The 73rd Berlin International Film Festival—Part 4

Jacob the Liar (1974)—the original East German version

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This is the fourth article on the 2023 Berlin International Film Festival, held February 16 to February 26. The first was posted on February 22, the second on March 2 and the third on March 6.

Filmgoers may be most familiar with *Jacob the Liar* (*Jakob der Lügner*) in the form of the 1999 Hollywood adaptation (directed by Peter Kassovitz), starring Robin Williams.

This year, the Berlin film festival (Berlinale) screened the original 1974 version by East German (GDR) director Frank Beyer (1932-2006), with a screenplay by Jurek Becker (1937-1997).

The 1975 Berlinale awarded its Silver Bear prize to the film's lead performer, Czech actor Vlastimil Brodský. *Jacob the Liar* was also the only East German film to be nominated for a foreign language Academy Award.

The film's drama takes place in a Jewish ghetto in Nazi-occupied Poland in 1944. The Soviet army is marching westward. No news reaches the strictly isolated ghetto. When Jacob Heym has to report to the Nazi SS for allegedly breaking the curfew, he learns by chance (from a radio) that the Soviet army is not far away.

When the hungry Mischa (Henry Hübchen) recklessly risks his life to get hold of some potatoes, Jacob reassures him the "Russians" will arrive soon. Mischa, however, doesn't believe the story. No one has ever come back alive after reporting to the SS. Jacob fibs that he has a radio, a lie which puts his own life in danger. At the same time, it gives those in the ghetto a glimmer of hope.

No one kills him or herself any more. Little Lina (Manuela Simon) presses Jacob to show her the radio. Because she has never seen one before, she takes the paraffin lamp for a radio that only she is allowed to listen to. Jacob creates fake radio announcements from an adjoining room.

Now, however, on a daily basis, Jacob has to invent fresh news for the ghetto inhabitants. In the event, he is sorely tried keeping up the masquerade, especially when deportations begin because of the approaching Soviet forces. He explains that the radio is broken, but the others find a repairman. Eventually, Jacob tells the truth, whereupon his friend, the barber Kowalski (Erwin Geschonneck), takes his own life. At the end of the film, the deportation train rolls towards Auschwitz.

Becker and Beyer deliberately chose this ending, matter-of-fact and without martyrs, unlike the Hollywood adaptation in which Jacob even leads a resistance group. This is precisely what Beyer and Becker did not want–a hero who stands above the rest of the population. Beyer remarked ironically that the happy ending of the Hollywood film reminded him somewhat of the "Socialist Realism" policy pursued under Stalin.

By the 1960s, cinema audiences in East Germany were fed up with the hackneyed portrayal of square-jawed Communists being hunted by Nazis, while everybody else stood on the sidelines and played the role of extras. A number of films were made that realistically portrayed East German life, thereby raising existential questions about the GDR itself. All the films made in 1965 and 1966 by the state-run East German film production company, DEFA, were ultimately banned, including Beyer's construction site comedy *Spur der Steine* (*Trace of Stones*).

The ruling Stalinist party (SED) claimed such films

incited popular unrest, under conditions of considerable social tension. This was only a few years after the construction of the Berlin Wall. The films implied at least that the SED was preventing the working population, especially the youth, from playing any meaningful social role, i.e., the films called upon the Stalinist party to carry out its own stated programme of realising the power of the working class. It was this democratic spirit that also influenced the script for *Jacob the Liar*, which Becker submitted at the end of 1966.

The film dispenses with the usual didactic and overbearing Stalinist functionaries (and lecturing). The historical figure of Jacob Heym, who deliberately violated the Nazi ban on owning a radio, became the fictional, apolitical, former baker Jacob, who does not own a radio and by chance finds himself in a situation in which he reacts spontaneously (but not by chance) in a very humane way. Instead of reconstructing a ghetto with overcrowded streets and apartments strewn with corpses, the film concentrates on the sensitively played main characters.

Jacob the Liar could not be filmed until 1974 because Beyer was not permitted to make any films for nearly a decade after the success of the regime-critical *Spur der Stein*e. In the meantime, Becker developed the script into a successful novel, which the West German television channel ZDF was interested in filming. The veteran German film actor Heinz Rühmann, who lived in West Germany, was prepared to play the lead role in the GDR production.

GDR state and party leader Erich Honecker personally prevented Rühmann's participation. The GDR had been recognised as an independent state by its admission to the UN in 1973. "Everything that could point towards a unified cultural nation was to be avoided," Beyer says in his autobiography.

There were also difficulties with neighbouring Poland (also under Stalinist rule). Polish actors engaged for the film were not allowed to travel to take part in the film. "This was probably related to the relationship of the Poles to the country's Jewish community. Along with acts of solidarity during the war, there was also anti-Semitism and betrayal. But that was a taboo in Poland at the time."

Between 1966 and 1974, when the film project was on hold, the mood in the GDR changed. The time of radical demands was over. In a changed situation which opened up certain freedoms, realist films now concentrated on the struggle for the right for personal advancement and personal happiness. This was the case in Beyer's television multi-part *The Seven Affairs of Dona Juanita* (1973) or Heiner Carow's *The Legend of Paul and Paula* (1973), which became a cult film. The film *Jacob the Liar*, with its poetic and sober approach, fits well into this period.

The Berlinale screening of the old GDR classic is a welcome rediscovery. Not least, the film reminds present-day audiences of the hopes bound up with the existence of the Soviet Union, whose army, consisting of both Ukrainian and Russian soldiers, liberated signficant portions of Europe from fascism in World War II.

The film is now available for viewing on the internet here:

To be continued