

Document Citation

Title	Forty years on
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Source	<i>Sight and Sound</i>
Date	1985 Jan
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Eine Liebe in Deutschland (A love in germany), Wajda, Andrzej, 1983

Forty years on

A Love in Germany/Jill Forbes

Sight / Sound
January 85

In what is today the Baden-Württemberg region of Southern Germany, in the sleepy village of Brombach where the Bürgermeister spent his days supping beer and the mail was delivered by a fat lady with blond plaits, the shopkeeper's wife Paulina seduced a Polish prisoner of war while her husband was away defending the territories of the Third Reich. Paulina had a son who is first seen sitting on the shop counter sucking a giant lollipop with a black swastika imprinted on it. Perhaps this is an emblem of the goodies promised to a childlike population by Hitler's regime. But if Herbert is lacking the percipience which characterises Oskar in *The Tin Drum*, he similarly witnesses his mother embracing a stranger and is sufficiently affected by the events which ensue to take his own son back to Brombach, forty years on, in an attempt to understand what took place.

Rolf Hochhuth, the author of the novel on which *A Love in Germany* (Artificial Eye) is based, has a reputation for seeking out fascist complicities, and here the target is, among others, the Swiss government, which made a practice of sending escaped Polish pows straight back to Germany. This is a true story, meticulously researched and,

under Wajda's direction, astonishing in the authenticity of its detail. So true is it, indeed, that it reveals more about the tenor of village life than any fiction could, for in Brombach no one acts from high-principled sympathy with the regime, and motivation has less to do with place and time than with a conventional case of rivalry among women.

Herbert starts out with the slightly naive belief that he can discover who denounced his mother. Elsbeth her book-keeper, whose fiancé is killed at the front before ever she lost her virginity, finds Paulina's ostentatious flirtation offensive and cruel, so it could have been her. But it could equally have been Maria next door who covets (and eventually acquires) Paulina's shop and who is envious of her neighbour's son, husband, and the amount of money she is reputedly making. And it could have been the Melchiors on whom Stani the Pole is billeted, or the chemist from whom Paulina buys condoms, or any of the people who were in the chemist's shop at the time, or any of her own customers who have seen Stani in the shop. The point is that Paulina refuses to hide her infatuation from the village and refuses to be contrite. She throws caution to the winds by visiting the injured Stani in



hospital and refuses to plead that she was raped when she is finally apprehended. Her friends and neighbours feel cheated in the face of such an unnatural unwillingness to be let off the hook and, as Herbert reluctantly comes to realise, morally speaking they are all guilty.

After Paulina is arrested there occurs a significant shift of location and tone. The village is left behind and we enter the arcane world of organised racism, regulated by a rule-book so byzantine that special medical experts are required to interpret it. The ss officer in charge of the case has taken a shine to Paulina and, since she claims full responsibility, dreams up a wheeze for, as it were, retrospective legitimisation by declaring Stani a candidate for Germanisation. Clearly, just any Pole won't do: postulants must be checked for height, weight, skin colour, hair colour, etc, against a complicated system of gradings designed to dispel all ambiguities and provide for all eventualities. Stani's skull is measured with a contraption that looks like a scold's cap, his eyes are matched against a sheet of glass marbles each a slightly different shade of blue and classified from 'A' to 'J'. The entire operation recalls medieval tests for sorcery and we would hardly have been surprised if he had been dunked in the village pond and left to sink or swim. Yet the soldiers performing this grotesque verification take it only half seriously, while the doctor mobilised to sign the papers rejects the whole business as nonsense. Thus we are only returned from the realms of light relief by Stani loudly protesting that he is a Pole and intends to remain one.

With this he has signed his own death warrant and black tragedy replaces black comedy as the gallows looms. Another Pole is found to hang his compatriot and extensively briefed in the macabre art of placing the noose correctly round the condemned man's

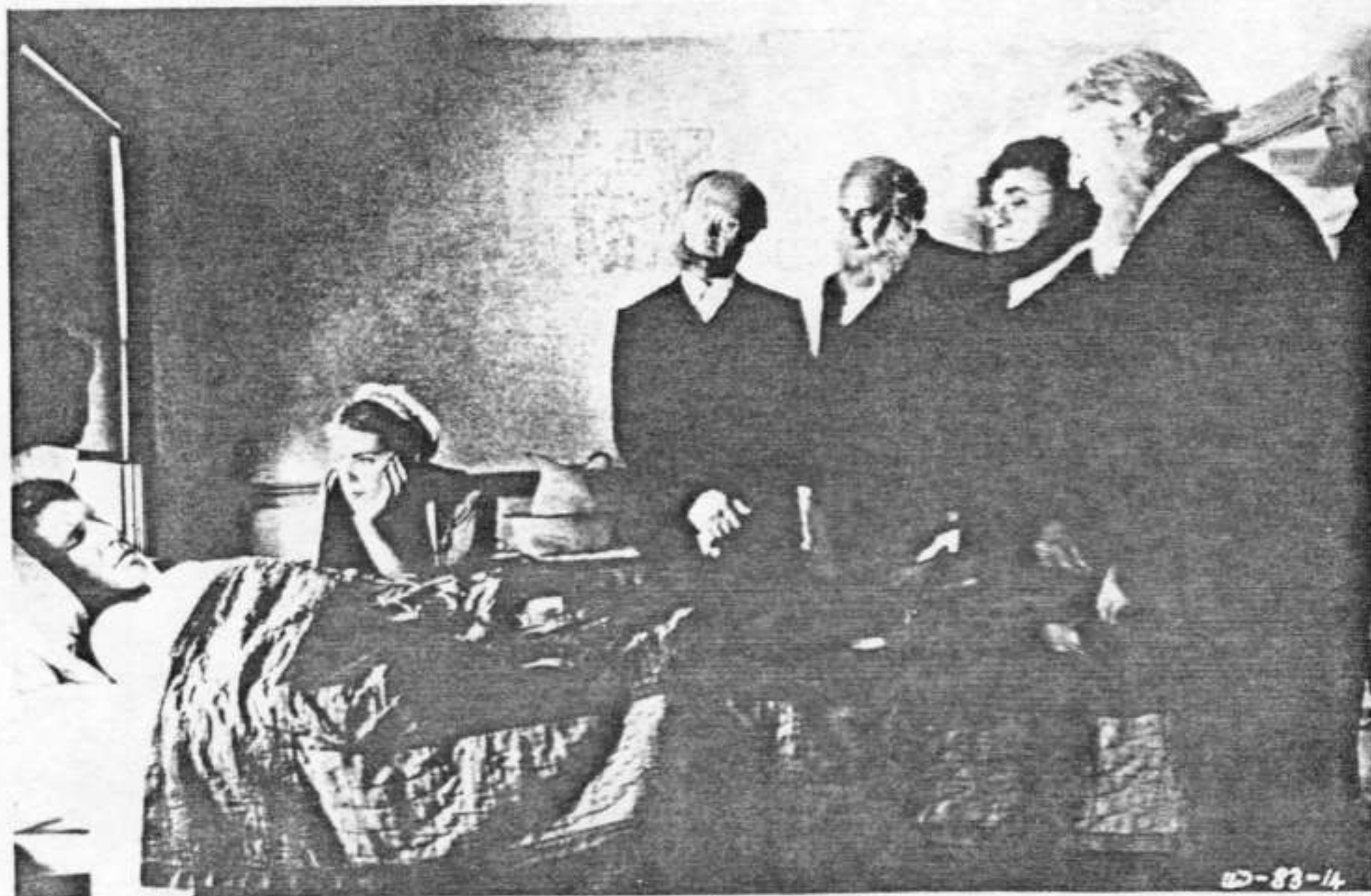
neck. A lorryload of Polish prisoners accompanies the execution squad back to Brombach where, in the quarry where he and Paulina first made love, they witness *pour l'exemple* Stani's slow agony. Paulina is hounded out of town with a scarlet letter round her neck and Herbert is taken into care. So ends a squalid little chapter of German history.

Andrzej Wajda is possibly the most celebrated member of the Polish diaspora next to the Pope and his films have kept modern Polish history in the forefront of our minds for the last 25 years. This is why a particular interest has surrounded the trilogy he is due to make abroad, with the help of the French Ministry of Culture. His sense of timing is impeccable: *Danton*, that meditation on the course of the Revolution, opened at the height of Solidarity's activities; now *A Love in Germany* coincides with the fortieth anniversary of VE Day. And yet, the films Wajda has made abroad paradoxically have a less universal import than the apparently more parochial *A Generation*, *Kanal* or *Man of Marble*. Without in any way wishing to deny that the Nazi treatment of the Poles was abominable, *A Love in Germany* is very much a reminder that Germany has a 'Polish Question' much as Britain has an 'Irish Question'. The fact that Wajda is playing away from home may explain, therefore, an unevenness which is otherwise difficult to account for.

The first part of this film does for provincial Germany what Chabrol has done for provincial France—the rhythm of village life, with its gossip and petty jealousies but also its affection and solidarity, is brilliantly observed. It is quite clear that Nazi regulations are more honoured in the breach than in the observance and that most of the inhabitants are carrying on as normal. The drama turns on the contrasting performances of Hanna Schygulla and

Marie-Christine Barrault who, as Paulina's lascivious neighbour, steals the show and confirms that she is one of the great underrated actresses of this generation. The second part begins as a German version of *Dad's Army*, which is an original not to say refreshing approach to the ss, but these essentially comic, or at least lighthearted, scenes sit uneasily with the gruesome and sadistic execution and the adult Herbert's persistent failure to get answers to his questions.

There may be no reason why *a priori* we should expect films about Germany at war to be meditations on the nature of fascism and to embody the desperation we know it caused. Yet somehow that is what the best ones are, and though *A Love in Germany* may well be about 'ordinary' fascism it fails to measure up to the competition of *Germany, Pale Mother* and others of that kind. On the other hand, the portrayal of day to day life is so successful that it somewhat diminishes the Polish dimension, which is unfortunate since part of Poland's problem is that it has always been the subplot rather than the plot. As it becomes increasingly difficult to say who won the war, it is at least obvious that the Poles lost it, but Wajda, who has performed so well in the propaganda war which ensued, is in danger of surrender in *A Love in Germany*. Poles go home? □



Witness: Succoured by the British.