

Dark Lullabies: Documentary filmmaking with a conscience

By Susan Gray

Dark Lullabies, co-directed by Abbey Neidik and Irene Angelico, takes an original and provocative look at the Holocaust. As well as talking to survivors of the concentration camps, Angelico (the on-camera interviewer) speaks with children of Holocaust survivors and children of Nazis to determine how the war has influenced their lives.

Many conferences on the effects of the Holocaust on the children of survivors have been held during the last six years, sparked in part by Helen Epstein's book, *Children of the Holocaust*. But no film has yet treated the guilt and burden these children feel and compared this with the shame and more personal guilt felt by the descendants of ex-Nazis.

The main premise in *Dark Lullabies* is that the Nazis were not monsters, but instead human beings who were capable of loving their families and other select individuals. Unfortunately, Angelico does not always probe her subjects deeply enough in the film; she succeeds best with Antje Mulka, a young woman whose father and grandfather both were Nazis. Mulka is the interviewee who seems the most open to personal change. She states the need to separate herself entirely from her family's values but acknowledges the extreme difficulty of reconciling the horrible facts about her grandfather with her loving memories of him.

The filmmakers also depict the opposite end of the spectrum by having Angelico interview a group

of Neo-Nazis. The group does not ordinarily grant interviews to Jews but Neidik and Angelico did not disclose their origin. Apart from these two extremes, mention is made of Germans of the war generation who have repressed their personal feelings about the war ever since the beginning. Breathtaking shots of fairy-tale villages in the German countryside contrast with ironic voice-overs about the gap which has often existed between appearance and reality there.

Dark Lullabies is a co-production of the NFB's Studio D and Dark Lullabies Incorporated, the film company owned by Angelico and Neidik. Financing the film was difficult as many potential investors were put off by the filmmakers' desire to place so much emphasis on the German component of the

film. During the early days of production Angelico and Neidik were also frustrated on the creative front as they could not find the right German contact to do research on the film from that end.

They finally found Harald Lüders, a young German filmmaker whose film, *Now, After All These Years*, about confronting the lie many Germans have created about the war, was aired on PBS in 1983. Not only was Lüder's off-screen work invaluable to the team but his sensitive presence adds much to the film.

Angelico says that the primary goal of *Dark Lullabies* is to influence young Germans to confront the painful legacy of the Holocaust. In speaking about the legacy of the Jews, she says: "This legacy is bittersweet. It is full of the horror and pain of what happened but also

of the vitality and hope which was passed on to us by our parents."

In creating a film about the experiences of the new generation, Neidik and Angelico found it necessary to incorporate the experiences of their parents' generation as well. As Angelico says: "Until recently, the past and the present were inextricably linked in the lives of the children of the survivors."

By probing the past, the directors of *Dark Lullabies* re-discovered the hope which is an integral part of Jewish culture and philosophy. Certainly the film also attempts to be the conscience of a generation which, according to the directors, is ready to assume responsibility for its burdens. The film's conclusion suggests that Germany must assume full consciousness of its past if it is ever to be absolved.

Irene Angelico,
co-director of
Dark Lullabies



Ben Soo