# ARTS & CULTURE

# Stalking History

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*When German filmmaker Malte Ludin (right) delves into his father's past, he learns that he deported nearly 9,000 Jews to Nazi camps. The ensuing confrontation with his sister, Barbel (left), points to the conflicting ways Germans grapple with their history.*

Delving into the Nazi past is also at the heart of another new documentary, *2 or 3 Things I Know About Him*, distributed by the National Center for Jewish Film (NCJF) at Brandeis University. This time, the researcher is German filmmaker Malte Ludin and his subject is the father he barely knew, Hanns Ludin, who was executed for war crimes in 1947. As diligently as he pushes to understand what drove his father to embrace Nazi ideology, Malte's siblings resist. The tension between them not only provides some real-life domestic drama, but also sheds light onto collective German amnesia about the Third Reich and the Holocaust.

The single most formative influence on Hanns Ludin as a young boy was World War I and Germany's defeat. His parents were artistic and steeped in German romanticism. According to Malte, "United in their fear of the coming 'modern times,' my father shared with his father a penchant for mysticism and enthusiasm—a tendency to equate the ideal and reality." Hanns' career in the German army ended when he was arrested in 1930 for joining the National Socialist party. Out of jail a year later and jobless, he channeled his energies into the SA, a Nazi paramilitary group, making speeches at recruiting rallies. According to Malte's mother, Hanns was full of "despair and rage" when many of his comrades were purged in Hitler's Night of the Long Knives, and yet, Ludin did not quit the SA. His service was rewarded in 1940 when he was

appointed ambassador to Slovakia; he and his family took up residence in Bratislava (formerly Pressburg), in an "Aryanized villa" the Nazis had confiscated from a beer magnate named Steiner.

Malte interviews surviving sisters Barbel, Ellen and Andrea. (His eldest sister, Erika, who never got over the family scandal, died a broken alcoholic. His older brother Tilman left Germany at age 16 to re-settle in South Africa and avoided talking about Hanns.) Andrea, only four when her father was hanged, was later told he died in action. Ellen, the middle sister, wavers when she recalls him, wanting to believe he couldn't have known about the Final Solution. But the eldest, Barbel, strives the most to paint a fond portrait of a *bon vivant* who loved his family, good food and wine. Malte ironically cuts between her reminiscences of an idyllic childhood in Bratislava and an interview with Holocaust survivor Dr. Juraj Stern, whose family lived near the German embassy and the Ludins' residence but was forcibly ejected when the area was "cleansed" of Jews. Stern survived the war hidden in a barn.

By reading all the files on his father, Malte hoped to find something that would exonerate Hanns. But the record is clear: Hanns Ludin authorized the deportation of nearly 9,000 Slovakian Jews to the camps. Malte and Barbel argue on camera about guilt and shame; Barbel protests she feels none because the Jews that were deported, she insists, were "partisans" who were rounded up with Polish partisans and local Resistance members, and that people die in wars. Their argument takes place in her artist's studio, as attractive as her comfortable home—and one can't shake the feeling that, as much as she's defending the father she loved, she's also clinging to a tradition of German bourgeois refinement at polar opposites with Nazi barbarism. She, like many of her generation, wants to carry on as though the Third Reich never happened; she lacks the facility for compartmentalization that her father so evidently possessed. Only in interviews with Hanns Ludin's grandchildren do we hear a more clear-sighted assessment of his role in the war. *2 or 3*

*Things I Know About Him* may be a microcosmic view of Germans grappling with history, but its intimacy is the source of its power.