

WHITE SPOTS ABOUT THE FACES

BY CHRISTOPH HUBER, "DIE PRESSE"

With her film "Das wirst du nie verstehen", Anja Salomonowitz performs a general overhaul of the genre historical witness film. A great little documentary film from Austria. By Christoph Huber

Hanka will not speak about the time in Auschwitz; that's what was agreed. Hanka is the great aunt of Anja Solomonowitz, and one of the three elderly protagonists of "Das wirst du nie verstehen," a groundbreaking attempt to approach the genre of the historical witness documentary from a new perspective. The second figure is simply called "Tante"; during World War II, she was a nanny for the filmmaker's family, a devoted Socialist who supported their uncle in his resistance to the Nazi regime. The third figure is Salomonowitz's grandmother, who lived during that time in Graz. "She did the same as everyone else did: nothing," summarizes the filmmaker in her commentary from the off.

"My best friend summed it up as: a kind of film about the roles of perpetrator and victim roles, both from your family" Salomonowitz immediately states, and adds, "and I think, like a lot of people: but my grandparents are no perpetrators." Thus she asks questions, not least of herself: How to stage a film about memories, which she knows in advance will contradict each other? Salomonowitz decides on a type of laboratory experiment that makes memory itself the lead actor.

"Das wirst du nie verstehen" differs from what we are used to seeing when survivors talk about the war: the apartment interiors, the survivors, are clad in white. There is no personal ambient; no comfortable living room situation: a decision that stresses not only what is spoken, the core of the recollections, but also once again makes the director's ambivalent initial position visible. White spots about the familiar faces: that which cannot be discovered even with the closest intimacy, that which does not want to be torn from the darkness of memory.

How is memory constructed?

Or cannot. The title of the film comes from its ending. It is the last sentence by Hanka, whose discomfort with the film project was already clearly perceptible: over the phone she declares that it is impossible for her to disclose what remains of the suffering of concentration camp survivors: "You will never understand," she says and the screen becomes completely white. It is a forced ending, but not necessarily a failure and even if it were, then it is more the productive kind. At this point in time it has already been made clear that Salomonowitz is not concerned with individual explanations, but with a more complex relationship to memory, to historical memory itself.

It was not until after 1946 that he really knew hunger, the grandfather says. But Salomonowitz also "learns from Tante that the war was worse than the post-war years." How is memory constructed? In essayistic commentaries from the off, Salomonowitz describes the rules of historical witness discourse, points out how deeply speaking from perpetrator and victim roles has been collectively normalized—which the discussions also show, exemplarily. Hanka's final rejection can also be read as a refusal to be pushed into this role.

"Das wirst du nie verstehen" fascinates and moves us beyond the individual narratives in its attempt to lend resonance to the contradictions between the "subjective," the personalities and the current everyday lives, and the "objective," the historical and the complex contradictions in relationship with the past. Unavoidably, this results in more dissonance, but as such, a dissonance that sharpens our awareness. The white upon which Solomonowitz builds her film serves to illuminate, not to fade out.