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2 oder 3 Dinge, die ich von ihm weiss: Die Gegenwart der Vergangenheit in einer deutschen Familie. Malte Ludin.

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Bourgeois Bohemians Confronting their Family's Nazi Past

The evening before I watched this film for the first time, I happened across an investigative program on German television that dealt with the same broad theme as Malte Ludin's film–<cite>Verhangenheitsbewltigung</cite>–but in a decidedly different setting. The TV report cast a critical eye on the partnership between the German Bundeswehr's mountain infantry division and an association of World War II <cite>Gebirgsjger</cite> veterans. The program exhorted today's Bundeswehr to be more discriminating when choosing partners to promote its sense of military tradition; the august veterans who participated in a wreath-laying ceremony near a Bavarian barracks in June 2005 once belonged to an alpine unit notorious for committing atrocities in wartime Greece, including mass killings of Jews. One elderly gentlemen dressed in Upper Bavarian <cite>Tracht</cite> (and speaking in a broad dialect to match) justified the murders of unarmed Jews by assuring the interviewer that "they were all partisans"–even the children. A woman who supported the veterans tellingly turned on the television interviewer with accusations against "the Jews," who in her view must self-evidently be behind any public criticism of German soldiers' conduct in World War II. Insinuating that ulterior financial motives underlay the anti-<cite>Gebirgsjger</cite> protests, she helpfully reminded viewers that the Federal Republic has already paid billions of Deutschmarks of reparations to Israel. <p> Such attitudes among Wehrmacht veterans and their sympathizers will hardly surprise anyone who follows German public debates about the Nazi past. Besides the fact that they both treat Germans' continued obsession with coming to terms with the Nazi past, this television report and Malte Ludin's new film appear to have little in common–were it not for that telling quotation about Jews as partisans. That association surfaces again, in a surprising setting, in the film under review here. In <cite>2 oder 3 Dinge, die ich von ihm weiss,</cite> Ludin offers a filmic expos of his own family's <cite>Vergangenheitsbewltigung</cite> concerning the Nazi past, specifically the career of his father Hanns, a high-ranking SA officer and Nazi diplomat implicated in the Holocaust. <p> Who was Hanns Elard Ludin? Born into an academic family in Freiburg im Breisgau in 1905, Hanns became an officer in the Weimar-era army, where he surreptitiously organized Nazi cells. For these activities, he was sentenced to prison in the 1930 "Reichswehr Trial" in Ulm. Forced to leave the army, Hanns entered the NSDAP and SA, rising to become one of the latter organization's leading lights in southwestern Germany. His career stalled after the anti-SA Rhm putsch, but revived again when Foreign Minister Ribbentrop made it his policy to appoint SA men to ambassadorships throughout southeastern Central Europe in order to contain the encroachment of the rival SS onto diplomatic terrain. From early 1941 to 1945, Hanns Ludin served as Berlin's minister to the Axis client state of Slovakia. He has been described as a relatively moderate Nazi who was given the task of mediating between the two rival factions in Slovak politics and thereby assuring the country's stability as an Axis partner.[1] In that capacity, he undoubtedly played a supporting role in

the bureaucratic/diplomatic process by which Slovakia deported most of its Jews to German death camps. At times, in fact–despite his moderate image–he appears to have pushed the Slovaks to speed up their deportations.[2] Approximately 56,000 of the 89,000 Slovakian Jews perished in the Holocaust.[3] Hanns Ludin also helped coordinate the bloody repression of the Slovak National Uprising in 1944. After the war, he surrendered to American forces, who returned him to Czechoslovakian authorities. He was convicted as a war criminal and executed in 1947. Unfortunately for viewers who are not intimately familiar with the history of World War II-era Slovakia, Malte Ludin's film does not always present this information in chronologically coherent fashion or place it in its proper historical context. <p> Some critics have stressed the "shock" value of this filmic expos about one family's refusal to accept the truth about their patriarch's culpability in Nazi crimes, but that is really nothing new. Difficulty in facing the truth, even outright denial about the role of close relatives under disgraced ex-regimes would appear to be the norm, and not just in Germany.[4] The film, however, does teach us a few other things that have generally gone unremarked and may reveal a thing or two about class and education in the German-speaking world. <p> We see, for example, that a cultured, prosperous, cosmopolitan life in postwar West Germany, Johannesburg or London does not immunize a family against patterns of denial and rationalization more commonly associated with the (presumably reactionary) <cite>Stammtisch</cite>. We've come to expect many Wehrmacht veterans (and conservative older Germans generally) to insist that massacred Jews, whether in Slovakia or the Ukraine, were overwhelmingly "partisans" or that perpetrators of Nazi crimes were actually victims of their time. But we are not used to hearing such apologias from fashionable, cultured, thoroughly liberal-appearing women such as Barbel Ludin. To a woman, the striking Ludin sisters (eerie: the almond-shaped brown eyes passed down by Hanns to almost all of his descendants) come across as stylish, laid-back, postmodern creative types, people who look as though they vote for the Greens and just returned from the reception at a gallery opening. To borrow a label from present-day American cultural sociology, they are "bourgeois bohemians."[5] <p> A second sister, Andrea–even younger-looking than Barbel and just as bourgeois bohemian in appearance–argues, incredibly, that Hanns could not have lied about what he knew or didn't know of the Shoah because honesty was an especially German virtue of the time! We've heard all such claims before, but the fact that these words come not from elderly men wearing Tyrolean hats, or tinted spectacles and beige sta-prest trousers, but from someone who looks instead like a contemporary art historian is what truly jars–and fascinates. Education, prosperity and enlightened cosmopolitanism cannot guarantee a self-critical appraisal of Nazism, at least when the reputations of one's own family members are at issue, as new research is beginning to make clear. In a recent H-German review of Olaf Jensen's book, Kimba Allie Tichenor noted "the higher the educational level achieved by subsequent generations, the more likely they were to lose all critical perspective when evaluating the stories told by family members who lived during the Third Reich."[6] The sophisticated, worldly Ludin family appears to be a case in point. <p> Malte describes his father's father as "a romantic" and in photographs, Hanns does look like a bourgeois bohemian of the early twentieth century. In fact, a strong thread of bourgeois bohemianism seems to run through this strikingly handsome family's history: the sisters appear on camera before imposing book-filled shelves or in artist's studios crammed with papier-mache sculptures and other oddities, artsy clippings tacked to the wall. One of Malte's nieces studied in London and fell in love with a Jewish Briton. Hanns himself was an educated man whose affected <cite>schwrmerisch</cite> "idealism" as a young officer candidate was common in bourgeois academic circles of the day and among the intellectual right. <p> The film contains some powerful, even chilling moments. One of Malte's brothers-in-law, rationalizing that the documents he read do not make explicitly clear that the ambassador knew the ultimate fate of deported Jews, fidgets nervously as he tries, not very convincingly, to exculpate Hanns of complicity. The archives, it seems, tell a different story–and Malte has consulted them. <p> Such patterns of denial may indeed be broadly representative of postwar German families and Malte introduces his film as a "typical German story." In many respects, however, the Ludins are rather atypical. Are most Germans in their late sixties as slim, good-looking and stylish (in a bourgeois bohemian way, naturally) as the Ludins uniformly appear to be? How many possess personal libraries filled with vintage books, have homes with orchard-like gardens, or send their children to study at the London School of Economics? All of these things appear to be taken for granted in the world of the postwar Ludins. Apparently, the family did not suffer much materially, either from the war or from their father's status as a convicted Nazi criminal. <p> <cite>2 oder 3 Dinge, die ich von ihm weiss</cite> is an intriguing film, but it leaves many questions unaddressed. These matters are not always the

kind that stimulate thought; rather, they left me feeling the author didn't do his homework thoroughly enough. Malte offers no self-analysis as to how he came to be the family conscience. How long had he suspected or known of his father's true past? And why did the sisters, who to a woman defend their father (or at least their own insistence on allowing personal affectionate memories to dominate their view of him) agree to be in the film, and have their agonizing moments eternalized on celluloid, if they reject Malte's critical view of their father? Is this a failure of self-recognition? Or simply narcissism? I suspect that Malte's less forgiving attitude and lack of fierce loyalty toward his father, which the elder sisters all share, may in part be the product of something as banal as his later birthdate. Malte was just three when Hanns was executed and, unlike his older sisters, never had the chance to know his father personally. <p> In his zeal to demonstrate that Hanns's dubious past has been suppressed by a family conspiracy, Malte can seem unfairly harsh with relatives who are, after all, just the descendants of a Nazi, not Nazis themselves. The viewers in the seats behind me murmured disapprovingly when one of Malte's brothers-in-law, Fedor, insisted it was impossible that his own son, now a student in his twenties, claims he grew up thinking of Hanns as a "resistance fighter." At first glance, Fedor comes off looking disingenuous in that scene, yet his disbelief struck me as plausible. After all, <cite>Verdrngung</cite> of the truth is one thing, outright fabrication of lies another. It might have been relatively easy to rationalize that Hanns Ludin did not have knowledge of the Holocaust. With what justification, however, could anyone in his family have credibly held up a Nazi official who was publicly tried and executed for his crimes after the war as a resistance fighter? Did he commit any acts in his official or private life that lent themselves to such an interpretation? The film doesn't offer any clues. <p> At times, Malte appears as a stereotypical " '68er" angrily confronting his parents' generation–except that he appears to have waited until his parents were both dead before doing so. Malte explains that he could not have made this film until his mother Erla died, and she lived a long time, into the mid-1990s. Well, why not? And who was it, then, that videotaped an interview with Erla Ludin in 1978–footage that Malte includes in this film–asking pointed questions about Auschwitz and what the Ludins knew about it, and why? It appears not to have been her son. <p> Perhaps students of the cinema will find aesthetic value in Malte's collage-like editing. As a historian, however, I judge his film by its self-proclaimed intent of exploring <cite>Vergangenheitsbewltigung</cite> and as a document of historical events. I'm interested not only in the internal psychological dynamics of the Ludin family but in places, names and biographies, as well as where these fit into and help shape the historical context. And in those respects this doubtless interesting and worthwhile film manifests considerable deficiencies. <p> In one scene, Malte stands in front of the former ambassador's Bratislava residence where he himself was born, predictably an "Aryanized" house. It belonged to a Jewish brewer whose son, hidden in a manger by a Slovak peasant, survived to be interviewed for this film. The man offers a concise, eloquent and moving account of his own experiences. Too often, however, intriguing settings or people appear without adequate identification or explanation. Most viewers will probably not know enough about Slovakia and its history to be able, first, to identify the places and, second, make the connections to the story of the Ludins. Malte Ludin covers the brief story of the Slovakian state only in the broadest outlines. Perhaps it would be unfair to expect his film to provide a more subtle and differentiated historical account. But since Hanns Ludin's status as "war criminal" is the basis of Malte's investigation and the resulting film, one might have expected him to examine more closely his father's actions while posted in Slovakia. <p> A second example: Malte introduces us to the poet Tuvia Ruebner, who as a Jewish adolescent in wartime Slovakia managed an 11th-hour escape to Palestine while his parents perished in the Shoah. In footage of the initial meeting between Ruebner and Malte, the filmmaker reveals his parentage to the survivor (I couldn't help but wonder whether that was <cite>really</cite> their first encounter). Unfortunately, Malte is miserly with basic biographical information about Ruebner, who is evidently a man with an interesting story to tell. Did Ruebner return to live in Czechoslovakia after 1945 or only later? Why does Ludin film him reading from one of his books while he sits in what appears to be a hotel in a famous High Tatra resort, then suddenly, in midverse, standing in a field in front of a completely different mountain vista? Such filmic experimentation distracts. Furthermore, the fact that this Slovakian Jewish survivor writes poems in German seems significant and, once introduced, should have been explained. <p> For me, Ludin's film is intriguing but not fully satisfying. It is nonetheless worth seeing, not so much for its analysis of how <cite>Vergangenheitsbewltigung</cite> and <cite>Verdrngung</cite> operate but for capturing in pictures and words how common patterns of denial persist even in uncommon families. It also provides striking images of Slovakia, a visually interesting country that

most Western viewers will probably not have seen much of on screen. I would not hesitate to use it for graduate-level discussions of memory (and forgetting) and dealing with the Nazi past in postwar Germany.[7] <p> Notes <p> [1]. Tatjana Tnsmeyer, <cite>Das Dritte Reich und die Slowakei 1939-1945</cite> (Paderborn: Schningh, 2003), p. 92. <p> [2]. Ibid., pp. 149-150. <p> [3]. Roland Schnfeld, <cite>Die Slowakei. Vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart</cite> (Regensburg: Ferdinand Pustet, 2000), p. 129. <p> [4]. See for example Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller and Karoline Tschuggnall, <cite>Opa war kein Nazi</cite> (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2002); Claudia Brunner and Uwe von Seltmann, <cite>Schweigen die Taeter, reden die Enkel</cite> (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2004) and Olaf Jensen, <cite>Geschichte machen: Strukturmerkmale des intergenerationellen Sprechens ber die NS-Vergangenheit in deutschen Familien</cite> (Tbingen: edition discord, 2004). <p> [5]. See David Brooks, <cite>Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There</cite> (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000). According to Brooks, "bourgeois bohemians" blend mainstream culture and traditional materialism with countercultural values and tastes. <p> [6]. Kimba Allie Tichenor, "Review of Olaf Jensen, Geschichte machen: Strukturmerkmale des intergenerationellen Sprechens ber die NS-Vergangenheit in deutschen Familien," H-German, H-Net Reviews, March, 2006. URL: `http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=149971161297941.` <p> [7]. Official website: www.2oder3dinge.de.

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