

ment that the cooperation of Jewish leaders with the Nazis was a moral catastrophe. She wrote: "To a Jew this role of the Jewish leaders in the destruction of their own people is undoubtedly the darkest chapter of the whole dark story." Arendt does not blame the victims for the Holocaust, but she does force herself and others to confront the way in which the Jewish leaders sacrificed what she understood to be the first principle of morality – the imperative that it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong.

Many of Arendt's Jewish friends and critics accused her of having no love for the Jewish people. Kurt Blumenfeld's friendship with Arendt lasted nearly 40 years. He served as Arendt's host, guide and intellectual aide when she came to Jerusalem to cover the Eichmann trial. Her report, however, outraged him beyond reconciliation. Blumenfeld did not forgive her even when she made an emergency visit to Jerusalem to see him on his deathbed.

Today, Arendt's thoughts about the "banality of evil" have become an essential component of any discussion that seeks to judge the crimes of the Nazis and they are accepted and indispensable insights about the modern predisposition to any form of totalitarianism.

The Film

The film concentrates on the four turbulent years when the lives of Arendt and Eichmann crossed. Portraying Arendt almost exclusively during this period made it possible not only to investigate her groundbreaking work, but also to reveal her character and personality. There are a few flashbacks that take us back to the 1920s and then the 1950s, showing the youthful Hannah's passionate love affair with Heidegger, as well as their reunion years after the war ended. She never managed to let go of her connection to Heidegger despite the fact that he joined the National Socialist Party in 1933. These flashbacks are important to understanding Arendt's past, but the film is primarily concerned with the life and relationships in New York: with her husband Heinrich Blücher and with her German and American friends, especially the author Mary McCarthy and with her oldest friend, the German-Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas.

We see her as a passionate thinker and professor and as a woman capable of lifelong friendship. But she was also a fighter who courageously defended her ideas and never shied away from any confrontation. "I want to understand" is the phrase that maybe best describes her.

Critical Reception

Ruth Cyzsner, a friend from Philadelphia, found Arendt's ideas "repellent". She explains: "Her banality of evil interpretation has been disproved by first hand accounts of Eichmann's enthusiasm for going way beyond his orders. As one witness recently said, 'Believe me, there was nothing banal about Eichmann'." Cyzsner continues:

"Viewing the movie, I was again struck as I had been when I read Arendt's report in the New Yorker all those years ago, by her dispassionate, and faulty reporting. Was it due to naïveté that she saw Eichmann as a mere bureaucrat just taking orders? I think not. Research on her part would have shown that he went way beyond those orders, sending thousands of Jews to their death. But her mind was made up, and digging deeper, also bringing recognition of the complex motives for "collaboration," would have deterred her from her rigid, intellectualized interpretation. Perhaps, then, some empathy might have crept in, bringing with it some discomforting understanding. Living her intellectual life in New York, she had a circle of Jewish friends, but it was a rarified existence, far from the turmoil Jews in Europe had undergone. If she had experienced some of that, would her perspective have been different? Finally, how much of an influence did Heidegger's views have on her?"

THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Friday Film Fest Series



Hannah Arendt

By Margarethe von Trotta

May 9th, 2014

• 6:30 PM •

Film, Food & Discussion

Non-Members \$15, Members \$12

The German Society of PA

611 Spring Garden St.

215-627-2332

Support provided in part by the
Philadelphia Cultural Fund.



Hannah Arendt (2012)

Credits:

Director: Margarethe von Trotta
Screenplay: Pamela Katz
Margarethe von Trotta
Production: Bettina Brokemper
Johannes Rexin
Camera: Caroline Champetier
Music: Andre Mergenthaler

Length: 109 Minutes

Cast: Hannah Arendt -Barbara Sukowa
Heinrich Blücher -Axel Milberg
Mary McCarthy -Janet McTeer
Lotta Köhler -Julia Jentsch
Hans Jonas -Ulrich Noethen
Kurt Blumenfeld -Michael Degen
William Shawn -Nicholas Woodeson
Lore Jones -Sascha Ley
Charlotte Beradt -Victoria Trauttmansdorff
Martin Heidegger -Klaus Pohl
Frances Wells -Megan Gay
Siegfried Moses -Germain Wagner



Hannah Arendt
(1906-1975)

Barbara Sukowa
(b. 1950)

The Director - Margarethe von Trotta

Born 1942 in Berlin, Margarethe von Trotta is one of the leaders of the New German Cinema movement, as well as one of the world's most prominent feminist filmmakers. In the early 1960s she pursued acting, working closely with both Rainer Werner Fassbinder and former husband Volker Schlöndorff. With Schlöndorff she co-directed *"The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum"* (1975) before going solo with *"The Second Awakening of Christa Klages"* (1978). She has since directed many acclaimed films – often starring Barbara Sukowa – including *"Sisters, or the Balance of Happiness"* (1979), *"Marianne and Juliana"* (1981), *"Rosa Luxemburg"* (1986), *"The Promise"* (1995) and *"Visions: From the Life of Hildegard von Bingen"* (2010). Von Trotta is also a Professor of Film at the European Graduate School in Saas-Fee, Switzerland.

Hannah Arendt (1906 – 1975)

Arendt was born in Hannover in 1906. Her father died when she was seven, her mother, Martha Cohn Arendt, raised her. She studied philosophy at the University of Marburg with Martin Heidegger, with whom she also had a youthful affair; she later completed her doctoral dissertation "Love and Saint Augustine" at the University of Heidelberg under the supervision of Karl Jaspers.

In 1929, she published her dissertation and married Günter Stern, who wrote under the name of Günther Anders. They divorced in 1937. In 1933, Arendt was working for the German Federation of Zionists, led by Kurt Blumenfeld, when she arrested. She managed to flee to Paris where she worked for the Youth Aliyah organization, which rescued Jewish youth. There she met her second husband, Heinrich Blücher. Arendt was imprisoned in a detention camp in Gurs in southwest France. After escaping, she and Blücher fled Nazi Europe, coming to New York in 1941. Through the 1940s, Arendt wrote essays on anti-Semitism, refugees, and the need for a Jewish army for *Aufbau* and other German émigré journals.

In 1951, she published her major work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, her insightful study of the intellectual and historic foundations of the Nazi and Stalinist regimes. Her other major books were *The Human Condition* (1958) and *On Revolution* (1963). Fiercely independent, Arendt never accepted a tenure-track teaching position. She was nevertheless the first woman to be named a full professor at Princeton and also taught at the University of Chicago, the university of California Berkeley, Wesleyan University, and the New School for Social Research.

Arendt died in 1975 in New York and is buried alongside Blücher in the Bard College Cemetery, where Blücher had taught for 17 years.

Adolf Eichmann (1906 – 1962)

Adolf Eichmann joined the Nazi-Party in 1932 at age 26 and rose quickly through the ranks of its paramilitary arm, the SS. Eichmann was eventually assigned to the SS "Central Office for Jewish Emigration" division, where he was first a sergeant and then a captain in charge of the deportation of Jews. In 1941, he was promoted to lieutenant colonel and appointed head of Section IVB4 of the SS, responsible for the forced expulsion of Jews from the German Reich. In 1942, he played an integral role in the notorious Wannsee Conference, in which Hitler's pursuit of genocide and the Final Solution (Endlösung) was formally organized. Eichmann was made transportation administrator, tasked with determining transit logistics ("Schreibtschtäter") for the Holocaust – a position he held until the war's end. After escaping Allied custody, Eichmann fled on the "Rattenlinie" through Italy to Argentina, where he lived and worked until his capture by Israeli Mossad agents in 1960. Eichmann was executed by hanging on May 31, 1962. To avoid burying his remains on Israeli soil, he was cremated and his ashes were scattered in the Mediterranean.

The Banality of Evil – The Essay and the Controversy

(some of this material was reprinted with the permission of the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities at Bard College, New York)

In 1961, Hannah Arendt jumped at the chance to cover the trial of Adolf Eichmann. It would be her last opportunity, she wrote, to see a Nazi official in the flesh. Her essay on the trial appeared in *The New Yorker* and became the book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Widely misread. Arendt's writings on the subject unleashed a storm of controversy.

She was struck both by the immensity of Eichmann's crimes and the ordinariness of the man. Arendt saw that Eichmann became a mass murderer not simply from hatred but from his fervent dedication to the Nazi movement. He was a joiner. In his own words, Eichmann feared "to live a leaderless and difficult individual life" in which "I would receive no directives from anybody". A bourgeois salesman down on his luck, Eichmann found in the Nazi movement a sense of importance and belonging. The desire to prove himself meaningful, combined with his use of clichés and bureaucratic role morality, rendered him unable to think clearly and critically about what he was doing. This is what Arendt means by her famous and famously misunderstood dictum of the "fearsome, word-and-thought-defying **banality of evil**".

Arendt neither defends Eichmann nor denies he is evil. She recognizes that he was an anti-Semite. But she also sees that his overriding motivations were neither monstrous nor sadistic. Eichmann participated in the Nazi atrocities because of his inability to think critically about his fidelity to a Nazi ideology that he clung to as a source of significance in a lonely and alienating world. Such thoughtless ideological zealotry, Arendt concludes, is the face of evil in the modern world.

The other part of Arendt's report on the Eichmann trial that provoked ire is her argu-