

## The Counterfeiters [Fälscher, Die]



### Film Details

Director: Ruzowitzky, 2007

It was the biggest counterfeit money scam of all time. Over 130 million pounds sterling were printed, under conditions that couldn't have been more tragic or spectacular. During the last years of the war, as the German Reich saw that the end of the war was near, the authorities decided to produce their own banknotes in the currencies of their major war enemies. They hoped to use the duds to flood the enemy economy and fill the empty war coffers. At the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, two barracks were separated from the rest of the camp and the outside world, and transformed into a fully equipped counterfeiter's workshop. 'Operation Bernhard' was born. Prisoners were brought to Sachsenhausen from other camps to implement the plan: professional printers, fastidious bank officials and simple craftsmen all became members of the top-secret counterfeit commando. They had the choice; if they cooperated with the enemy, they had a chance to survive, as first-class prisoners in a 'golden cage' with enough to eat and a bed to sleep in. If they sabotaged the operation, a sure death awaited them. For *The Counterfeiters*, it was not only a question of saving their own lives, but also about saving their consciences as well...

### Suitable for:

GCSE, AS/A2, Intermediate and Highers, Citizenship, History, German, Media/Film Studies.

## Key Characters

### Salomon Sorowitsch

In the opening sequence we meet Salomon 'Sally' Sorowitsch. This short sequence is very important in providing us with character information.

#### Key questions:

- What do we learn about him?
- How is this information conveyed to us? (Think about dialogue, body language and mise-en-scene.)
- How would you describe him from the opening?
- Does this information prove to be a reliable guide to the man we get to know throughout the film?
- Why do you think Herzog treats Salomon the way he does?

### Herzog

The relationship between Salomon and Herzog is central to the narrative.

#### Key questions:

- Do these characters have anything in common?
- What do you think motivates Herzog?
- At one point, Herzog claims to be 'saving Jews'. Do you think this is an accurate account of his behaviour?

Director Stefan Ruzowitzky comments on this saying:

*'On the trip to the set, the two 90-year-olds [Burger and Plappler] had been arguing about whether the SS Kommandant of the counterfeit workshop was a murderer or a saviour. I thought to myself: that's exactly what the film is about!'*

#### Key questions:

- What do you think about this comment?
- Are you surprised that they don't agree?

### Adolf Burger

During the course of the film we see Burger in a number of different ways.

#### Key questions:

- How does his character change over the course of the film?
- Can you understand his reason for sabotaging the production of the dollar?
- Burger has very definite ideas about how to respond to Nazi treatment. How would you describe his approach?
- Think about the whole film - when and how does he make a stand?
- What are the consequences for him and those around him?
- Think about these three central characters, do they have qualities, behaviours, and motives in common?

## Trailer analysis

Use the following link as a starting point to help you answer these questions.  
[www.diefaelscher.at/](http://www.diefaelscher.at/)

1. From the trailer, can you tell which parts of Salomon's life were before and after the concentration camp?
2. How important do you think the music is (diegetic – part of the story and non-diegetic – external to the story)?
3. You may be watching the trailer after having seen the film. If so, do you think that the trailer would have been enough to make you want to see the film?
4. If you were in charge of producing a trailer for a UK audience what approach would you take? Think about the whole film and what you think the key moments are, what do you want to leave in and just as importantly what do you want to leave out?
5. How much of a barrier are subtitles to you when making a choice to see a film?
6. If you are a German speaker, watch the trailer again and in pairs/small groups produce English subtitles. It is important to be accurate, but to also think about the context in which your translation will be seen. How much time is there to read subtitles? What do you need to get across to the audience? What gets lost?



## Bearing Witness

On 5th May 1945, Adolf Burger was freed by US troops at a sub camp of the Ebensee concentration camp. He returned to Czechoslovakia, where he worked as a printer again. He wrote down his recollections in 'The Devil's Workshop. The Counterfeit Money Workshop of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp' (Hentrich & Hentrich, Berlin 2006). It became his mission to disseminate the memories of his experiences and of that particular time. Now in his 90s, Burger continues to travel tirelessly, to hold lectures and give talks in schools to tell youths about his life and provide information about what really happened back then. Adapting Burger's book into a film was the next logical stage in this process, enabling the horrific events of that time to be remembered and brought to younger generations.

Making a film of real events is complicated. The filmmakers and actors involved feel that they have a responsibility to the people involved. This theme of responsibility is touched on by the director of *The Counterfeiters*, Stefan Ruzowitzky:

'For me, the most moving moment was undoubtedly when Burger and Plappler, the last survivors, were on the set and I realised: My God, this isn't just a flick we're making – this is history, this really happened, and these two men suffered through this ordeal.'

Sometimes there can be a tension between the process of filmmaking and the responsibility to the experiences of those that suffered. The filmed version must sustain the interest of its audience, and sometimes, this may be at the expense of a true, factual interpretation of the events being depicted. The difficult job of the director is to strike a balance between factual and entertaining.

### Key questions:

- Can we consider the film versions of these events as historical source?
- What problems or issues are raised here?

Ruzowitzky comments:

*'For a present day audience, an angry 'That's how it was!' is no longer enough. We have to talk about the Holocaust and so have a moral obligation to do so in a way that reaches as many viewers as possible. So, yes, a film about the Holocaust should be exciting as well as entertaining, in the best sense of the word. And The Counterfeiters is also an entertaining film. But I would like to say that I would never have dared to depict the everyday horror of a 'normal' concentration camp.'*

These comments raise some interesting questions about the purpose of the film.

### Key questions:

- Do you agree that contemporary audiences need to be entertained as well as made aware?
- Do you think this film appeals to a wide audience?
- How is this achieved?

In the climate that Ruzowitzky talks about, do you think that getting the balance between excitement, entertainment and not losing sight of the horrific experiences should be part of a filmmaker's moral obligation?

- Why do you think he talks about 'normal concentration camps' the way he does?

## Films about the Holocaust

This film can be considered as part of a group that offers audiences an initial overview of the Holocaust as well as giving a voice to the experience of the survivors.

The following titles are some well known and recent examples of films that deal with this subject.

- Schindler's List
- The Pianist
- Freedom Writers
- The Boy In The Striped Pyjamas

(All of the above titles have Film Education resources that can be accessed via the website [www.filmeducation.org](http://www.filmeducation.org))

All of these films, including *The Counterfeiters* have close associations with Holocaust survivors. For example, the director of *The Pianist*, Roman Polanski, lived in the Warsaw Ghetto that the film depicts.

### Key question:

- How important do you think it is that more than fifty years after the Holocaust films are still being made about it?

## Citizenship

The film provides many examples of kindness and bravery under the most extreme circumstances. The characters that we meet during the film have very different ways of standing up for what they believe in. This is highlighted most directly through the characters of Salomon and Burger. The director comments on these characters saying:

*'Never before had I been able to treat the tension between idealism and pragmatism in such a dramatic, existential framework.'*

### Key questions:

- Considering the experiences of these characters and indeed these individuals, can you understand their differing approaches?
- Do you agree on which character is the more idealistic and which is more pragmatic?
- Were there particular moments that you thought were particularly moving or inspiring?

## Lessons from the past

Part of the reason for wanting to bear witness is so that we know what happened and remember those who suffered as well as the ways in which this systematic oppression was achieved so that it never happens again.

Ruzowitzky talks about the way the film brings up issues that remain relevant:

*'I feel it's essentially about modern-day, universal questions. And that's why I was fascinated by the topic: is it possible to play ping pong in a concentration camp while a few metres away people are being tortured to death? This is no different than the question: Is it possible to take an all-inclusive vacation to a place where people are starving to death nearby? Is it possible to enjoy our rich, sheltered lives in the face of all the suffering in the world?'*

■ What do you think of this statement?

Ruzowitzky goes on to talk about his own circumstances and how this motivates him,

*'When you live in a country like Austria, where the right-wing-populist parties FPO and BZO with their intolerable closeness to Nazi ideology, consistently grab 20% of the votes and are even allowed to take part in running the country, which is just as intolerable – you simply have the urgent need to confront this topic every now and then.'*

This statement raises interesting areas for discussion. Consider the following statements as a starting point for debate:

- The lessons of the past have been lost. With more people participating in reality TV phone-ins than elections, how can we say we live in a democracy?
- The balance between rights and responsibilities has become distorted. People expect to be able to do as they like without any consideration of others.
- Democracy is about letting those that you personally don't like have a political voice. It is a sign of a mature democracy that parties of all parts of the political spectrum are represented.
- We are a society without community.

## Interesting links

[www.guardian.co.uk/austria/article/0,,1452908,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/austria/article/0,,1452908,00.html)

[www.cbsnews.com/stories/2000/11/21/60II/main251320.shtml](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2000/11/21/60II/main251320.shtml)

[www.channel4.com/history/microsites/H/history/n-s/swindle1.html](http://www.channel4.com/history/microsites/H/history/n-s/swindle1.html)

[www.radio.cz/en/article/90267](http://www.radio.cz/en/article/90267)

[www.lawrencemalkin.com/index.html](http://www.lawrencemalkin.com/index.html)

[www.diesfaelscher.at](http://www.diesfaelscher.at)