

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Die Flucht

Director: Kai Wessel
Producer: Katrin Goetter
Screenplay: Gabriela Sperl
Cinematography: Holly Fink
Spieldauer: 183 minutes
Released: 2007
Cast: Maria Furtwängler (Lena Gräfin von Mahlenberg); Jean-Yves Berteloot (Francois Beauvais); Tonio Arango (Heinrich Graf von Gernstorff); Gabriela Maria Schmeide (Babette); Jürgen Hentsch (Berhold Graf von Mahlenberg); Hanns Zischler (Rüdiger Graf von Gernstorff); Angela Winkler (Sophie Gräfin von Gernstorff); Max von Thun (Ferdinand Graf von Gernstorff); Josef Mattes (Fritz); Stella Kunkat Vicky); Michael Ginsburg (Mikolai)

The *Treckwagon*, moving slowly across the winter landscape, is the heart rending symbolic *Schwerpunkt* of *Die Flucht*. The *Treckwagon*, crammed with *das Notwendigste* along with the ill, the young and the old, with the able bodied plodding doggedly alongside, vivifies the plight of the inhabitants of East Prussia in the winter of 1944 to 1945. Along with those shattered by bombs or tilted agonizingly in ditches or sliding beneath the ice of *die Haff*, the intact *Treckwagons* pervade *Die Flucht*, testifying to a people in extremis in this fictionalized rendition of the flight of the civilian population of East Prussia to the west via the Baltic coast during the bitter cold, final winter of the war.

Makeshift mobile homes for the desperate and the despairing, these covered farm wagons were the principal means by which the civilian population of the eastern provinces fled the approach of the avenging Red Army. An almost primitive technology, to be sure, but in the circumstances, the most effective that could be mustered. The refugees were literally placing what remained of their lives within those wagons and then walking for their lives beside those wagons.

Die Flucht is a visually arresting film, with many beautiful shots which intimate the essence of that vanished world of Junkers and their vast estates, of wide and lonely spaces, of rigid social hierarchy and duty and tradition stretching back for centuries. That entire culture, its beginnings traceable to the *Drang nach Osten* of the Middle Ages, taking root over hundreds of years, was effectively eviscerated within the space of a few months, and then permanently eradicated via the expulsion policy adopted and pursued by the occupying powers from 1945 to 1948.

There is much that is perfunctory in this film – it is replete with the characters one finds in so many of the films about the Third Reich: the adolescent true believer (Fritz), the disillusioned, guilt ridden soldier (Ferdinand), the rigid Prussian patriarch (Graf von Mahlenburg), the

sensitive, brooding, morally unimpeachable prisoner of war (Francois), the loveable and innocent child whom all the adults unite in loving (Vicki), and the commonsensical *Oma* who is fed up with this idiotic man-world of fanatical ideology and senseless war.

Yet stereotypes, brimming with truth, are necessary ingredients in story telling, and these stock characters do not impeach the integrity of the story that is told. Francois in particular serves to foreground the corrosive moral ambiguity which pervaded that time. The dynamics of power were shifting daily, and the wrong choice in terms of alignment or allegiance could lead to a deadly denouement on any given day. Prisoners such as Francois were as vulnerable in relation to the Russians as they were to the Germans.

Preeminently, in the character of Lena Gräfin von Mahlenberg, this film bears witness to *die Stunde der Frauen*. In the midst of this fearful crisis, bearing the brunt of the pain and sacrifice and the struggling and dying, were the women. Sojourners in a hell not of their own making, an inferno thrust upon them by the foolishness of men, these women were compelled to delve deep within themselves to retrieve the psychological, spiritual and physical resources necessary to endure and ultimately prevail.

What is most remarkable about the events that came to be known as *die Flucht* is that there is so little awareness among the general public of what transpired at that time and in that place. Of course there are few witnesses remaining who actually remember those terrible months. But the diminishing ranks of living witnesses is not the primary reason there is so little awareness of *die Flucht* as a historical topic. When it comes to the essential raw material of history, memory, it must be born in mind that someone is always doing the remembering, and that that someone is always doing the remembering about something.

Memory has been referred to as "... the matrix of history..." and in any generation, there is a myriad of very

human dynamics in play that mediate and mitigate which memories successfully make the transition to the status of an approved history that is regularly promulgated, a history whose explanatory effect is deemed appropriate. When that history involves war, what is appropriate may be defined as that which is compatible with the overarching narrative set forth by the victors.

In this instance, that meta-narrative emphasizes the just cause of the Allies in stopping the Nazi war machine. The cause was indeed just, but what the approved narrative does not emphasize and often does not even mention are the instances where the Allies seemingly invoked the dictum of Cicero that "... laws are silent in time of war" and where their actions inclined toward the merciless ethos of the Nazis.

Historians, with a few exceptions, have been essentially mute about what transpired at the end of World War II, and during the subsequent brutal occupation of Germany from 1945 to 1948, and the expulsion of upwards of 16 million Germans from Eastern Europe in that same period. From the German perspective, perhaps this has been a case of self-censorship. A society pushed to the limits by war and collapse and guilt may sometimes feel compelled to forget the unforgettable.

In the case of what was done to others, especially the Jews and Poles and Russians, those tragedies have quite justly not been permitted to be forgotten. There are probably all too many people, and not Germans alone, who would prefer to do so. In considering what might be termed the final, radical *Drang nach Osten* (the Barbarossa campaign of 1941) some would say that in history as in physics, for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction, and so, what happened in the eastern provinces in 1945 was inevitable, and, in some sense, even equitable.

In the case of what was done to many innocent Germans, that censorship, whether self imposed or imposed from above by the victors, was for a long time, in many ways, an unspoken *quid pro quo post bellum*. Thus the

transition from the raw material of memory to the finished product of history was never actually accomplished. Since it would seem difficult if not impossible to develop a precise calculus of suffering, and there is no patent on *Leidensgeschichte*, it serves no purpose to over-remember some aspects of history at the cost of under-remembering others. History too often degenerates into a monologue when it should always be a conversation. Like Cromwell's portrait, the only meaningful history is a complete history, warts and all.