The 75th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 8

Two films dealing with racism and fascism: *The Moelln Letters* and *The Lie*

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This is the eighth in a series of articles on the recent Berlin International Film Festival. Part 1 was posted February 20, Part 2 on February 27, Part 3 on March 2, Part 4 on March 6, Part 5 on March 9, Part 6 on March 10 and Part 7 on March 16.

Along with the film *The German People*, the documentaries *The Moelln Letters* (written and directed by Martina Priessner) and *The Lie* (Katrin Seybold and Melanie Spitta) met with great interest from the public at this year's Berlin Film Festival, with the former winning the Panorama Audience Award.

The Moelln Letters

In November 1992, arson attacks by neo-Nazis in the small town of Moelln in Schleswig-Holstein (Germany's northernmost state) destroyed the life of ?brahim Arslan's family. The seven-year-old boy survived the fire but lost his sister, his cousin and his grandmother. Unlike the racist riots that took place in the same year in Rostock-Lichtenhagen in eastern Germany, these attacks were not directed against refugees but specifically against German-Turkish families, who had lived in the country for a long time.

The event provoked worldwide outrage and led to mass demonstrations and candlelight vigils against right-wing extremism throughout Germany.

Twenty-seven years later, in 2019, Ibrahim Arslan learned by chance that there were countless letters of solidarity from all over Germany addressed to the affected families, offering them comfort and courage but which the city administration had withheld from them. They remained in the office for public order and social welfare and then in the city archive. The mayor responsible at the time was the lawyer Joachim H. Dörfler (Christian Democratic Union, CDU).

In her retrospective account of the events in Mölln, director Martina Priessner highlights the contrast between the official attitudes and those of the victims and their supporters. The film follows Ibrahim and his siblings, presenting a sensitive portrait of the lasting trauma that continues to shape their lives up to the present.

Ibrahim suffers from flashbacks. After going public and speaking at school meetings, his symptoms have diminished. His brother Namik, who was rescued from the burning house as an infant, also struggles with anxiety attacks and is in psychotherapy.

In her director's statement for the Berlinale, Priessner, who met Ibrahim Arslan in 2020 and first learned then about the solidarity letters, says this conversation left a lasting impression on her. She said:

> How could it be that these important messages of solidarity never reached the victims of the racist attack? And what does that actually say about how this society deals with victims of right-wing terror?

She helped the relatives of the victims gain access to the letters and establish contact with the letter writers. This leads to a moving encounter in the film between Ibrahim and Sonja, who sent a letter and a lucky charm in 1992 when she was just 12 years old.

"Remembrance requires action" is the motto of the city's official annual commemoration of the attacks. The commemoration, however, is limited to passive expressions of consternation. According to Ibrahim, he and others affected were reduced to the role of extras and have therefore been organizing their own annual memorial event for some time.

The former mayor, Dörfler, refuses to talk to Ibrahim. The successor mayor, Jan Wiegels (Social Democratic Party, SPD), also remains silent about his behavior at the time, which is incompatible with democratic principles. The city administration not only confiscated and archived the letters, it went so far as to partially open and answer them.

Ibrahim reads out the official reply to one letter, which was allegedly forwarded to the relatives "in the hope that it would bring them comfort." However, like other letters, it was never received by the family. The relatives remember that the mayor left them on their own and did not visit them personally. They themselves would have had to take care of the people who had been made homeless by the fire.

Ibrahim is particularly angry about the official comment that the families could have picked up the letters at any time. How could they have picked up something they had no idea existed? The film accompanies the families to the archive to receive the letters, which they now want to transfer to the "Documentation Center and Museum of Migration in Germany" (DOMiD) in Cologne. Trust has been destroyed in the Moelln archive. The archivist is still the same person as in 1992.

Ibrahim vents his frustration at the constant delays in the handover. It is the "institutional approach," he asserts, a "white German person" who is not affected by "everyday racism" could never put himself or herself in the family's shoes. Elsewhere, he recalls that in 1992, the police (who had apparently already labeled the Arslans as a so-called "problem family") initially investigated the murdered family instead of looking for the right-wing perpetrators. At the end of the film, Ibrahim reports on his efforts to organize migrants from different backgrounds against racism.

At this point, the film adapts to identity politics, which sees racism not as the policy of a ruling class that, in one form or another, tries to play off and divide the workers but as a characteristic of "white politicians" or a "white-dominant society."

Ambiguous film images of swift, meticulous administrative hands, labelling, measuring, seem to suggest as much. They transform a small Qur'an with burn marks, which belonged to a girl killed in the house, into an impersonal object that is handled with gloves. Typical German bureaucracy?

The picture of the high stack of boxes in the archive points in a different

direction, however, and Ibrahim is also a person who does not discriminate in his everyday life. Like the other victims, he is deeply touched by the extent of the sympathy shown in 1992.

The Moelln Letters repeatedly shows messages written by children, adults, young people and school classes, often lovingly coloured, from all over Germany and other countries. One letter, written to offer comfort and strength to the family, comes from the US.

The Panorama Audience Award for *The Moelln Letters* is an expression of the widespread opposition in the population to far-right terror, a solidarity with migrants and increasing outrage against state representatives who, in soapbox speeches, invoke the "we" that they actually fear and sabotage.

German bureaucracy has its own special history. Ever since its emergence in the 19th century under Bismarck, it has been a primary instrument of German capitalism to suppress any democratic stirrings from below. This did not change after 1945. The top priority was "law and order" rather than democracy.

The Lie

The Lie was made in 1987 by Katrin Seybold and Melanie Spitta. The rarely shown film was recently digitally restored and screened in the Forum Special at the Berlinale. It will, one hopes, soon be more widely available.

The "lie" refers to the cynical use of the word "reparations" by German authorities after World War II, referring to the state handouts given to some of the surviving concentration camp victims. The state apparatus at the time was infested by thousands of former Nazis. When the victims returned to society after the war and began to make public the crimes they had experienced, the state feared the general population would show solidarity with them. It largely silenced the victims and fuelled politically and socially backward sentiments.

From the outset, the state did not want to compensate Sinti and Roma for the crimes—forced labor, sterilization and extermination—committed against them and demanded proof the victims were even German. Under the Nazis, the German citizenship of this minority, which had lived in the country for centuries, was revoked.

After the war, the authorities did not return passports to the "stateless." When compensation claims were made, the assessors were often former Nazis who demanded impossible proof of persecution, concentration camp stays, etc. The official documents about this, of course, were in their own possession and kept under lock and key.

The Lie recounts the case of a woman suffering from tuberculosis who was supposed to prove her illness was a result of her time in the camps and not an infection from a relative. The Nazi document, kept secret by the authorities, which the film shows, proves that the relative's tuberculosis itself was in fact a product of conditions in a concentration camp.

Particularly insidious was the claim that Sinti and Roma were not subjected to racial persecution or only after the 1943 Auschwitz decree. Until then, they were supposedly simply criminals, "asocials" and work-shy, who were justifiably imprisoned.

The film thoroughly refutes this myth. Even earlier, Nazi racial researchers had attributed to them a racial "migratory instinct" and a penchant for crime that supposedly made them incapable of social integration, normal schooling, vocational training and disciplined work.

In *The Lie*, those affected report how Sinti and Roma were systematically isolated and criminalized in the second half of the 1930s. Those who had work involving travel were stripped of their jobs. All were forbidden to leave their places of residence. Then they were evicted from their apartments and locked up in ghetto-like camps guarded by police, where they were forced to be available for forced labor and as objects of racial research.

During the period of the so-called economic miracle of the 1950s, the racist persecution of Sinti and Roma continued seamlessly. The film quotes a 1956 document of the German Federal Court of Justice, which compares them to "primitive prehistoric men."

The German police would still be relying on the "gypsy files" of the Third Reich's criminal investigation department had the civil rights movement of the Sinti and Roma not put an end to this practice in the early 1980s through an intense public campaign that attracted international attention.

In addition to archive photos, old film footage and interviews with concentration camp survivors, many of whom lost their entire families, the countless private photos that Sinti families made available for the film are very moving.

For the first time, they themselves were given a voice in a film about the Nazi crimes against their families and their continuing persecution after the war. The voice that guides the viewer through the film belongs to co-director Melanie Spitta (1946-2005), a child of surviving Sinti.

It was not Hitler's fanatical SS, the film emphasizes, but German civilian institutions—police, hospitals, welfare offices, health offices (the latter supervised the sterilization) and other state authorities—that organized the crimes. Some of the scientific community were deeply involved in the extermination. Quite a few Sinti, the cinema audience learns, refused to see a doctor again after the traumatic experiences.

None of those responsible were ever punished.

"Those who brought us to Auschwitz were believed," is the film's bitter conclusion. Leo Karsten, former head of the police "Department for Gypsy Affairs" in Berlin, worked as a criminal investigator after the war. A sought-after "expert" was the racial researcher Robert Ritter, who found employment as a doctor at the Frankfurt am Main health department.

The reason for the continuation of the persecution was not, as the film implies, that racist prejudices were so enduring and deep-going, although the Nazis and postwar German capitalist politicians no doubt did hold deplorable views about this minority.

In reality, the ruling class consciously used existing prejudices about mythical "Gypsies," who never existed historically, giving them a scientific veneer through "racial research," to create a climate of mutual mistrust, backward suspicion and denunciation. The bourgeois fear of the working class continued in the offices of post-war society, and alongside the call for "law and order," the call for rearmament soon resounded.

The demonic image of the restless wanderer and work-shy parasite who poses a danger to German society has been repeatedly revived in the refugee-baiting of recent decades. Since the rise of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the ongoing criminalization of Roma refugees from Eastern Europe, many German Roma and Sinti fear that history might repeat itself.

The film is a powerful indictment of the Federal Republic of Germany, which did not deal with the country's Nazi past but rather *prevented* any genuine reckoning with the crimes of the Third Reich.

It should be added at this point that the long-standing resistance of high-ranking German politicians to the establishment of a central memorial for the Sinti and Roma of Europe murdered by the Nazis, which was inaugurated in Berlin in 2012 and is now endangered by a Deutsche Bahn project, was also justified on the grounds that the Sinti and Roma were persecuted for criminal offences and not due to fascist policy.

To be continued