

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Einer kam durch

Director:	Roy Ward Baker
Script:	Howard Clews (based on the book by Kendal Burt and James Leasor)
Producer:	Julian Wintle
Production Year:	1957
Studio:	Pinewood Studios, UK
Cast:	Hardy Krüger – Franz von Werra Colin Gordon – Army Interrogator Michael Goodliffe – RAF Interrogator Jack Gwillim – Commandant, Grizedale Harry Lockhart – German Prisoner George Mikell – German Prisoner

Baker's Blond – Allen Krumm

Hardy Krüger's career is remarkable for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that it began under a producer named Goebbels, who was staging what he hoped would be a long running series, called the "Thousand Year Reich." Although that epic folded in its twelfth year, Krüger persevered in his craft and by 1952 was appearing in films such as the critically acclaimed *Illusion in Moll* with Sybille Schmitz.

Krüger was one of the few post war German actors who was able to enjoy an international career, he himself being "one that got away", escaping to a large degree the burden of obligatory stereotyping. Along with British and French films (Krüger was trilingual) he achieved considerable success in Hollywood productions. American movie goers will recognize him from major roles in such well known films as *Hatari* with John Wayne, *The Flight Of The Phoenix* with Jimmy Stewart, and *The Wild Geese* with Richard Burton, as well as supporting roles in *A Bridge Too Far* and *War and Remembrance* and more obscure offerings such as *Slagskämpen* (Inside Man) with Dennis Hopper.

Einer kam durch was Krüger's first British film, and the one that is considered his break out movie. Roy Baker had been under pressure to use Dirk Bogarde in the role, but his instinct was to find an unknown, younger German actor. He found Krüger in Hamburg and persuaded Pinewood Studios that the young German was right for the role. His instinct was right. After the success of *The One That Got Away* (1957), Krüger appeared in two more British films (*Bachelor of Hearts* (1958) and *Blind Date* (1959)), and his international career was effectively launched.

Einer Kam durch tells the remarkable but true story of Luftwaffe Lt. Franz von Werra, the only German pilot to escape from British captivity and make it back home to Germany. The movie is based on the book *The One That Got Away* by Kendal Burt and James Leasor, published in 1956.

Franz von Werra's Messerschmidt was shot down in England in 1940. After transfer to a prisoner of war camp (which the British director seems intent on portraying as a rather large yet comfy bed and breakfast affair), von Werra is twice foiled in escape attempts. Because of these attempts, he is transferred to Canada, destined to sit out the war in a remote camp on the north shore of Lake Superior in Ontario.

En route, he leaps from the train and after a harrowing crossing of the St. Lawrence River, turns himself in to the American authorities. The movie ends here. In real life, von Werra, with the help of the German vice consul, managed to slip out of the US and travel home to Germany via Mexico, Rio de Janeiro, Barcelona and Rome. He made it back in April of 1941. Sadly, after returning to duty in the Luftwaffe, he disappeared while on a mission in October of 1941.

Einer Kam durch is a period piece, yet perhaps this is a singular virtue, since the movie reveals as much about the zeitgeist of the fifties, and the psychology of British producers and directors as it does about von Werra's adventures. The objective was to make a movie, scarcely a decade removed from the war, which would sell in both England and Germany. Hence the director was compelled to walk a fine line, striving mightily to make the film palatable to both British and German audiences.

Inevitably, perhaps because of this, the German prisoners seem a bit too British, with their clubbable camaraderie and stiff upper *schnurrbart* optimism. There are two versions of the film, English and German, and in the latter version one is continually thrown off by the actors who portray Brits chattering away in crisp German. Moreover, the British style of military marching engenders sympathy for the aesthetic qualities of goose stepping. Krüger, in his cool leather flyers jacket, often seems a composite of James Dean and Marlon Brando, glued together with a generous dollop of Teutonic Hardy Boys affability. The net effect yields a rebel without his Messerschmidt.

A few attempts are made to remind us of the context, namely that a war is on: in the opening credits we see Krüger's name replete with a rather huge *Umlaut*, and there is a close shot of the swastika on his plane after he crash lands. But Herr Baker seems to have given up early on and wisely surrendered to Krüger's photogenic charisma. Like Hitchcock, for whom he had worked as an assistant before the war, Baker knew how to capitalize on a blond star.

Although it would be a number of years before they were paired up, Krüger shared a quality, noted by many, with John Wayne: both men

possessed a kinetic grace, an elegant way of moving and carrying themselves on camera. It was this quality as much as his winning smile or the way he delivered his lines that enabled Krüger to elicit the sympathy of viewers.

Solicitous of his audience, Roy Baker consistently portrays Krüger and the other prisoners in a positive, even affectionate light. They are not the Other; they are just like us, regular guys, who happen to have a predilection for upbeat marching songs. They are veritable precursors of MacGyver as they constantly match wits with the Brits, seeking ways and means to escape.

Given the era, it actually was quite daring of Baker to invite viewers to feel this way about German prisoners. Years later, he noted: "I have never been the sort of director who deliberately makes films with messages, but I came close to it with *The One That Got Away*." And what was his message? Baker rejected the crude and often vicious caricatures of Germans as cruel Prussians or beery Bavarians which were so typical of most war movies of that time. Both Baker and Krüger later commented on the hostile reception of the film in some quarters. Baker noted it among critics and some colleagues, and Krüger experienced it when he was doing promotional work for the film in England.

Historically speaking, the film is considered reasonably accurate. Scenes such as where von Werra almost succeeds in absconding with a British fighter plane apparently actually happened. In the end, *Einer Kam durch* succeeded. An adventure story pure and simple, with the unusual twist of a German protagonist, it played well in England and was a hit in Germany.