

## Up Close and Personal

If you think the times we're living in now are perilous and dark – they are not, I believe – and that people are divided, especially within their families and among spouses and friends, we should take a look at film history. Two Hollywood films made in 1940 and 1944 would be a way to commence, and we'll follow with others.

*The Man I Married* (1940) and *Address Unknown* (1944) explore the abyss that opens wide between family members and even husband and wife due to different viewpoints of current events, because of ideology and ambition, and that goes right up to patricide. Those were difficult times all right, and we ought to reflect on the past a little to get some perspective on what we think of as an era that is so hard to get through.

Set in 1938 after the Austrian *Anschluss* (annexation), *The Man I Married* features Francis Lederer as Eric Hoffman, a German-born and German-raised resident of New York who is married to an American. His wife Carol, an art critic for a magazine, is played by Joan Bennett. They have decided to travel, with their seven-year-old son Ricky, to Hoffman's birthplace in Germany to help Eric's father (Otto Kruger) to dispose of the factory the family owns in Berlin. The old Germany is gone, Eric's father, his face cast in sorrow, tells his son upon their arrival. But Eric doesn't care. He loves the transformation he has witnessed all around him and is mightily proud of his country and his Germanness. He falls under the influence of Frieda, his father's secretary and a former schoolmate of his, played by Anna Sten, an enthusiastic Nazi, prim and proper and determined to lure Eric away from his American wife. He doesn't need much luring. Carol at first tries to fight for her husband but resigns with disgust when it becomes obvious he slept with Frieda. He demands a divorce from Carol and declares that he will keep their son to grow up in the new Germany. Carol is horrified. The German authorities are certainly on his side. Carol must find a way to leave the country together with Ricky.



*The Man I Married* (1940), Francis Lederer.

The subtle, slow-but-certain transformation of the German-American Eric Hoffman is a masterpiece in sure-footed portrayal by Francis Lederer, an émigré to America from the small enclave of German-speaking Prague Jews (like Ernst Deutsch and, by the way, Kafka and Franz Werfel, among others). He reveals the vainglory in the end of a man searching for his roots, who finds them and proclaims them loudly in the hope he can, in his turn, stamp his boots on the necks of those whom he finds are beneath him as an incipient member of the new Master Race. This transformation took place on a mass scale during those years to many people in Europe (and to some in America). What you are seeing in the film is the quiet metamorphosis of a mild-mannered husband into a potential human monster – and who is proud of it.<sup>1</sup> It is still saying too little to acknowledge that the success of this transformation during the picture, as portrayed by Francis Lederer – from everyday American Joe Blow to Super Aryan – means that there seems to be no going back, not after you have become a future lord over men.

*Address Unknown* came out four years later. Its director of photography was Rudolph Maté. It stars Paul Lukas as Martin Schulz, a San Francisco art dealer in a partnership with his good friend Max Eisenstein, a Jew, played by Morris Carnovsky. They both hail from Munich. Martin Schulz leaves America with his four young boys and wife (the Austrian émigrée Mady Christians) to return to Munich, leaving his son Heinrich (played by Peter Van Eyck) with Max in San Francisco. Heinrich and Griselle, Max' daughter (K.T. Stevens), were to be married but they have agreed she would go to Germany for a year to see whether she could launch her career on the famed German-speaking stage.

Schulz is a man of weak character; he hungers for power and influence and is apparently willing to do what is necessary and what is asked of him, without qualms, to get them in his

readapted country. Germany has new rulers and new rules. The power broker Baron von Friesche (played by Carl Esmond, another émigré Hollywood actor) gets him a job as a high bureaucrat in the Ministry of Culture.

Meanwhile, Griselle goes on stage in Berlin. She is nearly arrested for saying some forbidden lines during a performance and must escape. She gets to the estate of her “uncle” Martin Schulz while being pursued by SA storm troopers. Martin shuts the door in her face. She is killed.

Martin writes to Max in San Francisco to inform him about the death of his daughter. Heinrich, who is present when Max receives the letter, is silent. At first he wants to comfort Max, who is seen crushed with hunched shoulders, but then Heinrich balls his fist. He is silent but boils inside.



*Address Unknown* (1944), Peter Van Eyck.

Martin starts receiving cryptic letters that appear to relate to art dealing but are transparently coded, although the code is unknown. The letters are opened by the Nazi censors. The letters keep coming. The Baron warns Martin. The repeating scene of the mailman on a bike leaving a letter in his mailbox at the front gate and then ringing the bell is like a death knell for the suspected traitor. Schulz is desperate to stop the letters. Paul Lukas plays Martin Schulz with understated yet very clear power; his eyes are anxious, sweat beading on his forehead and cheeks; he is falling apart psychologically and is frightened. Martin is fired from his job at the ministry. He is definitely under suspicion.



*Address Unknown* (1944), Paul Lukas, Carl Esmond.

Alone in his house, the bell rings to announce the arrival of new letters. The interior is like an elegant cage for the frightened and increasingly frantic Martin, with its lone lit window, the leaves blowing across its dark, shadowed court in the front and its interior with its checkered black-and-white floor plan. Martin is in a web of his own ruined ambition, in a snare caused by his own ruthlessness and immorality, his failure in remaining humane. Now he is contemptible.



*Address Unknown* (1944), Paul Lukas.

Who has sent the letters to Martin Schulz?

At the end, we are back in San Francisco at Max Eisenstein's gallery. Max receives a letter with the stamp "Address Unknown" across the recipient's destination in Germany. He tells Heinrich, whose face and shoulders are framed on both sides by two shafts of black darkness in what is apparently the rear of the gallery, "I don't understand. I didn't send Martin this letter. Why, I haven't written him since...." Max looks at the returned and unopened letter and then looks again at Heinrich; it dawns on him what has happened. We see the horror on his face.<sup>2</sup>

With the film *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, released in 1939, Hollywood had openly declared a propaganda war on Nazi Germany. The new *Reich* had its native American sympathizers as well as adherents within ethnic German communities.

Ben Urwand, an Australian film scholar, wrote a book called *The Collaboration* in 2013. He claimed that the Hollywood moguls had collaborated with the German consul in Los Angeles, Georg Gyssling, and deliberately suppressed any overt criticism of Nazi Germany in the films they produced.

This is a rather monstrous accusation, since most of the studio bosses were Jewish. Does his proof bear up to scrutiny? Urwand did much of his research in the German Foreign Office archives; and, I think, it is this evidence, for what it is worth, that underlays his thesis. The problem is that the German Foreign Office does not discuss and does not even perceive what was going on in Los Angeles at that time.

The Nazis were definitely attempting to influence American public opinion and obliquely supported the German-American Bund, even though Hitler assured the United States that the *Reich* would not interfere in American politics. The Bund was spied upon and their aims crossed quite effectively by a group mainly composed of American Jews and patriotic German-Americans who infiltrated the Nazi-allied groups on the West Coast. The information on Georg Gyssling, the German consul, is so contradictory as to be nonsense. Some claimed he was a Nazi; other scholars claim he was nothing of the kind. Urwand apparently believes him to be omnipotent; but two other scholars of this period, Steven Ross and Laura Rosenzweig, completely contradict Urwand's claim of Gyssling's alleged power. Urwand says the studio bosses even submitted film scripts for pre-approval to Gyssling before thinking of shooting any movies that dealt with Germany. Ross, for instance, avers that Gyssling was a 100% anti-Nazi and not an anti-Semite at all.

But it seems to be up close and personal for Urwand as well. He is perverse and harbors unlimited suspicions when it comes to the celluloid titans. What he accuses the tinsel-town moguls of doing in terms of ruthlessness, he does. He ascribes their collaboration to venality, like it is unique to Hollywood moguls; while Urwand is the one who is using anti-Semitic clichés to describe the greed of the Jewish studio bosses, who will stop at nothing, e.g. collaboration with Hitler and Goebbels despite being Jewish and in spite of the persecution of the Jews: the most important thing is dollars, dollars, dollars. He repeats the accusations again when

discussing *The House of Rothschild*, starring George Arliss and directed by Alfred Werker, a film about the Rothschild banking family that was released in 1934 in Hollywood. Urwand somehow accepts the Nazi interpretation of the American film and its misuse in Fritz Hippler's *Der Ewige Jude* (1940), a movie produced at Hitler's behest, a deliriously vicious documentary film, which apparently Goebbels didn't quite approve of because it was so purely a naked piece of National Socialist anti-Semitic propaganda and too obvious in its intent (which was no criticism, in this particular instance, in the *Führer's* eyes, for he wanted to be obvious and knew the Jews to be his mortal enemy against whom any means were amply justified).

Both Ross and Rosenzweig assert that Urwand got a distorted view looking at the German Foreign Office archives and that Urwand misunderstood relationships in Hollywood, particularly between the studio bosses and the German consul, whom they basically ignored. So instead of Gysling having a huge influence on them, he actually had no influence at all. And besides that, the studio bosses funded an espionage ring, headed by Leon Lewis, an American Jew and World War One veteran with close affiliation to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, to spy on Nazi groups on the West Coast.

Lewis came from Chicago, where he had worked for the Anti-Defamation League. He followed the rise of Hitler and the Nazis in the press and dedicated himself to finding out about their activities in America and particularly in the German-American community. He had been trained as a lawyer. He was so good at his clandestine organization and found out so much that he never really got back to his practice of law to any real extent; he kept vowing he would return to his law office and leave the sleuthing to others. But it wasn't just Lewis' ability as a spy; he was unusually talented in organizing information and people to get the job done.<sup>3</sup> Half the German-American community supported the Nazis, the other half did not. Although there were a few scattered native American fascist groups fashioned after the Italian fascists or copying their much fiercer German counterparts, the National Socialists, it was chiefly the German-American Bund that led the subversion efforts. The Bund wished to sabotage Lend Lease cooperation with Great Britain and it publicly wished to overthrow the United States system of government, to replace it with the *Führer* principle model that reigned in Nazi Germany; they were helped in their efforts by the *Reich* Propaganda Ministry via German consulates and by means of shipments of propaganda writings in English that were delivered by Gestapo agents traveling on German ships attached to legitimate German ship lines and clandestinely unloaded at American ports, particularly on the West Coast. It was a worrying situation for American Jews. Who knew how popular Hitler was and how much influence he had in America? That was what Lewis and his cohorts did: they spied on the Bund and on the German-American community institutions as well as on native American fascist sympathizers in Los Angeles. The West Coast was wide open territory for the Nazis to carry out their campaign of influencing U.S. public opinion. But in no way did the Hollywood moguls kowtow to the Germans, in particular the German consul in Los Angeles. They did the opposite: they secretly financed Leon Lewis and his group to spy on them. Lewis' group investigated sabotage at defense factories, watched pro-Nazi groups and uncovered subversion against the country. The FBI did not get really serious about the Nazis until 1939; a couple of half-hearted endeavors by

Congressional committees (Morris Dickstein as well as the Committee on Un-American Activities chaired by Martin Dies) were initiated during the mid-thirties and the latter part of the decade, creating a temporary stir in the American press about the subversive efforts of certain of these groups and the Bund. Hoover had always been more worried about the Communists. Besides that, the FBI only had 600 agents across the entire United States at its disposal. Lewis and his people provided the FBI, Navy Intelligence and the American government with the information they needed once hostilities began. Urwand got everything wrong. He misunderstood relationships, did not know about Lewis and his group and about his financing through the Hollywood film bosses. Lewis also investigated Nazi sympathies among film workers, not that they were very widespread, but you never knew....

*The Private Life of the Master Race (Furcht und Elend des Dritten Reichs, literally: Fear and Misery of the Third Reich)* by Bertolt Brecht was originally published in Prague with Malik Verlag in 1938, just as the Germans marched in; it was reissued in German in an expanded edition in 1945 by a New York publishing house. Divided into 24 vignettes, the play is a montage consisting of dialogues. It shows day-to-day life on a very small scale. It was based upon eyewitness reports and documents that Brecht and his colleague Margarete Steffin had collected since 1934 about life inside the German *Reich*.

Brecht manages to show in his 24 scenes just how bad had become in Germany – where children joined the Hitler Youth and informed on their parents; where, if people listen to foreign broadcasts, they are arrested; one man in the SA describes how he marks people who are to be arrested with chalk, threatening the cook's brother for not saying "Heil Hitler" quickly enough to satisfy him and appears to be ready to relegate the man to the fate he has just described; a judge gets in a panic because he doesn't know whether the ruling he must make over a Jew will please his higher-ups – will it be drastic enough? The scenes meld into a whole to show a state of fear and misery among the German people, as Brecht's title suggests. What these Germans would bring to the rest of Europe – the whole catastrophe of even greater and more widespread fear and misery – was of course yet to come. The play was not filmed in Hollywood, but the scenes it showed were not inventions. Brecht made sure to emphasize he had based his work on real everyday life in the *Reich*.<sup>4</sup>

The chasm in the family was previewed in Nazi Germany under a reversed signage: Hollywood's bad guys were the good guys in the *Reich*. *Hitlerjunge Quex (Hitler Youth Quex, 1933)* featured a teenage Nazi named Heini Völker who fights with his father, a lifelong Communist (Heinrich George), to let him join and participate in the Hitler Youth. It really seemed the Hitler Youth did have more fun than the Communist youth, as depicted in the film, and beside that, they wore snazzy uniforms and waved flags. But Father Völker definitely did not approve – until the father is convinced by Brigade Leader Kass (Claus Clausen) to recognize where his true loyalties lay: with his *volk*, not with his working class comrades and corrupt Communist leaders.



*Hitler Youth Quex* (1933), Claus Clausen, Heinrich George, Jürgen Ohlsen

*S.A.-Mann Brand* (1933) is the story of a heroic Nazi SA stormtrooper who defies the Communists in his working class neighborhood as well as his committed Social Democrat father (Otto Wernicke) to organize a Nazi propaganda march, which his father finally joins at the end. He has seen the light. They end the film with the very first use in a film of the Horst Wessel song, which starts with the words: "Raise the flag..."

*Kopf Hoch, Johannes! (Chin Up, Johannes!, 1941)* was produced by Viktor de Kowa. It starred Douglas Sirk's estranged son Klaus Detlef Sierck. Sirk had divorced his then-wife, the actress Lydia Brincken; his son was left to grow up with his mother, who became a convinced Nazi in the early 1930s. Sirk himself left Germany in 1937 for Hollywood after directing some films in Nazi Germany. The boy had gotten into the acting business by then. He became a youth star. *Chin Up, Johannes!* took place in a so-called Napola school (a Nazi boarding school for young leadership talent), involving a wayward adolescent (Sierck) who refuses to buckle down to school and comradely discipline. He's a rebel. But that was also O.K., according to the film, because he was talented (he composed marches) and his heart was in the right place (with the *Führer*). Young Johannes doesn't get along with his strict father, doesn't like the school he's been stuck in and is generally a nuisance, albeit a talented young man. Johannes ultimately finds his way to become an exemplary young Nazi. The young actor who played him, Klaus Detlef Sierck, had a harder way, though. He fell into disrepute with Goebbels the following year. Goebbels suspected him of being homosexual. The young man, by 1942 all of seventeen years old, enlisted in the Wehrmacht and died fighting in 1944. His father searched for him after the war ended when Sirk returned to visit Berlin. The boy's grave was in the Ukraine. Sirk had not known what had happened to him.





*Chin Up, Johannes!* (1941), Klaus Detlef Sierck.

Two other German films can be seen in the immediate post-war context of riven families and irreconcilable political beliefs. *Und über uns der Himmel* (*And the Heavens Above Us*, 1947), with Hans Albers in the starring role, directed by Josef von Báky, is a film that is, at first glance, about the functioning of the black market in Berlin before the introduction of the German mark and the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany, events which occurred in 1948 and 1949, respectively. Hans Albers plays Hans Richter, who has lived through the Third Reich and the war years and is quite happy to be rid of both; he makes a living on the black market. His son Werner has returned from the war blind. Hans the father must continue selling on the black market because he needs money to pay for medicine and medical care for his son. He gets the money, and his son's eyesight is restored. Now the young man sees what his father is doing, resents his activity and tells his father to his face that he is not happy. At first the elder Richter is in disbelief that his son is moralizing about the black market; at the beginning of the film, the older man says he is so glad to be alive in the city without the "boom-boom" of bombs dropping on the city's collective head, happy to be safe and sound now that the war is over. And the young Werner now sounds as morally pure as a Nazi, chiefly because the young people like him only know the "morality" of the Nazis – the same claptrap phrases that the party had been preaching to the German people for twelve years. So as a reward for his sacrifice and effort to scrape up money to pay for his son's medicine and a cure, the father hears his son's reproaches about "morality."



*And the Heavens Above Us* (1947), Hans Albers

*Der Ruf* (*The Last Illusion*, 1949), again directed by Josef von Báky, starring Fritz Kortner, takes place initially in America, then follows its protagonist to a German university town. Kortner also wrote the screenplay. As the film opens *The Last Illusion* features a depiction of a one-of-a-kind artistic and intellectual community that had found its home in the city on the West Coast in the 1940s, the exiled Germany in Los Angeles, a once vibrant émigré sub-culture. Kortner plays Professor Mauthner, an exiled professor of philosophy, a Jew, who is called back to teach at a famous German university. *The Last Illusion* presents an effective and wholly doomed portrait of post-war German students and academia in the small university city. Mauthner tries to reconnect there with his ex-wife (Johanna Hofer, Kortner's real-life wife). The film shows the reconciliation doesn't work. Mauthner is still bitter about her family and the anti-Semitism he experienced with certain members of her clan; she is bitter over him and his headstrong and proud behavior. She had obviously stayed behind in Germany. One young man is particularly vehement in protesting Mauthner's lectures on Plato and the ideals of philosophy. We learn at the end that this young man is actually the professor's son. The young man himself was unaware of it; his mother had kept it from him during the Nazi years. He attempts at the end to make amends, but it is too late. The rift remains; the chasm does not seem mendable.



*The Last Illusion* (1949), Fritz Kortner.

*The Big Lift* (1950) varies the theme of suspicion, or lack thereof, in the most intimate relationships. Montgomery Clift plays Tech Sergeant Danny MacCullough, the flight engineer for a C-54 Skymaster, with Paul Douglas as Master Sergeant Hank Kowalski. They are part of the crew delivering vital supplies to the Berlin population during the Berlin Airlift in 1948-1949. Kowalski had been a prisoner of war in Germany during the war. He hates the Germans and does what he can to be rude to them, doesn't trust them. He is dismissive of Danny MacCullough's empathy with and interest in them.

Danny meets the pretty Berlin widow Frederica Burkhardt (Cornell Borchers), who speaks English. Danny gets very involved with Frederica, a German dame whose number Hank thinks he has – the movie audience is a little skeptical of Hank's judgment here, since Hank has proven to be so biased against Germans up till now; Hank doesn't like her at all.

Frederica tells the two Americans her father was a professor at Berlin University and active in the resistance against Hitler. She also says her husband was killed in the war; he had been a conscripted soldier, implying he was no Nazi since Frederica also ironically asked whether there was conscription in America too. Afterward, Hank does research – at the Berlin Document Center, where all the records of Nazi party organizations and personnel, including the SS, were kept – and finds out Frederica was lying: her father was a committed Nazi and Frederica's husband was in fact in the SS.



*The Big Lift* (1950), Paul Douglas, Montgomery Clift.

Danny applies to his base commander for permission to marry the German national Frederica.

Living in the apartment below Frederica is Herr Stieber (O.E. Hasse), who humorously admits he is a Russian spy. He tells Danny he feeds information to the Russians on the number of American planes flying in supplies to Berlin.



*The Big Lift* (1950), Cornell Borchers, Montgomery Clift.

He is an important character in the film. He develops a suspicion for Frederica. He has to deliver Danny's papers for her to fill out for their permission to marry. He also has another letter for her, from America. Frederica rips open the letter from America; it contains a photograph of a man in his thirties standing in front of a shop, "Mirbach's Camera Shop." Written on the photograph, in German, are the words: "Darling, here is the new shop. Love, Ernst." Herr Stieber knows that Frederica's husband is not dead but is in America, the same man we know was in the SS; Frederica had deceived Danny and was only using him to get to the United States and to her ex-husband. Of course, Danny learns of Frederica's deceit, thanks to Stieber. (Maybe Frederica will try her wiles with another naïve American GI, we can presume, if it doesn't work out.)

*Watch on the Rhine* (1943) is wrong-headed in a very big way. It effectively advocates – is a virtual plea for – murdering your political opponents, even if you're not at actual war with them. Paul Lukas and Bette Davis star in this well-meaning but highly propagandized message movie, based on Lillian Hellman's play. It is all right as it plods along showing the audience the travails of what it means to be in opposition to the Nazis in Germany and occupied Europe; it is 1940, and we are introduced to a well-known intellectual and leader of the anti-fascist resistance, a German named Kurt Muller (Paul Lukas), who is exiled in the United States along with his American wife Sara, played by Bette Davis, and their three children. Sara comes from a well-to-do and well-connected Washington, D.C. family, who are of course staunchly anti-Nazi but don't really understand how bad things are in Germany under the Nazis.

Kurt Muller does what he *must do*. In Washington, D.C., in a garden shed on the estate of Sara's family, he liquidates the Romanian informer Teck de Brancovis, who is also staying in the house of Sara's mother, by shooting him with his revolver. This hapless man is not even a Fascist, has not yet done anything to anybody but is obviously somebody "weak" and indifferent to the fates of those who might fight the Axis. Of course, Brancovis is a sleazy, greedy and thoroughly venal man.

The murder is perpetrated on American soil, right in the heart of Washington. At the time the film was set (1940), the United States was not at war with Nazi Germany nor with German's Axis ally Romania. The only thing of which the iron necessity of liquidation reminds me as a viewer is that this was how the Communists in Russia dealt with class enemies in their various inventions but not at all what you would expect, in terms of humane behavior, from the noble Kurt Muller.

Kurt Muller tells de Brancovis he wishes he didn't have to do what he is going to do and that he, Kurt Muller, must now kill him because Brancovis is weak and poses a danger to the greater goal. Muller is doing it for the cause. Later, Muller goes to say goodbye to his children before he is on his way back to Germany. His mission is a rather fantastic enterprise anyway, but somehow Hellman thought this a plausible way to justify her good zealot, the underground leader Kurt Muller, as though this one man meant so much in the context of the upheaval that was going on in Europe. Muller, with his disheveled hair and dirty clothes (clothes he has dirtied owing to his struggle to kill Brancovis), comes back from his murder to tell his kids piously that

he did wrong but that it was for the greater good. An idealist must kill for the good of all mankind, and Muller has murdered Brancovis in cold blood. That's father Muller's point. Paul Lukas as Kurt Muller is not a hero but a henchman.



*Watch on the Rhine* (1943), George Coulouris, Paul Lukas.

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<sup>1</sup> This transformation of "ordinary men" led, in no small way, to the mass murder and barbarism the continent witnessed during those few years before the war and during the global conflict.

<sup>2</sup> James Agee was regrettably off-key in his review of the film in 1944. He called it "vapid anti-fascism [...] full of sincere and, in their uninteresting way, skillful shadows by William Cameron Menzies. But neither Paul Lukas nor anyone else can give it much bite." Either Agee cannot recognize what the film is showing and what the audience is viewing or else he cannot imagine what it means to live in a totalitarian society.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis was supported by the Austrian-born Joseph Roos, a former research assistant and story editor at several Hollywood studios, and was also ably backed by many other undercover agents throughout the 1930s. Many of these people, some of whom were German-American, remained 100% anonymous in their endeavors until the historical uncovering decades later – in 2017 by the historians Rosenzweig and Ross – of what amounts to no small measure of heroic and selfless work on the home front.

<sup>4</sup> The *Deutschland-Berichte der Sopade (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands)*, a secret reporting system maintained by the exiled organization of the German Social Democratic Party, were reports by clandestine

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correspondents in Germany on life inside the Nazi *Reich*. The reports were published in Prague and later also in Paris. They constituted a rich source of what life looked like in Germany from 1934 until 1940. The Social Democratic Party had been outlawed in Germany on June 22, 1933. Thereafter the party leadership had fled to Prague.