

## ON THE VOICES AND SILENCE OF GRANDMOTHERS

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Anja Salomonowitz, a young filmmaker of the "third generation," lets her own grandmother speak in "Das wirst du nie verstehen." What results is not a family film, but a vivid documentary about ignorance, powerlessness, and guilt.

The black letters DAS WIRST DU NIE VERSTEHEN on the poster's pure white background announce the strictly enforced concept. The color white plays a dominant role in the film: The entire background, the walls, and the upholstery in the apartments are white; even the people are dressed in white. The filmmaker wants to prevent viewers from being distracted by unimportant details; she wants the content to take effect without optical irritants. And yet another element becomes a great strength in Anja Salomonowitz's film—the actors' involvement with each other and with history. At the center are three women, the three "grandmothers" of the 28 year-old filmmaker. The real grandmother comes from Graz and has a to-put it mildly-murky memory of the Nazi period. The second protagonist, "Hanka," the great aunt, is a Jewish concentration camp survivor from today's Czech Republic. The third elderly woman was once the family's nanny, called "Tante" in family jargon and is a proud old school Viennese Social Democrat. Certainly it provides, if the word can be used for a personal family film, interesting casting. Yet the "grandmother trio" first comes into play through a convincing dramatic artifice: Anja Salomonowitz's younger sister Yael, who asks questions that appear naive, but in reality are merciless, becomes a central figure in many different respects: not yet twenty years old, the young woman symbolizes the age of the three women during the time on which the film focuses—World War II. She is the figure that is needed to create a connection between the three women. She is the stranger through whom, as in Ibsen, the story unrolls and she is at the same time right in the middle as the representative of the filmmaker, who is equally present and absent. A wise and fortunate constellation for a film in which the appropriate mixture of distance and proximity is decisive for the quality. "Das wirst du nie verstehen" is a film about identity and memory, a film in which the so-called third generation, intellectually prepared, asks very personal questions and with this know-how, investigates their own family history. If one asks the filmmaker in an interview why she as a young woman wants to continually bring up the past when the second generation has already said for years that finally, enough is enough and one should let the old days rest, she surprisingly casts this question aside. And the insistent questioner will also not learn of her inner

sentiments. It is obvious to her that she must uncover this seeing illusion, but apparently without taking a strict position in the old discussion, as the second generation was constantly required to do: "I was sitting at the table at a family party. The grandmothers were talking, having cake and coffee, and I asked myself how is this possible?" The silence over what the three women experienced from three different perspectives is what inspired Salomonowitz's attempt to have the women speak in the film. The viewers are offered exactly this scene, in which the grandmothers meet for cake and coffee. And together with the filmmaker we are somehow happy that once again they don't bring up any difficult topics. For it is sometimes said of artists and historians of the third generation, whether they are offspring of the perpetrators or victims, that they comprehend the period of World War II only as a family story and neglect to consider history as a coherent structure. Anja Salomonowitz also presents an uncompromisingly personal family film, but with the identifying concept of trying to track down the general: "It is not only about personal experience, but about the relationship between personal and collective memories. And there is always the question of whether the statements of historical witness are really personal experiences or presentations of collective assumptions. Do people believe they really experienced something or do they merely repeat collective memories?" This problematic was portrayed particularly well in the scenes of the grandmother with her husband, a German from Sudetenland, who lost a leg in the war, when they speak about which time was actually worse: before or after the war.

As a response to the criticism that the recent writing of history has become lost in the presentation of individual family histories, Anja Salomonowitz proves that the ability to tell these subjective family stories is the special and unique contribution that this third generation has to offer. Whereas sometimes a window was opened by either parent or a child in the wall of silence that developed between the first and second generations, the window was never opened by both at the same time. In contrast, grandparents and grandchildren are, in principle, much more capable of speaking openly with each other. Nevertheless, it is evident

that this possibility is exhausted only by a small "avant-garde": after all, most grandchildren and great-grandchildren are still willing to take on the prefabricated family rhetoric. Additionally, there is a tendency from generation to generation to view ancestors positively and to accept them. In many families it is similar to that of the lawyer who, after 1938, first shamefully robbed his Jewish clients and then had them deported. His children see him as a man who didn't have an easy time of it during the war years. And because it is a deep wish to want to believe only the best about one's ancestors, for the next generation grandfathers and great-grandfathers mutate into resistance fighters who helped many poor Jews escape. "Das wirst du nie verstehen" proves to us that subjectivity and differentiation are not contradictory-even within a short hour. We experience on the one hand the "defensive rhetoric" of the grandmother, for example, as she over-emphasizes the suffering of German prisoners of war. Or the ever-present helplessness of the "Tante," when she explains that it wasn't possible for her to give water to the Jews imprisoned in a hot wagon in the sizzling sun at Westbahnhof. In an interview, Salomonowitz states that not being able to reach the outstretched hands mirrors the powerlessness of the worker's movement in the face of the Nazi regime. Toward the end of the film, the Jewish great-aunt Hanka refuses to talk. She can't speak about it any longer; the case is closed. What she would speak about would be too horrible-this history of suffering and then the "survival guilt." She is silent, because it is the only way to spare her from her memories. The three grandmothers meet on the occasion of their "granddaughter" Yael's birthday. The "aunt," the former nanny, sits between the familial poles: the grandmother who never learned any better and the Jewish great aunt. They talk over coffee and cake-never about their histories.

When Anja Salomonowitz notes in passing, that "nothing at all happened" at this meeting we almost detect her relief that we all know so well when we bring together people who are important to us, but who are strangers to each other. And when the filmmaker brings her viewers' attention to the fact that Hanka has forgotten on this day to wear white clothing, as arranged for all of the days of filming, we sense not only the closeness of the filmmaker to her own "actresses" but also a sympathetic irony to

her own strictly "white" concept. Anja Salomonowitz has succeeded in making an outstanding film about Vienna. With simple means, she finds a language for the complexity of the history of this city. And because she, despite inner resistance, decided to remain strictly personal, it is also a film that does not require a discussion from the target audience. It is as well-received among the residents of Vienna as it is at foreign film festivals, because it convincingly explains the problems of a city that everyone knows is beautiful but whose residents all too willingly repress the past. With this film, however, it becomes clear to the viewers that there are occasionally people who do not want to give up because-simply and ultimately-they want to understand. "Das wirst du nie verstehen"-Documentary by Anja Salomonowitz Publikumspreis [Audience prize] at the festival of the Filmakademie Prize for New Films at the documentary film festival, Visions du Réel in Nyon (Switzerland) Agency/Contact: sixpackfilm (office@sixpackfilm.com).