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A New Generation Of Filmmakers With A Mission That Reveals A Germany Unfamiliar To Many

*The new Germany, 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, is a nation grappling with what could be described as a sociological identity crisis in terms of the sociological impact some 75 years after Hitler's regime. In a candid interview reflecting her affection for Germany and her passion as a director - producer, and author, Ilona Ziok talked with The Business of Film about why her three films and subsequent projects revolve around the interesting perspectives of the consequences of any one individual's actions and impact on society, and particularly the subjects of her three films *The Sounds of Silents* (about Willy Sommerfeld, the last original silent movie pianist), Kurt Geron's *Karussell*, and *The Count and The Comrade*. Born in Poland, Ilona Ziok lived there for a short but impressionable time. She attended primary school in England and graduated from high school in Germany where she studied Political Science (International Relations), Slavic Literature and Art at Frankfurt University, named in 1932 after Johann Wolfgang Goethe. Ziok went on to study theatre and film making in New York and Moscow. It was after her time spent in Paris that she rediscovered her "Polish" roots and for a while worked creatively in the Polish film industry. Currently Ilona Ziok lives in Berlin with renowned musician and composer Manuel Göttsching. Together they produce films, create music, and initiate cultural events.*

THE BUSINESS OF FILM: The Business of Film has screened with interest your three feature films, and the common thread is the exposure of a side of Germany many of us are unfamiliar with. Can you tell us why, as a filmmaker from Poland, you have taken on these German topics and taken upon yourself the task of recording such subject matters for posterity?

ILONA ZIOK: In terms of filmmaking, I am influenced by the schools I attended in Moscow and in New York, and by what I later learned in Poland. But over the years, I have developed an individualistic style through which I attempt draw the viewer into the heart of the story. I use the structure of classic drama for documentaries that are based on archival film footage, interviews and - very important - music. There are no re-enactments, no narrators, and no comments. Through this method, I try to captivate the audience's spirit and heart. I am very interested in personal stories, but it is never the biography itself which captures my imagination, but what the hero represents to humanity. The biography is primarily the vehicle, which shines a penetrating light onto a particular historical period or topic. The context and the reasons why I choose certain subject matter, with regard to the topics of my films, stems from my background.

I was born in the South of Poland, in a province called Upper Silesia, which is close to the border of today's Czech Republic and Germany. The particular language spoken still today is derived from both German and Slavic elements and can only be understood by those who either know it or at least have a passive knowledge of German, Polish and Czech. Upper Silesia is a country of beautiful landscapes dotted with castles, and a rich tradition of music and legends. Today, its largest city is Katowice - known for its famous film school, but even more so for its philharmonic orchestra, made world famous by composer



Ilona Ziok

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Henryk Mikołaj Górecki. The film composer Wojciech Kilar who wrote the music to Andrzej Wajda's, Roman Polanski's, Francis Ford Coppola's and Jane Campion's films among others, also lives in Katowice.

The area is rich with history. From Katowice it is 80 km Southeast to the ancient city of Krakow, a city of the residences of Polish kings (which is not part of Silesia) and famous for its jazz and its medieval Jewish quarter Kazimierz. Katowice is also approximately 30 km south to Oswiecim, which during the Nazi regime became synonymous with the Nazi death camp Auschwitz. In past centuries due to its well-developed mining and steel industry, rich agriculture and abundant mineral deposits of coal, Upper Silesia was a rich enclave. It became the object of numerous disputes between Austria, Germany, Czech and Poland, and was ruled in turn by these countries. Depending on the specific period and depending on who ruled Silesia, it was not unusual that one's grandfather was an educated Pole and one's grandmother was an educated German while the common language was Silesian - a language which the inhabitants have kept alive in order to maintain their cultural identity.

My mother was born in Silesia, and her father's ancestors were from Sergey Eisenstein's Odessa on the Black Sea, and my father was born in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany. He was opposed to the Hitler regime and fled to Poland, where he was later arrested by the Nazis, but later escaped with the help of Poles. During the Nazi regime, he lost all trust in Germany and decided never to return. Consequently, he settled in Poland, where he met and married my mother in the late 50's. In 1968, the political situation in Communist Poland was not comfortable for my mother whose background was not that of a worker, but one of the richest landowners in Upper Silesia. The situation became worse and she decided to leave Poland to secure a future for her children. During the Communist regime and according to regulations, only the children of workers had guaranteed access to universities, and the government had also gradually expropriated everything my mother's family had once owned. At that time, my parents had divorced, and my mother and we children were able to immigrate to Germany due to my father's German nationality. Distrustful of postwar Germany, my father stayed behind in Poland. He was convinced that even in the late sixties, many "former" Nazis held important positions. While I have been working on the documentary about the highly acclaimed German state attorney Fritz Bauer (working title: *Fritz Bauer: Death by Installments*), I learned that my father was right in this assumption. In a trial known as "the Remer trial" in Brunswick Lower Saxony, in 1952 Fritz Bauer rehabilitated people who had been part of the Resistance to the Hitler regime - people like Count Stauffenberg, the "count" in my film *The Count and The Comrade*, and my father. In addition, Fritz Bauer also initiated the now famous Auschwitz trials from 1963-1968, which took place in Frankfurt/Main.

Continued on page 22

Continued from page 21

It's from this very diverse and chequered political and historical background that I find subjects and subject matter that deeply interest me, and that I make into films. This includes my interest in film history, music, and art.

TBOF: In *The Count* and *The Comrade*, do you see similarities between the way society as a whole was in war-torn Germany, and the present day social struggles of the ordinary people?

IZ: The story of *The Count* and *The Comrade* starts during the world economic crisis in the late twenties. Eighty years later, there is another economic world crisis. This may make the film particularly relevant – despite the fact that people in the West are not suffering the way they did in the twenties because contrary to the twenties, the West has a better safety net. Still the fear of a further slide downward is very real. One might even consider this a reflection of society then and now. It shows what can happen, when people blindly believe in “solutions” without considering whether these solutions are ethical or unethical. Eighty years ago, it was Adolf Hitler's ideology which promised to save Germans from hunger and unemployment but which instead lead to the destruction of dozens of countries, the extermination of millions, and the devastation of Germany itself. The majority of the German population had believed in Hitler's ideology.

When I watch certain historical programs on German TV, or feature films about the bombing of German cities, I can't help but note the concept in which Germans are portrayed as the victims. This notion was also present at the end of WWII when Germans found themselves among the ruins and rubble of the almost total destruction of Germany. What was missing from the beginning was the insight that Germany's destruction was a direct consequence of its invasion of dozens of countries without any provocation and the murder of millions of civilians in those invaded countries. In addition, there was the genocide of six million men, women and children.

TBOF: In any of your films is the moral imperative your sense of justice either for the German people or against the lack of examination within a society from both inside and out that drives your depiction of the subjects you cover?

IZ: I consider education with strong emphasis on moral values as important as a good academic education in general. I switched schools several times, but I graduated from a German high school in Frankfurt/Main, named after Heinrich Friedrich Karl vom und zum Stein, the famous German reformer who, together with Karl August Fürst von Hardenberg – one of the ancestors of the “count” in my above mentioned film, initiated the so called ‘Prussian reforms’ in 1807. These reforms included the liberation of farmers from serfdom and most importantly for Germany, the

emancipation of people of Jewish origin. Hardenberg and vom Stein even aspired to establish a monarchy with civil rights, liberties and democratic developments. Theodor W. Adorno, a very influential German philosopher, writer and composer, also attended this school, as did a famous German prostitute known as “Red Cora”, who achieved the legalization of her profession in Germany, with healthcare and the right for a pension. This was revolutionary, even

*the story of two men who
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resistance to a common enemy
in their case the Hitler regime*

in the late twentieth century! Maybe it was the tradition of this school, or perhaps it was my education in general which taught me to listen to my heart and to know the difference between ethical and unethical behavior.

TBOF: In your film *The Sounds of Silents* about Willy Sommerfeld, although somewhat different it has the same or similar thread that drives why you pick the subjects that you film.

IZ: In *The Sounds of Silents* about Willy Sommerfeld, the last original silent movie pianist from the twenties, I wanted to resurrect a bygone era and show how this man's life was shaped by history, which was truly revolutionary in scope and events. Willy's knowledge of and love for music withstood every historical upheaval and kept him alive way beyond the usual life span. He never “sold out” and didn't allow himself to become downtrodden and bitter despite difficult and destructive circumstances. There is a light in his eyes and a passion for the particular music he plays, which transcends time and music based on fashionable trends. In his apparent simplicity, he is an extraordinarily inspiring person and therefore captured my imagination.

To keep his very unique art of accompanying silent films alive, through improvising and using his musical memory dating back to the 19th century, I looked for a venue in which Willy's music is the main “hero”. I told his story through excerpts of silent movies which Willy Sommerfeld accompanied live for my film.

TBOF: Why do you think that society outside of Germany is unfamiliar with the side of Germany that you expose for the reasons you have chosen, particularly in *The Count* and *The Comrade*?

IZ: I don't think that people outside of Germany are less familiar with the side of Germany which I expose than Germans are themselves. After the

Hitler regime and after the war was lost by Nazi Germany, the country was divided into East Germany (belonging to the Warsaw Pact) and into West Germany (belonging to the Western Alliance). The Cold War was actually a war between the USA and the Soviet Union, but the real Iron Curtain ran literally through the heart of Europe - Germany's capital: Berlin.

For forty years people in the East did not know much about people in the West, and vice versa. Strangely enough, twenty years after the unification, this is still the case. In this regard, I consider my film *The Count* and *The Comrade* of value to the present, because it tells the story of two men who are separated by wealth and class, but who are united in their resistance to a common enemy, in their case the Hitler regime. Tracing the lives of Count Hardenberg and Comrade Perlitz from their involvement in the resistance through the changing tides of Germany's post-war division, unification and political events to the present, the film reflects German history without seeking to pass judgement on the different political systems in the East and the West and the respective social order in each.

But political memory knows only one victor—at least until the next revolution. We the artists on the other hand have the obligation to preserve the memory for posterity.

TBOF: Why in your view is Germany itself still uncomfortable with its past, putting aside the Holocaust?

IZ: Germany of course is uncomfortable with its past which during the Hitler regime turned from “the country of poets and thinkers” into a country of judges (not necessarily promoting justice!) and executioners (“das Land der Dichter und Denker wurde Land der Richter und Henker”). But this does not mean that the Holocaust is put aside. At issue is the way the Holocaust is being dealt with. There are quite a few films about this subject, but none of them touch me or I felt dealt with the deeper issues – especially the documentaries. That's why I decided to make the documentary on Kurt Geron's *Karussel* (1999), which makes people feel, and the story itself goes under their skin and stays there. I made this film by using music and poetry instead of showing mountains of dead bodies or by telling how many millions were murdered. Too many dead bodies repel viewers and research shows statistics don't affect them.

The film *Karussel* is a portrayal of Kurt Geron, one of the most famous German entertainers of the 30s, told within the structure of a cabaret performance. It was to be Geron's last cabaret, which was performed in the concentration camp Theresienstadt. In 1998 I re-enacted *Karussel* on stage in Berlin with artists Ute Lemper, Bente Kahan, Ursula Ofner, Ben Becker, and Max Raabe. I consider this a poignant film - people are so often moved that they cry at the end or stay for another ten minutes or so in complete silence.

Karussell makes it clear that the Hitler regime destroyed the Jewish population, and any opponents to its ideology, and along with the mass murders, the regime also destroyed the essence of German culture. Without diminishing the enormous suffering and almost incomprehensible losses to the Jewish population and others who were persecuted and murdered, it is ultimately the murderers and their supporters who inflict the most damage on themselves: they destroyed their very souls. Karussell has been shown all over the world and won numerous acclaimed awards, but not a one in Germany. This destruction of the soul is perhaps why I had great difficulty getting financing for the documentary about the German state attorney Fritz Bauer, who according to the opinion of German politicians and officials was one of the most important democrats in postwar Germany. While the German Government supports my film, it was rejected by institutions, which fund films, and by most of the TV stations. I was fortunate to find a partner in one of the smaller TV station based in Saarland SR, making me wonder whether Germany's present problem in coming to terms with the legacy of the Nazi regime is valid.

TBOF: How many people outside of intellectuals and students of history specific to Germany are aware that the camps not only held the Jewish population but ordinary German citizens?

IZ: Besides the Jewish population whom Hitler considered "Germany's misfortune and parasites who had to be totally annihilated", his other enemies were all those who were ideologically opposed to his regime, which were first and foremost German communists. But according to Hitler's ideology, his regime also exterminated all those considered of inferior ethnicity: like Gypsies, Slavic people. Gays, and of course mentally and physically handicapped Germans also became victims.

TBOF: Does that translate to what you are ultimately putting on record is that Hitler's Germany did as much to harm its ordinary citizens as it did the Jewish population? Do you think society wants to review that, and if it does, is that the dichotomy in the discomfort?

IZ: I have the impression that so far, the German society does not want to acknowledge the severe damage it inflicted on itself. Instead it emphasizes the severe suffering it had to endure due to the bombing by hostile forces and the deportation of its people from the East.

TBOF: Do you believe there is a fundamental need for society to never cease to examine the complexity of reasons and impact of the singular decisions individuals make, that reflect the outcome of just a moment in history or the ability to influence so many?



Kurt Gerron and Marlene Dietrich in The Blue Angel

IZ: It is my personal opinion, based on a gut feeling, that no society can thrive with good prospects into the future when it refuses to examine its past and the complexity of reasons along with the impact of individuals on any decision, which she or he makes. The ideology of the Nazi regime was established both from the top down and from the bottom up. It will require the same method to truly bring German society back into a thriving state of being. Personal narratives will humanize this issue and will allow them entry into one's heart. The arts are supremely suited to achieve that.

My personal goal of making films is to understand the dynamics of politics, history and the psychology of human behavior. But I'm also driven by the deep wish to return the forgotten back to memory. The famous German entertainer Kurt Gerron was highly criticized after 1945 for having made a Propaganda film for the Hitler's regime. The truth is that as an inmate in a concentration camp and as a Jew condemned to death, Gerron was forced to make this movie. Gerron was gassed in Auschwitz in October 1944. Fritz Bauer was much hated in the sixties for proving to the world that the death camp Auschwitz had been a reality and was not a myth, nor was the Euthanasia program of the handicapped Germans perpetrated by Hitler's army during Hitler's time. I want the "Count" and the "Comrade" to be remembered for their courage to resist the Hitler regime and to serve as role models for young Germans. By making *The Sounds of Silents*, Willy Sommerfeld, the last original silent movie pianist of the twenties, shall never be forgotten for his unique art of accompanying silent films.

TBOF: You have already amassed a small but significant and interesting repertoire. What are your next projects?

IZ: Typical of an independent director, producer and author, I am presently developing several projects. Music is my passion, and *Sing A Song of Socialism* is a musical film on the songs of the

former DDR (East Germany) - from Germany's division to the fall of the wall. Another project is *The Pope's Eunuch*, about the history of castratos, based on the book by Luca Scarlini. A film about Friedrich Hinkel, the famous German archeologist in Sudan, a project on George Gittoes, a famous Australian painter, who works and paints in war zones (he started during the Vietnam war). A documentary with American writer Shareen Brysac based on her book *Mildred Harnack and the Red Orchestra*, and with director Philippe Mora (*Swastika, Mad Dog*) a series of films and facts about propaganda in the thirties and forties. In addition a project on Henryk Mikoaj Górecki, the famous Polish-Silesian composer, and the biggest music impresario ever, Bill Graham (*Bill Graham Presents*). Known for Fillmore West in SF and Fillmore East in NY, Graham discovered and made famous Santana, Jimi Hendrix, Grateful Dead, Neil Young, Janis Joplin and many others. Graham was born in Berlin into a Jewish-German-Polish family as Wolfgang Grajaca. This project I am working on with my partner in San Francisco, Janis Plotkin, and the Bill Graham Foundation. I am also very excited about a thrilling project *A Spark In The Dark* about the origins of Vishay, one of the world's leading electronics multinational companies and its founder, a Holocaust survivor who recently acquired the German giant firm Telefunken. I would also like to make a multimedia show with the Ufabrik in Berlin about Werner Richard Heymann, a famous German composer who wrote the music for Hollywood movies like *To Be Or Not To Be*, and *Ninotchka* in addition to many famous films in Germany before he had to leave Berlin in 1933 because of his Jewish heritage.

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