

Friday Film Fest Series



Die Fälscher ("The Counterfeiters")

Director: Stefan Ruzowitsky
Producers: Josef Aichholzer, Nina Bohlmann, Babette Schröder
Writers: Adolf Burger (book) and Stefan Ruzowitsky
Stars: Karl Morkovics, August Diehl, Decid Streisow
Music: Marius Ruhland
Released: Germany – March 22, 2007
United States – February 22, 2008
Time: 98 minutes

Compiled and written by Sonny Sidhu and Dheeraj Ravi,
Students in Prof. Sunka Simon's German Cinema class at
Swarthmore College November 18, 2008

Feeding the Beast: Operation Bernhard, 1942-45

Die Fälscher is a fictionalized account of the largest counterfeiting operation in history, known as Operation Bernhard. During World War II, the Nazis planned to flood the international market with millions of forged British pounds and American dollars, to support their ongoing war efforts, as well as to undermine the Allied economies. In all, 8,965,080 bank notes were produced during the project's three-year run, valuing over £134,610,810.

The majority of the counterfeiting work was performed by Jewish prisoners at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in north Berlin between the years 1942 and 1945. Sachsenhausen was unique among the Nazi concentration camps for its high concentration of political prisoners, as well as for its industrial facilities, with workshops where captives could be forced to manufacture goods for the Nazi *Reich*. Between 1936 and 1945, over 204,000 prisoners were interned at Sachsenhausen. Almost immediately after the fall of the Nazi regime, Soviet authorities in the German Democratic Republic began interning their own political prisoners at the Sachsenhausen site, and between 1945 and 1950, at least 50,000 were interned there. Today, the front gate at the Sachsenhausen site still bears the notorious slogan *Arbeit Macht Frei*—"Work will set you free." In total over a quarter million Nazi and Soviet prisoners passed through Sachsenhausen's gates. More than half that number perished there.

Operation Bernhard began in 1942 and was spearheaded by SS Major Bernhard Kruger. From the outset, there were 142 prisoners working on the counterfeiting operation. At first, the counterfeiters only printed small denominations of £5, £10, £20, and £50 to avoid attracting suspicion. It was not until 1943, when the Bank of England verified and approved a batch of the fake

Operation Bernhard notes, that the Germans started multiplying their production on a massive scale. After the success of the forged pound, there was a significant delay in the production of a passable forged dollar. Only in February of 1945 did the counterfeiter perfect their first \$100 bill, but the ailing *Reich* scrapped the entire project before the notes could be produced in significant numbers. Today, many historians argue that the Nazi war effort might have been prolonged indefinitely, had saboteurs within Operation Bernhard not exhausted the *Reich's* last financial hope by delaying the production of a counterfeit American dollar just long enough to end the war.

***Die Fälscher* and the Ethics of Holocaust Survival**

Though *Die Fälscher* opens in postwar Monte Carlo, the story the film tells begins in the Berlin of 1936. Salomon 'Sally' Sorowitsch (Karl Markovics), hailed as one of the world's best counterfeiter, is nearing completion of a forged American dollar that would be the first of its kind. Before he can taste the fruits of this breakthrough, Sally is arrested by the zealous counterfeiting investigator Friedrich Herzog (Devid Striesow) and sentenced to work in a hard labor camp. Soon Sally is sent to the Nazi concentration camp at Mauthausen, near Linz. There he is noticed for his artistic talents and, by offering his services as a portrait artist to the presiding Nazi officers and their families, avoids much of the daily horror of life in the concentration camp. Eventually, the authorities inform Sally that he is being relocated to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, along with several other prisoners with skills in the arts and the publishing trade. The prisoners are greeted at Sachsenhausen by the officer responsible for Sally's arrest—now *SS Sturmbannführer* Herzog—who explains their new situation. In exchange for softer beds, heartier meals, weekends off, and Herzog's relatively humane oversight, the Jewish prisoners will now be devoting their talents to the service of Operation Bernhard, a massive, top-secret counterfeiting scheme intended to destabilize the economies of Britain and the United States by flooding them with fake bank notes.

While Sally is pleased at first to return to his craft, accepting without question the apparent improvement in his conditions and chances of survival, his complacency is challenged by Burger (August Diehl), a politically outspoken printer who has no intention of helping fuel the Nazi *Wehrmacht* through the successful production of a counterfeit dollar. With an Allied victory over Hitler apparently imminent and Sachsenhausen Nazi overseers growing increasingly desperate for Operation Bernhard to produce a passable dollar, the prisoners must grapple with conflicting motivations of survival and loyalty, pride and principle, in the waning days of the Second World War.

Die Fälscher is laudable for its sensitive depiction of themes of courage, duty, compulsion, and complicity, staged within a singular historical/moral context of war and genocide. Through the conflicting characters of Sorowitsch and Burger, the film explores the philosophical dilemmas presented by confinement under constant threat of torture and death. Should the counterfeiter of Operation Bernhard seek survival through compliance with their captors' demands, or risk being made martyrs for subversive resistance in service of an ideal? In the end, *Die Fälscher* offers no final judgment, but rather invites its viewers to reflect upon their own answers to these enduring questions.

About the Director, Stefan Ruzowitzky

The Austrian screenwriter and director Stefan Ruzowitzky debuted his first feature film, *Tempo*, in 1996. Since then, he has directed six films in a variety of languages and genres. Ruzowitzky is the recipient of top honors at several international film festivals, the *Max Ophüls Preis*, and an Academy Award for Best Foreign Film (for *Die Fälscher*). He adapted the script for *Die Fälscher* from the memoirs of Adolf Burger, a Jewish Slovak typeographer who was involved in Operation Bernhard at Sachsenhausen. Ruzowitzky worked closely with Burger throughout the production of the film to ensure the accuracy of its dramatization of historical events.