film named Anna), her brother Michael (in the book and film named Max) and their mother Julia, left to join Alfred two months later just days prior to the March

federal election at which Hitler's party won the largest share of the vote. The election took place shortly after the attempted burning down of the German parliament, the Reichstag, on February 27. The Nazis branded the Communist Party (KPD) as the author of the fire, oversaw its criminalization and launched a campaign of terror against both the KPD and Social Democratic Party (SPD).

In her book Kerr describes the scene through the eyes of Anna: "When they looked out of the window the sky above the centre of Berlin was brilliant orange. Next morning everyone was talking about the fire which had destroyed the Reichstag where the German parliament met. The Nazis said that the fire had been started by revolutionaries and that the Nazis were the only people who could put a stop to that sort of thing—so everyone must vote for them at the elections. But Mama heard that the Nazis had started the fire themselves."

The new movie directed by veteran German director Caroline Link (*Beyond Silence*, 1996, *Nowhere in Africa*, 2001) opens, like the book, with a scrap at a children's party between young Max and a group of youngsters sporting Nazi uniforms. In the course of the tussle, Max rips a fascist badge from the tunic of one of his opponents. Back at home Anna shows the captured trophy to her father, who makes clear his animosity to the Nazis and tells her to toss the badge away. The children are making their own experiences with the same Nazi forces threatening their father's life.

Link's *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*, true to the novel, graphically chronicles the experiences of the Kerr family seen through the eyes of Anna. Forced to flee her home and country in a hurry with just one suitcase, Anna has to decide which of her toys to take with her. She decides to leave behind her oldest and most beloved toy, a mangy pink stuffed rabbit—a decision she later regrets, when the Nazis confiscate all the family's possessions.

We follow the adventures of Anna (delightfully played

by Riva Krymalowski) and her brother Max (Marinus Hohmann), first in exile in Switzerland and then in Paris. Their father (Oliver Masucci) attempts to locate employment, but encounters difficulties finding anyone prepared to hire a dissident Jewish journalist. The Swiss authorities are keen to maintain their position of neutrality in the war and do not want to offend Hitler. In France, the Kerr family are forced to confront the anti-Semitic prejudices of their landlady.

The sole employer ready to print Kerr's articles in France can only pay a pittance. Despite considerable financial hardships, Anna and Max demonstrate the enormous resilience and tenacity of young children to overcome all sorts of obstacles when they can rely on the support of their immediate family.

When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit faithfully follows the book and features key episodes charting the brutality of the Nazis. We learn, for example, of the price put upon the head of Alfred Kerr by the Nazis—1,000 Reichmarks. Kerr expresses his surprise at the bounty and tells his children defiantly he thought he was worth much more.

In Switzerland, Anna listens to her mother (Carla Juri) talking about the fate of those who remained in Germany, including one renowned professor who has been arrested and sent to a concentration camp.

The book describes the scene as follows: “The Nazis had chained him to a dog kennel ... The dog kennel was right by the entrance to the concentration camp and every time anyone went in or out the famous professor had to bark. He was given scraps to eat out of a dog dish and not allowed to touch them with his hands. Anna suddenly felt sick.”

In another key scene, we learn the fate of the children's favourite uncle, zookeeper Julius, also Jewish. Banned by the Nazis from working or even visiting his place of employment and increasingly isolated, Julius takes his own life.

Both of these episodes are included in *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*, along with graphic examples of the anti-Semitism that characterised layers of the petit bourgeoisie in both Germany and France.

In fact, Judith Kerr's parents, as would be the case in any other ordinary family, sought to shield the worst of their situation from their children. Judith Kerr, who went on to make a successful career as an author and artist in Britain (she died last year at the age of 95), revealed her shock when, long after the publication of her trilogy, she read a letter written by her father in Paris. In the letter, Alfred Kerr reveals that his wife was so desperate about

their plight in France she contemplated killing herself and both children.

Link's film has been largely positively received in Germany, with many families attending the showings. Some media critics, however, have criticised the movies' shots of scenic Swiss mountains and use of romantic music, which, they declared, were incompatible with the brutal historical reality of the Holocaust and had more in common with a traditional Christmas film.

This seems beside the point. In fact, *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* shows the tragedy of the Jews from the perspective of one child and her family who, like millions of others, experienced the loss of their homes and loved ones. In so doing the film, like Kerr's book, invariable invokes the situation today where once again immigrants and minorities are being cruelly harassed and fascistic forces are raising their heads.

In an interview with *Deutsche Welle*, director Caroline Link explained she saw clear parallels with the plight of refugees today. While acknowledging that the situation for refugees from Syria or Africa “is even more existential and terrible than that of the Kerr family in 1933, who at least had a roof over their heads and enough to eat,” Kerr notes: “But what they all have in common, of course, is the feeling of being in a country where you don't know the rules of the game, don't understand the language and have to start all over again. Perhaps the film will succeed in sensitising people to this; what it's like to gain a foothold as people who live in a completely foreign country.”

Under conditions where the German elite is again promoting anti-refugee sentiment and encouraging the growth of fascist forces, the release of Caroline Link's new film is very timely. It deserves a wide audience.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact