

Facing the past



Filmmaker Irene Lilienheim Angelico: restless souls

Documentaries about the filmmakers who make them are rarely films to be taken seriously. **Dark Lullabies** is an exception; Irene Lilienheim Angelico's own story about coming to terms with the Holocaust is really a universal tale about coming to terms with a past filled with mystery and pain.

Ms. Angelico is the daughter of a Jewish couple who survived five years in Nazi concentration camps during World War Two. In the film she explains that although she grew up with vague images of the Holocaust, her parents' experiences during the war remained shrouded in mystery. Her first real contact with the horrors they survived came in the form of a manuscript her father had written after the war, but which he had suppressed from his daughter until Ms. Angelico was in her thirties. Only then did she fully realize that suffering of unbelievable proportions was an undeniable part of her heritage.

Dark Lullabies chronicles Ms. Angelico's efforts to put her own feelings in perspective by gauging the impact of the Holocaust on the post-war generation of Jews and Germans. Her journey of self-discovery symbolizes a generation coming

to grips with an epoch which is remote in some ways but painfully intimate in others.

At a conference of Holocaust survivors in Israel, Ms. Angelico is introduced to a succession of individuals who typify the difficulties in dealing with the years of persecution. Though no one for a moment doubts the necessity of remembering, the act of remembering has a price. Survivors who have managed to shield themselves from the past lose all their defenses when they begin to recall their experiences. The film amply demonstrates that anguish never dies; it just mingles with other emotions in the hope that it might fade a bit.

Yet the more these survivors reveal about the past, the closer the younger generation of Jews draws to them. The exact opposite is true of young Germans who have begun to peel away the layers of silence that have grown over the Nazi era. Harald Luders, a West German filmmaker who assisted Ms. Angelico, puts it succinctly: "Young Jews, especially, the children of survivors, can look into their past and feel closer to their people. For Germans it's the other way around." Ms. Angelico interviews several people who've shaken the very cornerstones of their lives by facing the truth about the past. Antje Mulke discovered in her early teens that her kindly, loving grandfather had been vice-commandant at Auschwitz. Suddenly a happy childhood turned ugly and she was forced to reconstruct a substantial part of her life. Another woman discovered that a ruined building where she used to play had been part of a forced labour camp. She had grown up believing it was an abandoned cemetery, because that's what her elders had always told her. The discovery, she says, "destroyed the feelings I had for the place that had been my home. I never wanted to come back to the village or talk to the people there."

As the Nazi era recedes further into history, there is a growing tendency to regard the Holocaust as a series of clinical statistics and time-worn photographs. **Dark Lullabies** is a reminder that the Holocaust was an event of cataclysmic proportions which to this day continues to claim emotional victims. The film is also a reminder that there are people, like Ms. Angelico, whose souls cannot rest until they know beyond any doubt that it will never happen again.

'Dark Lullabies' is scheduled at the Bloor Cinema on Sunday, April 6.