

Culture Report

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Failing to face the past

‘Labyrinth of Lies’ reveals how Germans did all they could to conceal the Nazi atrocities after World War II **By Bernard Dichek**

FINALLY, there’s a German film that criticizes the failure of ordinary Germans to face up to the Nazi past. Unlike many recent German movies that blur the picture of what Germans did and didn’t know, “Labyrinth of Lies,” set in 1950s Germany, reveals how Germans did all they could to conceal the Nazi atrocities and let the perpetrators go unpunished.

The film is based on the true story of Fritz Bauer, an outlier prosecutor who

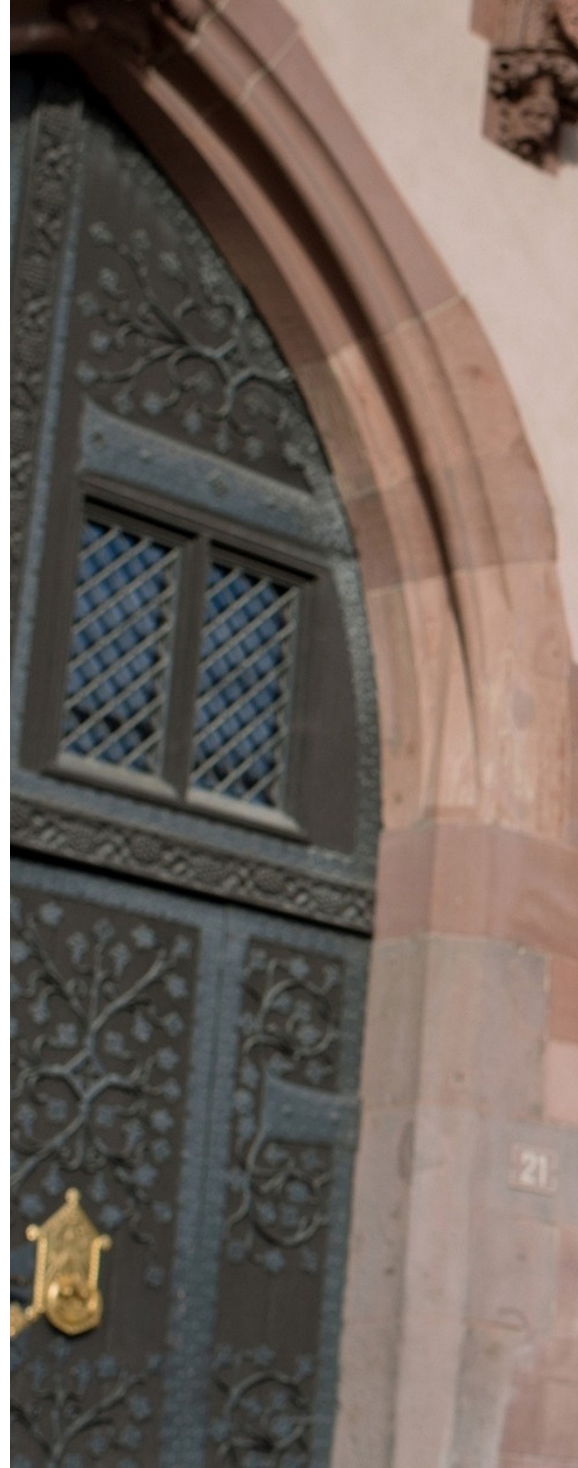
overcame the opposition of his countrymen and almost single-handedly pursued German war criminals, leading to what eventually became known as the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials of the 1960s.

As there have been so many movies and books about the Holocaust, most viewers will be surprised to learn that for decades after World War II the subject was largely ignored both in Germany and around the world, which is why, in one telling scene

early on in the film, when the eponymous death camp Auschwitz’s name is mentioned, it is greeted with blank expressions.

The silence was still prevalent in 1970 when filmmaker Giulio Ricciarelli, who was then five years old, moved with his mixed Italian-German family from Italy to Munich.

“There was a lot of not talking about it in German homes when I was growing





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up,” Ricciarelli tells *The Jerusalem Report* with a touch of irony. “When I would ask my mother what my German grandfather had done during the war, she would simply say that he wasn’t in the [Nazi] Party. It just wasn’t something that families talked about around the dinner table.”

Ricciarelli got the idea for making “Labyrinth of Lies” from co-scriptwriter Elizabeth Bartel, who came across a newspaper article about prosecutor Bauer. He was surprised to hear about the opposition

Bauer ran into from his countrymen. “I had the wrong idea that somehow Germany began to confront the activities of the Nazis immediately after the war. But what I found out was that it did everything in its power to sweep it under the rug.”

Ricciarelli explains that he and Bartel worked very closely with historians to get the details of the period and Bauer’s investigation right, but that they “took one great liberty” in creating a fictional character – a public prosecutor named Johann

When Frankfurt prosecuting attorney Johann Radmann, played by Alexander Fehling in ‘Labyrinth of Lies,’ obtains smuggled documents incriminating numerous Germans as former Auschwitz tormentors, he becomes determined to bring them to justice

Radmann – as the protagonist working under Bauer’s authority, who fights to bring the German perpetrators to trial.

Film

Director Giulio Ricciarelli: 'Germany did everything in its power to sweep the activities of the Nazis under the rug'

"We needed a character who could take us on an emotional journey," notes Ricciarelli, referring to the heroic arc the Radmann character follows after a journalist tells him an Auschwitz survivor has spotted a former Nazi tormentor working as a school teacher.

As the young lawyer learns for the first time about what went on in Auschwitz, he becomes more and more passionate about bringing the war criminals to justice. He is repeatedly frustrated by the obstacles placed in his way by German officials, one of whom remarks in a widely shared view, "Do you want every young man in this country to wonder whether his father was a murderer?"

Bauer didn't need to be enlightened about the Nazis. After being part of the German resistance movement, he was incarcerated in a concentration camp in the 1930s and afterwards fled into exile in Denmark and Scandinavia.

"When he came back to Germany after the war, he was a sad, lonely figure," observes Ricciarelli. "But he would not give up on having the [Nazi] trial as a teaching experience for the German people."

RICCIARELLI NOTED THAT MANY GERMANS STILL HAVE TROUBLE WRESTLING WITH THEIR PAST

Ricciarelli acknowledges that the number of Nazis brought to justice was remarkably disappointing. Of the 8,000 Germans involved in the murder of Jews at Auschwitz, only 22 were caught and put on trial. Most received only light sentences.

"As a criminal trial it was pitiful, but as a historical trial it was life-chang-



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ing," says Ricciarelli, who believes that Bauer did achieve his goal of raising public awareness about "the Auschwitz killing machine where everyone [who worked there] was guilty."

He notes that at the time West Germany's statute of limitations enabled only the prosecution of Nazis who could be charged with murder. "But Bauer made sure that among the defendants the entire Auschwitz hierarchy was represented, from a senior commander to a lowly guard," observes Ricciarelli.

"Labyrinth of Lies" is Ricciarelli's debut as a feature-film director. In preparation, he planned out the composition of every shot on a storyboard, a laborious procedure for a two-hour long film. The result, however, is an absorbing work full of striking and often surprising images. Despite the seriousness of the subject, he is able to lighten the drama with flashes of humor.

In one memorable sequence, Auschwitz victims are called upon to give

their testimonies at the prosecutor's office. We only see a montage of their faces and hands gesturing, interspersed with the reactions of the prosecutor's staff, accompanied by elegiac choir music. Not a single word is heard.

THE FILM IS BASED ON THE TRUE STORY OF FRITZ BAUER, WHO OVERCAME THE OPPOSITION OF HIS COUNTRYMEN AND PURSUED GERMAN WAR CRIMINALS

"When people are quiet, the stories they tell are the most emotional," explains Ricciarelli. "I felt it would be stronger



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to do it this way than through something like flashbacks. Also, I believe that there are aspects of Auschwitz that I didn't think I could ask any actor to do."

Because "Labyrinth of Lies" tells a universal story about how one individual can fight against the system and bring about change, it is not surprising that the film has been well received by audiences outside Germany.

The German-language film will be shown in Israeli theaters with Hebrew and English subtitles from May 21.

It's also not surprising, perhaps, that the film was readily funded by public German film foundations and that the city of Frankfurt, where most of the action takes place, provided the filmmaker with ready access to public institutions. After all, it does show the beginning of Germany's acknowledgment of its wrongdoings.

The film is, however, flawed in one major way. The real Bauer was actu-

ally Jewish, though he himself hid that fact, apparently in order to work unobtrusively in the German justice system. The movie makes no mention of this, nor did Ricciarelli in his interview with *The Report*.

Arguably, because Bauer presented himself to the German public as a non-Jew, a case can be made for telling the story of the dissident prosecutor as he would have been seen through the eyes of the German people at the time.

Still, this type of omission echoes a pattern of deception that colors many German films that deal with the Nazi era. It can be seen in as innocuous a film as "Back on Track" ("Sein letztes Rennen"), a 2013 film about a nursing home, in which German old-timers reminisce about their suffering in the early years after the war, yet fails to mention that they themselves may have had something to do with getting themselves into the economic woes that World War II

Attorney Radmann's life is about to change: Seen here confronting a traffic violator called Marlene (Friederike Becht), he will soon be locking horns with Nazi war criminals and be in love with Marlene

created for Germans.

It can also be seen in the controversial "Generation War" ("Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter"), a 2013 wartime drama about young German soldiers that has been criticized for portraying the Nazis as being completely separate and different from ordinary Germans.

Ricciarelli himself noted that many Germans still have trouble wrestling with their past. "After one of the screenings [of "Labyrinth of Lies"] in Germany, someone came up to me and told me that he had in his home a box that his grandfather left when he died. To this day, no one in his family has been willing to open the box." ■