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Café Zelig: A Seniors' Hangout and a Whole Lot of History

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When German filmmaker Tanja Cummings learned about a place Natan Grossmann frequented for a cup of coffee and a bit of socialising, it was only a matter of time before a new documentary film idea began to click into gear. Grossmann, the adorable and sometimes mischievous Łódź Ghetto survivor in Cummings' film *Line 41*, is a regular at Café Zelig, a weekly gathering spot of Holocaust survivors in Munich, many of whom originally came from Poland. Thus, the film *Café Zelig* came into being. Cummings hadn't intended to make another Holocaust film. She simply listened and followed a trail of conversations. An incredible community opened up before her eyes.

The film project, no doubt, came with challenges. "Coming into a room with a lot of Holocaust survivors, I knew each of them had a story," Cummings said in an interview. She added, "Of course, it was difficult to approach each of them without knowing already some details." It took a few months to get to know the men and women, who were well into their eighties and nineties, and then to decide who might open up more with their life stories. "For some, one had the feeling it would be better not to ask them any questions…. I proceeded over the months how to be sensitive about each of them."

A touchy issue is the whys and wherefores these Jewish people ended up living in what was the epicenter of Hitler's Nazi machine, Munich. Each story, Cummings learned, is a fascinating narrative riding the currents of fate, and where one might land. "Very often it was just by coincidence," she explained, "or because they just ended up there for certain reasons, which weren't really of their decision. This has to do with the post-war era, what happened to those survivors."

After the Second World War, an American zone was in the German state of Bavaria, which includes Munich. "Many had to move through Germany because they had the DP camps there," Cummings said. The Jewish refugees, many of whom had lost their entire families during the war, often had plans to move on to the United States or Canada, or to what soon would become Israel, but plans did not always go as intended. Some people were simply too ill to move on.

Take the story of Natan Grossmann, for instance. First, he returned to Łódź to try to learn something about the fate of his older brother; he decided to go to Israel, or what was then the British Mandate for Palestine, a journey that took him through a displaced persons camp in Bavaria, then

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to Italy, and a ship that sailed to his final destination. "Over the years, he became sick," Cummings said, "and it was difficult to find medical help in Israel. And the doctors told him the only people that can help you are the Germans." Grossmann suffered from the effects of serious frostbite, as did many German soldiers fighting in harsh winter conditions in the Soviet Union during the war. German physicians had the medical know-how to deal with such ailments. "So this is the reason why Natan came to Germany. It was just a coincidence, and because he met Ute, his wife now, and he had to decide, either I marry this German woman or I go to Israel, but both things were not possible."

Among many Holocaust survivors, there were hostilities directed toward Germans, and Grossmann faced criticism, especially in those early post-war years, well into the 1960s. "Some of his old friends from the kibbutz," Cummings noted, "they couldn't understand why he stayed in Germany, the land of the perpetrators, and then marrying a German woman. For some, it was really difficult to understand… They would criticise him for this, which hurt him, I think, it hurt him... he didn't understand it."

There is a powerful scene in *Café Zelig* when one Holocaust survivor, Salo Wolf, who endured the nightmare of one Nazi camp after another, simply cannot bear to listen to a fellow survivor, Henry Rotmensch, give a talk about the Buchenwald death camp. Wolf stands up and leaves. He tries to be respectful, but he simply doesn't see the point of hearing about it yet again. He was imprisoned at this ghetto and that camp, he recounts in the film. What more is there to discuss? Obviously, there are different opinions – sometimes clashing opinions – when it comes to remembering. Wolf, curiously, also ended up in Munich because of love.

"The story with Salo is that after the war, he emigrated to the United States, to I think New York, and he built up a factory there, and he was quite successful," Cummings said. After the war – "I think in the fifties," she noted – Wolf, originally from Bielsko-Biała, Poland, made a trip to Munich "just for bureaucratic reasons… to pick some important documents up." He intended to be in Munich a few days or so. "Then he met a young lady who was from Vienna originally, Jewish Austrian lady, who had survived with her parents in Shanghai, and … he decided, I must marry this girl." The new plan was to marry her and return to his business in the U.S. Her parents, however, weren't overly eager to go along with that. "They told him, 'You know, we survived the war, and for us, it's impossible for you to take away our daughter to the United States. We only give you permission to marry her if you stay in Munich.'" Another "specific story," as Cummings called it, "and very serious."

In one case, the filmmaker recalled, she was bluntly asked – told – please don't ask about *that*. As part of her research for *Line 41*, Cummings met with a Holocaust survivor originally from Poland. Prior to the scheduled interview, the man's wife and son "specifically asked me, 'Please, do not ask any question regarding why did you decide to live in Germany, in Munich.' So this was something I was to leave out, a question like: How did you end up in Germany? why? how's this possible? – one having survived the Łódź Ghetto – how is it possible to decide to move to the land of the perpetrators? and stay there, and raise a family there, which he did. His wife is actually from Israel, so he didn't meet her in Germany…, but he specifically, from Munich, travelled to Israel, to find a wife."

Complicating this further, Cummings said, is the haunting question surrounding one's German colleagues. "It must have been troubling to be amongst them and always having in mind that maybe their father, or this colleague himself, was a soldier in the war, and who knows what this guy had done in the East, or his family. So, of course, this question is always, was always, or still is, troubling to the children of those Holocaust survivors." Growing up "with this burden," Cummings

went on, has left many children and grandchildren asking themselves: Why are we in Germany? "And, actually, there's quite a number of, now, grandchildren of Holocaust survivors who go to school in Germany, and decide to leave. They finish high school and they leave Germany because, for them, it's much more difficult to stay."

One day, in preparation for *Line 41*, Cummings arranged a meeting between Andrea Löw, a renowned German scholar on the Łódź Ghetto, and two ghetto survivors living in Munich, Grossmann and another man. "This was a tough meeting somehow," Cummings said, and, for both her and Löw, "was really strange to us." These two survivors from Poland, Cummings explained, talked with "such a passionate and sometimes almost violent way, and… so vividly describing scenes, and it was clear to them they had a, at that moment, had a very deep, like a deep-rooted bad feeling about Polish people," adding "one was really, almost shocked." When the conversation turned to "the German perpetrators," the two men "were somehow soft about the Germans," she said, "portraying the Germans as the not-so-bad guys, but the worst people were the Polish people."

"This outburst of hatred one could also say" made it even more confusing because, as Cummings pointed out, Grossmann can be very gracious and warm-hearted towards Poles. In *Café Zelig*, Grossmann is firm in his praise for Poles: "The Poles were the only people in Eastern Europe… It's important what I'm saying!... In World War II, the Poles and the Czechs were the only people in Eastern Europe who fought against these beasts" – the German occupiers.

In a conversation after that meeting with Löw, the other man's son suspected that in the pre-war days the two Holocaust survivors "must have experienced anti-Semitic outbursts," Cummings said, "scenes probably ingrained into their minds when they were small children," and not everyone was good-hearted during the occupation. Decades of living in Germany might have also impacted observations. "Another interesting explanation…, Okay, they have to be somehow soft towards Germans in order for them to explain why they are actually living in Germany." One thing was, and is, clear. "It's complicated," she affirmed.

In *Café Zelig*, we meet Benjamin Rosendahl, the son of Theresia Rosendahl, who, as a baby, was hidden in a convent in Sosnowiec, Poland. "He's actually an example of a young man, finishing high school in Bavaria, in Munich, and then leaving," Cummings said. "He lives in Israel now. So, for him, you also see it, you have the feeling this story of his mother and grandparents, it's very present with them every day." There is a scene when he walks through the crowds at Marienplatz, the old town square in Munich. One can discern there is unease. The ghosts of the past are never far off.

It is this understanding Cummings hopes viewers take from her new film. Under the surface, a struggle, perhaps a war, may be raging. "For the victims and survivors of the Holocaust, or the Shoah, it's still very present in everything they do, and this is something that I learned," the filmmaker said. She felt this when she met Salo Wolf in his home. "Each time we met, he told this story about how he got separated from his brother, and I had the feeling he thinks about this each and every day." Wolf was the only one in his family to survive the war. "If you are in his living room, in his living room he has a few photos of his family, his brothers, some of them can be seen in the film, and on each wall of his living room he places these very important photographs. So wherever he looks he sees, every day he sees the faces of his brothers. So it's very present with him, every day, which is somehow horrible to think of, to imagine how this must be, to be pained by the scene of this separation. It's something someone cannot imagine, but this is what someone learns, or what I learned. This is what I mean with this presence of what is past. It becomes very clear when meeting these people."

Cummings, who lives in Berlin, made some special friends among the Café Zelig crowd, something of a seniors' club operated by the Jewish community in Munich. And, just as she knew, many of these eighty- and ninety-something-year-old people wouldn't be around much longer. Henry Rotmensch, the survivor who opens the film as he listens to a nostalgic Yiddish tune on an old cassette player in his home, died November 16, 2021. "I will go to Munich tomorrow very early in the morning," she wrote to me in an e-mail, "as Henry Rotmensch, a dear friend and protagonists of CAFE ZELIG (also my film) died last night... I will go to Munich to attend his funeral tomorrow at noon... in sad spirits…"

Café Zelig, released in 2020, has been making the rounds at special screenings and film festivals. More information about the film can be found at: https://daszelig-film.de/.