

THE BOOTLEG FILES: "THE FUHRER GIVES A CITY TO THE JEWS"

by Phil Hall
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BOOTLEG FILES 169: "The Fuhrer Gives a City to the Jews" (an astonishing 1944 Nazi propoganda charade).

AMERICAN HOMEVIDEO: None.

REASON FOR DISAPPEARANCE: As with other Nazi-era propoganda, there is no commercial call for it.

CHANCES OF SEEING A DVD RELEASE: Unlikely.

Trying to apply the basic tenets of sanity to the propoganda films of Nazi Germany is a vain endeavor, since those delusional and vile movies exist in their own sphere of logic. But even within that sorry genre, the 1944 short film "The Fuhrer Gives a City to the Jews" is so outrageous that its very existence is mind-boggling.

In 1944, after repeated requests by the International Committee for the Red Cross to examine conditions in Nazi concentration camps across Europe, the German government decided to coordinate a heavily controlled tour of the Jewish ghetto at the Czechoslovakian town of Terezin (called Theresienstadt in Germans). Located outside of Prague, Theresienstadt was not a concentration camp, but rather was a temporary holding location where the deported Jews of Europe awaited their final journey to Auschwitz. A recorded 33,000 people died from hunger or disease from the miserable conditions at Theresienstadt.

For the Red Cross inspection, however, the Nazis turned Theresienstadt into a Potemkin village, complete with hasty paint jobs and the construction of facades for nonexistent shops and cafes. The overcrowded conditions were relieved by deporting thousands of Jewish inmates to Auschwitz. The Red Cross delegates must have been incredibly stupid, as they believed Theresienstadt to be a humane resettlement village for the Jewish people who were taken by force from their homes in Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Denmark, Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. (For the record, Denmark's government was not fooled and successfully worked to get nearly all of the Danish Jews released from Theresienstadt before they could be shipped to Auschwitz.)

Buoyed by the charade pulled on the Red Cross, the Nazis decided to create a propoganda film to depict Theresienstadt as a model settlement for the Jewish people. Why this film was needed was never clear, since it obviously contradicted the Nazi goal of the Final Solution as determined by the Wannsee Conference in January 1942. Furthermore, the film was designed to present a positive view of Jewish life, which also contradicted years of propoganda designed to demonize the European Jewish community as parasitic and bloodthirsty.

But the weirdest aspect of this production was the decision to have one of the Jewish inmates direct the film. Kurt Gerron, a German actor/director who was barred from the German film industry after the Nazi rise to power, was living in the Netherlands when he was arrested and sent to Theresienstadt. It is not clear why he was chosen to direct this propoganda film, nor is it clear whether he took the assignment happily or was forcibly coerced. In any event, Gerron wound up with the unhappy distinction of being the only Jewish artist to direct a movie in the World War II-era Nazi cinema.

The resulting film is known in English as "The Fuhrer Gives a City to the Jews" and it shows a happy day in the life of the "city" which the benevolent Adolf H. put aside for Europe's Jews. On the surface, it all seems benign, almost to the point of being quotidian.

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-7220829978743875704#> (16 min)