

FILM REVIEW

DARK LULLABIES: Trying To Come To Terms With Contradiction

by Mark Pendergrast

When Irene Lilienheim Angelico stepped through the gates of the concentration camp at Dachau in 1983, she was the same age, she realized, as her father when he walked the other way through the same gates in 1945, having miraculously survived the ultimate devastation to humanity, the Holocaust.

The futility of the search for meaning combined with the need to find something redemptive is the status of survivors, and often survivors' children, who like Angelico at 36, search for answers and meaning, trying to come to terms with contradiction.

Angelico's pilgrimage of confronting a past she had attempted to avoid for most of her life is documented in *Dark Lullabies*, a National Film Board of Canada release, which made its New England premiere at Trinity in early November. The film, followed by discussion with Angelico, was part of the "Legacies of the Holocaust: Against Silence" series, made possible by the new Faith P. Waters Endowed Chair of Humanities.

The film was five years in the making. The catalyst for filmmaker Angelico came when she finally asked to read her father's manuscript. "I knew he had written something about his experiences," said Angelico during an interview on campus. "But I avoided the whole topic when I was growing up. I didn't want to know. And in some ways, I think my parents wanted to spare me the pain of their past as well."

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—Irene Lilienheim Angelico

In 1979, Helen Epstein's book, *Children of the Holocaust*, came out and hit Angelico "like a bomb." So did her father's manuscript, a moving account which begins on the day of his liberation from Dachau in 1945, goes through a frantic and ultimately successful search for his wife (also a survivor of a camp), and ends in 1947 with the birth of their child, Irene.

The film itself is framed by quotes from the beginning and end of the manuscript. Angelico says that her birth was part of a remarkable renewal among Jewish survivors. "The response to the end of the Holocaust wasn't bitterness or the desire for revenge," she says. "It was a reaffirmation of life and love."

It was also, for her father, an affirmation of continuity with a past that had been literally annihilated: "When I look at her (Irene as a baby), it seems I see my mother, my sister, my little niece. She comes into this world because I did not perish in the camps. . . ."

It is perhaps fortunate that because of initial funding problems, the filming took so long. We see Angelico mature and grow during the film. At the beginning, she is clearly troubled and uncertain about herself and what she may find. She



Abbey Neidik and Irene Angelico

tearfully seeks reassurance from Mr. Rosen, a camp liberator and survivor who tells her that her search is "futile" because there can be no answers.

We see Angelico's personal anguish gradually recede to the background as she reaches outward and listens to others, first the children of survivors at a Montreal conference, then survivors at a reunion in Israel, where she tries to comfort Mr. Lieber, a round-faced man whose stoic exterior breaks down as he talks about seeing his wife shot in the back.

We meet an Israeli family who have not only survived but are celebrating life. Rivka Miriam, the daughter and an artist who drew sensitive pictures of the Holocaust when she was 12, says that the thought of what her mother went through makes her aware of the preciousness of every day of her life.

Angelico then visits Eitan Prat, another celebrator of life in the face of the Holocaust. When he was 14, the Nazis took his beloved tamed pigeons from him. "Don't worry," his father told him. "There will be many birds in your life." Now Prat keeps a colorful international menagerie of birds outside Tel Aviv and hosts schoolchildren, talking about both the birds and the Holocaust.

The segment with Prat exemplifies the power of the film's imagery. The astonishing beauty of the white peacock's tail and Prat's colorful parrot dancing while he sings *hava nagilah* are only part of the film's enormous visual impact. Later, the huge black ravens circling through the mists below Hitler's retreat (Eagle's Nest) are a sharp symbolic contrast to Prat's birds.

By the time the filmmakers enter Germany, Angelico objectively interviews children of Nazis, then young neo-Nazis. We discover, along with Angelico, a curious sort of correspondence between children of survivors and children of Nazis. Both have experienced difficulties in talking about the past with their parents. Each are now struggling to come to grips with that past.

Angelico interviews and is helped in her search by Harald Luders, a sensitive young German filmmaker. She talks to Suzanne, a young woman who discovered only in her teens that her quiet little town had been the site of a brutal work camp. She interviews Sigfried Gauch, the son of one of Himmler's right-hand men. Gauch is now a writer trying to come to terms with his own

legacy.

Not all young Germans are so sensitive or aware, however. Against a backdrop of Eagle's Nest, Sylvia Febritius writes and sells a touristy pamphlet called *A History of the Third Reich* in which a sort of Romantic aura makes Hitler and Eva Braun look like kind, decent people who went through a hard time. Febritius says she doesn't know anything about the concentration camps, so she sticks to the "facts." The film cuts to stark black and white documentary footage of the Holocaust.

The neo-Nazis are even more horrifying in their deliberate and wrongful understatement. They insist that the Holocaust is simply a "fairy tale" invented by a world wide Jewish conspiracy. (Although not shown on film, co-director Abbey Jack Neidik, was impelled to stay after the interview and tell these men that not only were he and Angelico Jews, but that Angelico's family had barely lived through this "fairy tale.")

There is an extraordinary interview with Antje Mulka, a young woman whose grandfather

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was the last commandant of Auschwitz. Mulka remembers her grandfather as a kindly old man who read to her and took her for walks in the park. She is trying to reconcile those memories with the knowledge she now has of the atrocities he committed. At the end of the interview, she tells Angelico that "I've learned to be my own person, to set myself apart from my father and grandfather. I must live for myself."

The interview is most remarkable because we sense as viewers that these two women from such different backgrounds, meeting across a distance of time and space, have come to similar conclusions. Ultimately, that is the film's unstated message—there is hope for the next generation if



we learn from the past.

Angelico says she was terrified that her parents wouldn't like the film. Instead, after the first few minutes, when a picture of Angelico as a toddler with her pet dog flashed up on the screen, her mother said, "Oh, look, it's Irene and Sparky!" and the ice was broken.

The film has been successful on many levels, not the least of which has been to inspire dialogue between the generations. A winner of European film awards, it has been translated into several languages and is being shown around the world.

The film has succeeded in another way as well. Angelico and Neidik, both of whom were at Trinity for the showing, were married three weeks before. Their next joint venture will be a film about Franz Kafka.

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