

THE LABORATORY OF SILENCE

DIETMAR KAMMERER

Anja Salomonowitz' You will never understand this

Anja Salomonowitz undertakes an investigation of history. She allows three women to speak about what they experienced when they were young, during the era of Nazi dictatorship. Back then the three women didn't know each other; today they are members of Salomonowitz's family. But that is all that connects them. And separating them are the experiences of the past. Margit Kohlhauser, the grandmother, lived in Graz during the war. What she knows most about this time is: "the population suffered so greatly from the war." Gertrude Rogenhofer, the nanny and "second granny," was in the Socialist Turnverein (Athletic Club). Her fondest memories from this era are of the demonstrations, in which she took part. She still has the red pennant. And she supported people from the resistance. Hanka Jassy, the great aunt, survived Auschwitz. She refuses to speak about what she had to endure in the concentration camp.

In a discussion at the Viennale film festival, the director called Salomonowitz's film a "clinical laboratory situation," a "study." And yes, it is indeed "clinical." She asked her interview partners to wear only white clothing for the filming. The conversations, which were conducted in the women's apartments, used white backgrounds wherever possible; sofas and beds were covered with white materials: An unusual step, certainly in the context of an introduction to one's own family, and also for the depiction of memory work. We are generally accustomed to something different for this conversational situation, "interview with a historical witness," in the dominant image code: warm color tones, a decidedly personal ambient, a comfortable living room that always contains a table and a bookshelf. And this scenario can be found even more extensively in feature film productions: not a single historical film about the Nazi era would go without the "brown-beige patina of coming to terms with the German past" (Katja Nicodemus). In the context of these kinds of stagings, Salomonowitz's gentle, sub-cooled methods are like balsam. The staging here is reductive, "to denaturalize the environment," in order to arrive at what is essential, explains the filmmaker. Of

interest is not the present, the everyday lives of those portrayed, but the theme. A precautionary measure, a necessary operation. Salomonowitz has the film begin with Hanka opening the door to her apartment, which is secured by five locks. A tortuously long and complicated scene. Whoever has to secure themselves to that degree does not want anyone to get too close. She is the only one of the three that does not wear white, because she decided not to take part in the interviews. At some point she will speak with her niece, but only over the telephone. The sentence that the film takes for its title is from her, but it could also be from the grandmother in Graz, coming from a conversation about the generation gap: "Did you ever use the greeting 'Heil Hitler'?" "I don't remember." "You were as old as I am now." "Please, that was sixty years ago." Other things—such as the rationing of butter during the war—the grandmother remembers quite well. There are different kinds of silence, says Salomonowitz: one that talks in order to silence the others, and one that is silent, because it remembers too well. A concept and its implementation: what the filmmaker wanted to expose, was, in her view, more the functioning of the standards of memory and less so personal confessions. Similar to the way that the discourse on "historical witnesses" as a rule gives both victims and perpetrators collective rather than individual speaking positions. Perhaps the refusal of her great aunt Hanka to take part in the study as the "survivor" allowed her to settle any open accounts. Perhaps the service of the film and its title lies in having recognized this. (Appeared in *kolik.film - Sonderheft Österreichisches Kino*, [Special edition on Austrian cinema] March 2004, p.32-33) www.anjasalomonowitz.com