



What a
wonderful
dictator!



(Left to right) A scene from "My Führer," Charlie Chaplin in "The Great Dictator" and a poster of the film "Downfall."

Dani Levy's nauseating new film 'My Fuehrer: The Truly Truest Truth About Adolf Hitler' preaches to the audience to let bygones be bygones, to be forgiving, to lighten up

By Zohar Shavit

Last week, at a movie theater in downtown Frankfurt, I saw Adolf Hitler reborn as a pathetic character that evokes sympathy and compassion. This happened in "My Fuehrer: The Truly Truest Truth About Adolf Hitler," a film produced by the German Jewish director Dani Levy. "My Fuehrer" is set in the twilight years of the Third Reich. Hitler is brought together with a Jew named Adolf Gruenbaum, an actor and drama professor plucked from Sachsenhausen concentration camp by Josef Goebbels, in an attempt to revive the feelings of the other Adolf and to help him recapture the joys of leadership and hypnotic hype.

In its first two weeks in the theater, "My Fuehrer" has already attracted half-a-million German moviegoers, and with all the storm it has kicked up, it has been accepted as legitimate among the German elite. "My Fuehrer" is one of several recent movies that tell the story of Germany's past from the perspective of the Nazis as different from the Germans, with the Nazis portrayed in a forgiving light and the Germans as victims. Before "My Fuehrer," there was "Sophie Scholl: The Final Days," and then "Downfall," an empathetic study of the fall of the Nazis, which was probably one of the most successful movies in German film history. In television movies, documentaries, novels and children's books, the Germans are being increasingly depicted as the primary victims of the Third Reich, sometimes as the only ones.

This narrative was born not in recent years, after the reunification of Germany, but as soon as World War II ended. The "master-narrative" of the German as victim, which has been evolving since the early days of the federal republic, is built on the distinction between Germans, Nazis and pseudo-Nazis – the good Germans who only looked like Nazis, but deep in their

hearts opposed the regime. A past was constructed in which the Nazis took over Germany against the will of the Germans. The Germans were the victims of Nazism, and especially victims of Hitler, who was stripped of his German-ness and portrayed as "different," physically and mentally: small, dark, shrill and demonic.

Going easy on Nazis

Levy's film adds another layer, particularly extreme, to this master-narrative. Now that the Germans are victims of Hitler and Nazism, and even the Nazis are victims of Nazism, "My Fuehrer" proceeds to turn Hitler into a victim of Nazism. Perhaps because it bills itself as a satire, "My Fuehrer" condenses the story that the Germans have chosen to tell themselves about the Third Reich and the Holocaust into something even cruder and more barefaced than any of the films that preceded it.

Levy's movie goes easy on the Nazis. It presents them as ridiculous, amusing and non-threatening. Nazism as a whole becomes slapstick – a chain of comic accidents, of stupidity rather than wickedness, and that creates empathy. Levy is not the first to show the "comic" side of the Nazis. "Life is Beautiful,"

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Roberto Benigni's Oscar-winning film, beat him to it. In Levy's movie, however, the jokes take over the whole story, leaving no room for any other point of view. The movie preaches to the audience to let bygones be bygones, to be forgiving, to lighten up.

"My Fuehrer" pretends to address Hitler's psychology rather than his actions (which are only hinted at in the film). It makes no connection between Hitler and what is going on outside. Hitler's advisers, for example, are careful to shield him from the destruction in Berlin, and before his scheduled visit to the city, they order the facades of the houses to be rebuilt to keep him from finding out the truth about the

horrors of the war. Hitler himself is only a puppet manipulated by those around him, mainly Goebbels, who brings Adolf the Jew to save Adolf the German from a mental breakdown.

Levy portrays Hitler as a battered child with an abusive father whose desire to exterminate the Jews springs from the misery of his childhood. To the noise of the viewers who rustle their popcorn, Levy appeals to take a look at poor Hitler on his collision course with history. In scene after scene, we see him as a lover of dogs, a lover of children, a person hungry for warmth who crawls into bed with the Jewish Adolf and his wife, a virgin who is unable to consummate his union with Eva Braun, a boyish imp who sails battleships in his bubble-bath to make up for childhood experiences he never had, a generous soul who has no qualms about placing himself in the hands of a Jewish professor brought to him from a concentration camp (portrayed as a forced labor camp, hardly alluding to the horrors that took place there). What a wonderful dictator!

A hilarious little sect appears out of nowhere, takes over the enchanted castle and starts a war that ends in defeat. In this war, there are Nazis and Jews, but there are no Germans and there are no crematoria (actually, there are showers, but when one turns on the tap, what comes out is a refreshing stream of pure water). Prof. Adolf Gruenbaum, the great drama teacher, turns out to be the source of inspiration for Joseph Goebbels (Levy's hint that the roots of Nazism go back to the Jews).

Hitler as a golem

The Nazis need Gruenbaum's services because he, a Jew, is the only one who can recreate the Fuehrer. He does a good job of it, too. He touches all the right chords in Hitler's sensitive soul in order to resurrect the great master of rhetoric and to try to get the crowds roaring again. In the final scene of the movie, Hitler loses his voice and is unable to address the audience that fills the square. So who gives the feisty motivational speech in his stead? The Jewish Adolf, of course – the mirror image of the German Adolf. Hitler is born anew here as a kind of golem, a lump of clay, whose creation is inspired by the Jews and who comes to life at a Jew's command. A subliminal message is conveyed that Hitler is the fault of the Jews and clearly not the Germans, who are nonexistent in the film anyway, except as extras.

Charlie Chaplin's immortal film "The Great Dictator," which debuted in 1940, is always in

the background, of course. *Vive la petite difference*. The climax of "The Great Dictator" is when Chaplin steps out of the movie into real life, from cinema to meta-cinema. Instead of the Jew who gets up to speak in "The Fuehrer," we get the real-life figure of Charlie Chaplin. The message to viewers is: From here on, it's not a play anymore. Nazism is real, and it's dangerous. In retrospect, Chaplin's harsh censure of Nazi Germany and his support of the democratic world was one of the most important warning signals against Nazism that were sounded on the eve of World War II.

Levy's movie would like to create the illusion of this famous scene, of course, but it does the exact opposite. Levy tells his viewers:

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It's all a game. Hitler is nothing but an actor in a psychological drama, and the person who teaches him the fine art of acting is none other than Adolf the Jew. In contrast to "The Great Dictator," Adolf Gruenbaum does not step out of the movie. He takes Hitler's speech onto the podium with him. Standing before the masses, he delivers this Nazi oratory with great fervor and success. Only at the end of the scene (in a turnabout that has no artistic justification), does he deviate from the written text and say a few words against Nazism, although he never finishes what he began to say.

The allusion to "The Great Dictator" does not save this film from disgrace because it contains no condemnation of Nazism and its horrors. On the contrary, it perpetuates the German denial of responsibility for the Holocaust. If "My Fuehrer" were not another link in a disturbing chain, if it were not preceded by a long list of German literary and cinematic efforts that create a blurry picture of the Nazis that hovers somewhere between eccentric and pathetic – attracting a large crowd of curious Germans, who have been fooled into thinking that they are confronting their Nazi past and learning about the Nazi era, but have not

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even skimmed the surface – if not for all this, one could view Dani Levy's film as a cultural accident.

What was Levy thinking when he made this film? Did he really believe that by probing the "psychology" of his character he could create another masterpiece like "The Great Dictator"? Or maybe he just wanted to align himself with the German narrative and pander to it. One way or another, this nauseating film should never have seen the light of day.

Asked about his famous

speech at St. Paul's Church, German novelist Martin Wals-er told a Newsweek interviewer that no one could dictate to the Germans how to deal with the shame of their country. "My Fuehrer" is a warning as well as tangible proof that the victims of the Germans not only have the right, but the duty, to intervene in how the Germans choose to tell themselves about their past. If not, that repulsive past is liable to sink into the depths of oblivion and be wiped out of human memory as if it never happened.

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