

Conversations with Joseph Goebbels's secretary

A German Life: A glimpse into the Nazi inner circle

By Bernd Reinhardt and Verena Nees
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The Austrian-made film *A German Life (Ein deutsches Leben)*, directed by Florian Weigensamer, Olaf S. Müller, Christian Krönes and Roland Schrotthofer, which opened in German cinemas in April, is a disturbing, in part shocking film and, for these reasons, worth seeing. The documentary centres on Brunhilde Pomsel (1911-2017), who worked as a secretary in the office of Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels from 1942 to 1945.

The 103-year-old (at the time) looks at the camera with concentration, speaks calmly, factually, in an almost polished manner. The black-and-white close-ups show an aged face with its many wrinkles. The vivid gaze betrays an astonishingly clear mind with a pronounced recall. Brunhilde Pomsel talks about her working with Goebbels as if it were yesterday.

Not only the camera is close, everything is close. The audience realises abruptly: here sits someone who was at the centre of Nazi power, sat in the bunker of the propaganda ministry to the end and typed the documents of one of the most notorious Nazi criminals, who committed suicide with his entire family. It is not all that long ago.

At the end of her 115-minute account, which was recorded in 2013-2014 and is reproduced in the book accompanying the film (published by Europa-Verlag, 2017), Pomsel summarises her view: “Even beauty has blemishes. And the terrible also has a sunny side. It’s not black-and-white.” She vehemently rejects any admission of guilt. She had done nothing “other than type for Mr. Goebbels.”

“No. I would not consider myself guilty. Unless one accuses the entire German people of the fact that in the end, it contributed to the reality that this government came to power in the first place.”

Pomsel comes from a petty bourgeois background. Her parents were not affluent, but could afford to live in a better-off area in the south of Berlin. Education was directed towards obedience to authority. Political interests were not promoted, especially among girls.

As a young woman, Pomsel fulfills the widespread feminine ideal: pretty, neat and somewhat naive. She likes to sit and talk with her friends in cafés. Her first boyfriend, Heinz, is a

right-wing student from Heidelberg, who invites her to the Sportpalast in Berlin. To her disappointment, they don’t attend a sports event but rather a Nazi Party propaganda rally at which Goering speaks, and she is terribly bored.

On January 30, 1933, Hitler is appointed Reich Chancellor by President Paul von Hindenburg, and Pomsel waves at him at the torchlight procession at the Brandenburg Gate: “Why not, a new man.” She is in her early twenties.

Before 1933, “no one had thought about the Jews,” says Pomsel, “pure inventions of the later Nazis.” Her Jewish friend Eva Löwenthal is always present at their social gatherings. Eva never has money and is treated by the others.

Pomsel works as a secretary for the Jewish lawyer and insurance broker, Dr. Hugo Goldberg. She does not tell him she has cheered Hitler, out of tact, as she explains.

After 1933, when Goldberg has fewer commissions and can only pay her for working half-days, Pomsel improves her salary by typing up the World War I experiences of former aviation lieutenant and now SA Sturmbannführer [Major], Wulf Bley. She then follows Bley’s advice and joins the Nazis to advance her career. He helps her get a well-paid job working in radio.

Later, Pomsel says, her friend Eva would often visit her at the radio station. The reporters were nice, because they were “so funny and flippant.” Her language betrays the prejudices that prevailed in petty bourgeois circles in the south of Berlin. Eva was very pretty, “reddish hair, very dainty, very delicate, but she already had this Jewish beak.” She points to her nose.

In 1942, Pomsel is transferred to the propaganda ministry, where she rises to become the secretary in Goebbels’s outer office. Her earnings there are generous enough that all her girlfriends envy her. Several times, she explains how well she felt there: friendly people, nice furniture. Her employer, Goebbels, appears elegant, wears great suits and is always very well turned out, “nothing out of place.” Sometimes, Goebbels’s small, cute daughters come to the office; they are curious, want to write on the typewriter.

Later, she again visits Eva Löwenthal, who has now moved and is doing very badly. It is embarrassing to Pomsel now that she only brought cigarettes instead of food as a gift for her

friend, a heavy smoker. The family has almost no more furniture and lives four in a room. “Then Eva was suddenly gone. And we could not change it.” Eva is deported in 1943 and murdered in Auschwitz in 1945.

“All in all, we had no idea what was going on with Hitler,” Pomsel says in self-justification. But, “One did not want to know too much, one did not want to burden oneself unnecessarily.”

One strength of *A German Life* is that it constantly interrupts Pomsel and confronts her with reality. We see documentary footage, newly discovered archive material from the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, showing the mass destruction of bodies in the Warsaw Ghetto, concentration camp inmates liberated by US soldiers, living skeletons. Finally, at length, there are scenes of the Buchenwald concentration camp when the population of Weimar was compelled to look at the mountains of dead bodies after the end of the war and bury the murdered concentration camp inmates. In addition, there are excerpts from news and propaganda films of the various belligerent nations.

Pomsel does not have much to say about the murder of Jews and other minorities, or Communists, Social Democrats and resistance fighters. She would have known about the concentration camps for “quite a time,” she admits. But she contented herself with the official truth that they were camps for the “re-education” of enemies and criminals.

Resistance would have made no sense. Since Hitler was in power, everything would have been too late anyway. “We were all in a huge concentration camp.”

Coincidentally, the court records of Sophie Scholl and the “White Rose” pass through her hands. Pomsel remembers how proud she was not to have secretly looked into the files. She regretted the death of the young people. She admires the courage of Sophie Scholl and her colleagues. But it was also “stupidity” to risk “their lives because of a shitty piece of paper, because of a leaflet.”

A German Life disturbs mainly through the seemingly normal, the degree of banality with which Pomsel describes her years working with Goebbels. One gets the impression of a thoroughly routine office of a contemporary government official. And yet, Pomsel dutifully types decisions, instructions and protocols justifying mass murder and a war of extermination.

At the end of her life, Pomsel still admires her boss as a “gifted actor.” She was only horrified when he raged in a notorious Sportpalast speech: “Do you want total war?,” and received thunderous applause—a single man who had bewitched the masses, an inexplicable “natural phenomena.”

This ignorance of Brunhilde Pomsel, 70 years after the end of the Second World War, her frank admission that she supported the Nazis out of self-interest and the brazen assertion that she had seen nothing and knew nothing is striking, but not novel—as the documentary dealing with Hitler’s secretary Traudl Junge

has also made clear.

The Nazi Party was a petty bourgeois movement, which could base itself on many such opportunists. Their later justifications, that they had known nothing, served to advance careers in postwar West Germany. After five years in prison, Pomsel was able to resume her former profession. She became chief secretary at the broadcaster ARD on the recommendation of a former Nazi reporter, who had long ago found himself a new position.

A German Life gets under one’s skin because it is so contemporary. The present war dangers, the misery of the millions of refugees and the rise of nationalism and fascism evoke the ghosts of the past. There are “terrifying analogies to the present,” say the directors. “Today, it is not just a country, but a whole continent that threatens to drift to the right. It seems frightening to us how little we have learned from this history, which is still within living memory.”

They had not wanted to “uncover the personal guilt of Mrs. Pomsel, to expose her as a Nazi, to condemn her. That would have been too easy.” Instead, they wanted to confront the viewer with “how quickly one can become a fellow-traveller.” Fellow-travellers are again becoming ubiquitous, “indifference towards others, the lack of empathy.”

The documentary ends with an urgent warning not to forget the dead of Buchenwald concentration camp. The images of stacked corpses recall another recent documentary. The film *Fuocoammare—Fire at Sea* by Gianfranco Rosi, which won the main prize at the Berlinale in 2016, showed dozens of intertwined corpses of African refugees in the hold of a refugee boat.

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