

Claus Räfle about THE INVISIBLES

"He said: Now make something good out of it"



Claus Räfle's docu-drama tells about four young Jews, two women and two men going underground in Berlin, after the Nazis officially declared the city to be "free of Jews" in February 1943. Of those 7000 "invisibles" 1700, mainly young people, managed to sur-

vive in a climate of fear, insecurity and ill-founded hope. With fake identity papers, without food rations or safe accommodations, relying on their brave aides, whom Räfle commemorates with this film.

Four Jewish survivors learned that sometimes the best place to hide is in plain sight, thus dodging the Gestapo and their network of informants, knowing that death was just one mistake away. Living so recklessly in the middle of Berlin, they became practically invisible to the Nazi regime. THE INVISIBLES mixes dramatic reenactment with interviews with the real survivors whose lives inspired the film.

Claus Räfle: In 2004, I made a TV documentary about a Nazi brothel, in which the young Jewish Rosalie Janson survived as a house clerk. The so-called Salon Kitty near to the Kurfürstendamm was frequented by high Nazi dignitaries such as Minister Ribbentrop and guests such as Mussolini



and Count Ciano, who were systematically spied on. Janson's story gave me and my wife, co-author Alejandra Lopez, the idea of searching for more 'invisibles' and tell their inherently exciting survival adventures.

How did you further develop that idea?

Räfle: We started reading biographies, most of which had been written by the persons concerned or by their (grand) children. We found many cross-references to wonderful humanitarians, who have all been honoured as "righteous among the people" in the Yad Vashem Memorial in Jerusalem, but also to a Jewish "rat" like Stella Gold-

schlag, who snitched on many of her fellows to the Gestapo.

Then how did you find your interviewees?

Räfle: Historians Barbara Schieb and Beate Kosmala of the 'German Resistance/ Silent Heroes' Memorial were of great help. After we had convinced them of our project, they provided us with information, recommendations and addresses. The first one we called was Eugen Friede, who lived in Germany after an adventurous life in the DDR, GDR and Canada – he died in October 2018 at the age of 92 years. As a typical Berliner he was a bit rough, but finally we were allowed to come,



taking some biscuits with us. Only a week later, at our own expense, since we didn't get funding yet, we went back with our equipment, a cameraman and a sound engineer and spent two days talking about his life in the post-war period, interrupted only by a lunch. When we were done, he looked at me and said: *"Man, I've told you my entire story, now make something good out of it."*

What about the other protagonists?
 Räfle: All in all, we spoke with ten survivors - including Inge Deutschkron, whose moving story has already been adapted many times. We went for lesser-known stories: those of Eugen Friede and Cioma Schoenhaus, the orphan Hanni Lévy and doctor's daughter Ruth Arndt. She and her friend Ellen worked as housemaids for a colonel who organised in his villa tastings for officers with black market goods. Colonel Wehlen was like a more ambivalent Schindler character who impressed his customers with French delicacies, wines and pretty girls, whom he thus offered a chance to survive. The Arndt-Gumpel family right after the war migrated to New York, Cioma Schoenhaus managed to escape by bicycle across the Swiss border where he opened a graphic

agency, and Hanni Lévy was taken to Paris by an uncle who had found her on a Red Cross list of displaced persons. All of them have become 90 years and older.

How did you find your actors?

Räfle: We developed profiles according to the real-life individuals. Ruby O. Fee is an extraordinary talent I once spotted in a TV crime story. Passport forger Max Mauff had played a servile employee in a GDR ministry in Spielberg's BRIDGE OF SPIES. He had an uncanny resemblance to the original and hid his feelings behind a "perfect cousin" facade. I thought his quick physicality was brilliant. Aaron Altaras (as Eugen Friede) already attracted attention as a child when playing the role of a German-Jewish boy on television. And Hanni Lévy recognised herself in the wonderful Alice Dwyer. We wanted the feature film to have its own power and beauty, not simply running alongside the documentary narrative. A casting agency proposed us actors that granted authenticity to even the smallest roles.

In a supporting role we see the recently deceased Andreas Schmidt in his last performance.

Räfle: He plays the wonderful human-



itarian Hans Winkler, a humble justice employee, who accepted young Eugen Friede into his family, thus endangering his wife and children. Through him and his companions, we wanted to show that helping people in need was possible. This also applies to the situation today, now a populist whirlwind is drastically changing the social climate in many European countries. That is why our story has obtained a timeless relevance and the feeling about it is completely different from how it would have been ten years ago.

Did you think of a documentary from the very beginning?

Räfle: First we wanted to make a nor-

mal TV documentary. When taking this plan to different TV stations, I got nothing but refusals. Apparently that kind of film already had been done a thousand times before. ARD and ZDF had contributed a lot to that tradition, however, in 2009 and 2010 there was a general consensus that the audience had seen enough of it. Even if I could sense the uniqueness of our stories and their strong emotional impact, more and more it felt like I was trying to sell plutonium. Facing our defeat, we considered how to develop a more intense emotional power in order to reach out to a larger audience. That's when the idea came up to combine documentary with feature





Film, like Heinrich Breloer did in his outstanding political documentaries in the 90s. When we finally had the TV stations convinced, we needed a distributor. The same thing happened again: everywhere we were told that a documentary drama simply couldn't work in cinemas. Until we met the new team at Tobis-Film shortly before the expiration of our funding deadline. In 2016 we finally shot the film within three weeks. Finding the original documentary footage was relatively easy. After making a whole series of documentaries about Nazism and the post-war era, I knew exactly where to look for it.

Did you finish in time to show the

Film to your protagonists?

Räfle: Only Eugen Friede and Hanni Lévy were at the premiere in October 2017. Cioma Schoenhaus died a few months before filming began, but his children and grandchildren were there and Mrs. Arndt-Gumpel, who seemed so incredibly vital in the interview, died as well, but her sons were there. For these families, the movie is a true salute, and they are very proud and happy about it. Hanni Lévy is 94 now and she's coming with us to the New York première of the film in January 2019.

What wish do you have for THE INVISIBLES?

Räfle: I'm already very happy about its

widespread distribution. It's fantastic how many countries the film has been screened in cinemas, on TV, as video on demand and at festivals... Many young people, four or five generations after the war, have witnessed the crimes of the Nazi era, that go so far back that they almost seem unreal to us. It is so important that history will not repeat itself. In this respect, our story feels very contemporary, now that societies can suddenly take a drastic turn, as you see in Brazil, where a right-wing populist has become president. It is crucial to protect the achievements of liberal democracy – and THE INVISIBLES might contribute to that awareness. That is the legacy of these four brave 'invisibles' who's interviews made it possible that many young people can see their story. In Germany, the film has reached almost 100,000 viewers with 54 copies, which is a lot for this type of film.

What is your background as a filmmaker?

Räfle: Since the beginning of the 90s I have made socio-political historical documentaries for public television, as well as several satirical works. I've always wanted to do something fictional, but once you start making doc-

umentaries, that almost becomes impossible. Due to THE INVISIBLES, now that chance has come. I am currently working on two fiction projects based on true stories: one set after the end of World War II and one contemporary story.

Is there something more you want to add?

Räfle: Television stations and Film Funds these days in the first place seem to look at what the major companies are producing. The whole sector has embraced a sort of industrial feel, it's about brands and formats. I think those in charge at public broadcasters and cinemas should use their wonderful ability to create programmes in a more creative and open-minded way.

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Uta Beth