

Dark Lullabies true-to-life account of personal horrors of the Holocaust

Ted Shaw

In Irene Lilienheim Angelico's documentary about the Holocaust **Dark Lullabies**, there is a sequence showing past and present pictures of the concentration camp at Dachau while Brahms' Lullaby provides a thought-provoking counterpoint in the background.

It is a remarkable sequence, sharply focusing on the height and depth of human endeavour, yet so simply and Dramatically drawn.

In its 90 minutes, **Dark Lullabies** brings the horrors of the Holocaust down to a human level by cutting between archival footage and interviews mainly with the children of its victims and perpetrators.

Produced jointly by The National Film Board and Angelico's D.L.I. **Dark Lullabies** Inc.) Productions in Montreal, **Dark Lullabies** is the story of a young Jewish woman's personal search through her past, dredging up a history that she discovered neither side was too anxious to probe.

The winner of four international film awards, **Dark Lullabies** will be shown for the first time on television Wednesday at 9 p.m. on TvOntario, Channel 32.

Angelico, who had researched the NFB film about pornography, Not A Love Story, found herself in new and acutely personal territory in **Dark Lullabies**.

She used a manuscript written by her father, Henry Lilienheim, in 1947 as the springboard for her documentary. Lilienheim was liberated from Dachau in 1945 after spending several years under the daily threat of execution

Two years later following his daughter's birth, he wrote down his observations and memories of that period. For most of her life, Angelico avoided reading them although she was aware they existed through her adolescence and early adulthood.

'It was just too painful for me,' she explained. 'For the same reason, I never saw any of the films about the Holocaust or read any books about it.

But while working as an independent producer for the National Film Board in Montreal she was asked to discuss her family's history with French documentary maker, Marcel Ophuls (*The Sorrow And The Pity, The Memory Of Justice*).

She watched *The Memory of Justice* and was shocked to discover how articulate, gentle and intelligent Albert Speer seemed to her.

'I had a naive picture of the Holocaust like everyone else Angelico said. The dichotomy of Speer, the man, and Speer, the hated Nazi, convinced her there was a story to be told about her generations perceptions of that time.

So she finally took up her father's manuscript at the age of 30 and read through it. "Then, (learning more about the Holocaust) became an obsession," she said, "and I started reading everything about it I saw hundreds of films...I learned I couldn't hide from it anymore."

Her research took her initially to the first conference of children of the Holocaust Survivors in Montreal in November, 1980. With the help of fellow filmmaker, Abbey Jack Neidik, she filmed several participants, most of them her own age, talking about the effects of the Holocaust on them.

Then, scraping together enough money for a crew, she went to Israel in 1981 to film an international conference of survivors and their families. At one point in the process, Neidik convinced Angelico to be photographed and it was then that *Dark Lullabies* became more than just another documentary about the Holocaust.

"This was an unspoken and unrecognized obsession of a lifetime," said Angelico. "I thought at first I could be objective about it but, I realized soon that was impossible.

"Later, I worried about the film becoming too self-indulgent"

The most difficult filming was to follow in the summer and fall of 1983 when she visited Germany. In this segment, which occupies the last two-thirds of **Dark Lullabies**, she discusses the Holocaust with children of Nazis, members of a neo-Nazi organization, and visits scenes of past atrocities.

She expected to find self-deceit and evasion in the Germans of the earlier generation and found plenty of evidence of this. What surprised her was the depth of guilt and shame in young Germans, even children of former high-ranking Nazis who had been taught to deny that period of history.

The documentary at this point becomes a universal search for meaning "The story of the Holocaust says something about human nature, its scale and the participation of otherwise normal citizens who can be loving parents by night and murderers by day."

Confronted with this inherent contradiction, young Germans in the film are shown to break down in tears as they try to sort through their love of their parents and their shame at what they did.

The real impact of **Dark Lullabies** is in its shattering honesty - Angelico admits at one point she still harbors some distrust of Germans; during the interview with the neo-Nazis, she said, she experienced a "contained rage."

The most telling interview is with the publisher of a biography of Hitler which is sold at a museum in Austria. Here, a young German woman displays an incredible denial of the facts of history. Angelico said this interview dredged up the deep feelings of disgust in her.

The **Dark Lullabies** of the title are the discordant songs of children taking stock of their parents. The documentary is a brave, unblinkered look into the past in an attempt to define the present more accurately.

Completed in August 1985, *Dark Lullabies* was first shown at the 1985 Montreal Film Festival. In October of that year, it won a first prize at the Mannheim International Film Festival as the most engaging socio-political film. It was also awarded a red ribbon for excellence at the 1986 American Film Festival.

It has been shown in numerous North American film festivals. Angelico has also shown the film to community groups, including a recent visit to Southfield, Mich. PBS plans to show **Dark Lullabies** later this year, she said.