

Berlin Calling

A Documentary

Q&A with director/producer Nigel Dick

What was the goal of making this film?

The original goal was quite simple: to document Kastle's journey as she tried to unearth the true story of her father's time in Hitler's concentration camps and how it had affected her and her family. But as the time passed, this goal became more complex. One day I woke up and realized that this film could be more than just a record for her family. It was becoming a valid document in its own right that was making an important statement about war and its damaging effects on those who came afterwards.

As I started editing, I realized there was also an opportunity to give the film a spine and remind people of how the Holocaust came about. When I started showing the film to friends, I was astonished how few of them knew about Herschel Grynszpan and how he'd sparked the fire that exploded into Kristallnacht. At this point I realized our little film, which tackled this enormous subject, might also be useful in educational terms.

What is your connection/interest in the subject matter of the Holocaust?

I'm not religious and I was brought up in a nominally Church of England household so initially I had no burning desire to explore a subject that seemed to belong to other people. However, like Kastle, I was deeply affected by the 'hangover' left by World War II. I was born in the 50's and spent my childhood in England and Germany and it seemed that every city I visited had bombsites and every family I knew had war stories of some kind. My parents were even criticized by their German friends for constantly talking about the war. By the time I became an adult I sensed that I'd somehow lived through the war by osmosis and the older I got, the more obsessed I became with it.

Clearly WWII is one of the few wars where there has been a very clear distinction between the good guys and the bad guys and the bad guys justified everything they did by blaming the Jews. We often ask ourselves, "how could this terrible thing have happened and could it have happened here?" Sadly I think there's every chance that this kind of terror could happen again, and in some form or another, happens every day. I hope that by making this film I am keeping the discussion alive and doing my bit to make to try and ensure that no child ever has to go through what Ben and John went through.

This is your first documentary, what was that experience like as a filmmaker?

When we started Berlin Calling I was a total documentary beginner. I'd spent 25 years shooting rock bands and pop stars and quite clearly that was no preparation

for tackling the worst murder story in history. So, from a filmmaker's point of view, it was a huge learning experience. There were two big problems I had to overcome. The first was technical. I was used to working on shoots with dozens and dozens of crew members and suddenly it was just me and I had to get it right first time. I had to learn how to light a shot, run a camera, record sound and run backwards. After 25 years in the industry, I was in a one-man film school and all the mistakes I made – and there are plenty of them - are right there in the finished film.

The second problem I had to overcome was the emotional one. How can you not be moved when you are filming a man, whose father was murdered 66 years earlier, who is seeing his father's grave for the first time? I sob like a baby at the drop of a hat and filming scenes like these – and trying to keep a clear head and a dry eye – was exhausting for me. The scene where Ben visits his father's grave was one where both the emotional and the technical problems coincided, as my tears were pouring onto the camera and I was terrified that it would stop working!

How long was the shoot? Where did you shoot?

We started shooting on the 24th of June 2007 and shot our last scene on 25th February 2014 – so nearly 7 years. We shot in Los Angeles, Houston, Paris, Berlin Prague and Terezin (or Theresienstadt as it was then known.)

What format did you shoot the film on? What was the budget?

As the film schedule was spread over such a long period of time, the technology available changed tremendously as the project developed. Consequently I shot the film with six different kinds of cameras from the lowest resolution handi-cams right up to the latest affordable HD equipment. Since I was a one-man crew, I always made sure whatever I was using was light and portable so that I could put all the required batteries, mics and lav packs into a small back pack and still leave space for a tripod, guide books, raingear and a bar of chocolate.

Budget? There wasn't one. In the end it was a relatively small amount. I'm not sure if I want to discuss the actual figures, but it's pretty much that shiny new car I was hoping to buy myself one day!

What is your favorite scene in the film?

I love the scene where Ben tells us about how the reporters gathered round when he was granted his American citizenship. He is so proud and I'd swear he was blushing. He's a lovely man and it broke my heart to have to keep digging and digging to get to the nasty stuff, so to see him smiling and proud has a wonderful restorative effect on me every time I see it. I also love all the shots of Kastle with her Mohawk.

What was the most difficult scene to shoot?

None of this was easy. I would like to tell you that I am so professional that I can keep a clear head and distance myself from what's going on so I can capture the story and be truly subjective about what's happening. Well you can forget all of that. I'm horrified by this part of mankind's history. We can't simply say the Nazis were

bad people, stamp our feet, and say how much we continue to hate them. Men and women did this to other men and women. Looking back now, it seems like the size of the horror towers over me like a thousand foot tidal wave and hidden in those waves are the faces of all those who'd suffered begging for the truth to be told one more time so that we don't forget.

The film is told in through the eyes of a second generation Holocaust survivor and her father but intertwined with historical narrative. Why did you decide to tell the story this way?

Kastle and Ben's story is clearly an involving, frightening and yet wonderful narrative. But this is not the first film made about the Holocaust. As we were making the film, we kept watching other Holocaust documentaries and sometimes I felt the context had been left out and the story was poorer for it.

"Berlin Calling" is not just a film made for the families of other Holocaust survivors, or just for people of the Jewish faith – it's made for everyone and I think to have some historical context is important – especially for those who might be learning some of this for the first time. I'm a huge cycling fan and I've watched many documentaries about cycling and the Tour de France and all the good ones spend five minutes explaining the complexities of how the race works so that the rest of the film makes sense to all viewers and not just the cycling nuts like me.

With all the footage you shot, what was the editing process like?

I edited the film in chunks as we went along with no clear idea where everything was going to land, especially as I had no idea how the film was going to finish. For a long time I was convinced the film would conclude with our visit to Theresienstadt but once we'd been there I knew that we'd need something more powerful. Then something happened that none of us could have predicted. Once that unpredictable sequence was in the can, I came home and wrote down every scene we had on post-it notes and placed them on three boards. I then started inserting new post-it notes with the historical spine and, at that time, I could easily see what I needed to finish the film. From that point onwards it was just the normal editorial grunt work of refining and polishing.

Are there any unusual behind-the-scenes stories?

Perhaps the most unusual or unexpected event was our visit to Theresienstadt. Speaking for myself – and I think Kastle felt the same way – I was dreading the trip there. This location was ground-zero for all of Ben's pain and the site of thousands of deaths and atrocities and it was obviously going to be a very disturbing experience. Also I was concerned as to how Kastle would cope with it and how I would cope with filming that. On top of that, I anticipated that this visit was going to be the big finale of our film and we'd planned to spend just one 8-hour day going there, shooting AND coming back. And then the big day arrived and it was this bright, warm, sunny day. As we walked around Theresienstadt, there were residents and tourists everywhere. It didn't have the cold, dark mood we pictured it would be. We finished off the visit by sitting in the town-square and eating cake and drinking

coffee in the sun. It was not what I'd anticipated and it caught both of us off guard. Even though the train tracks to Auschwitz are still there, on the surface it's just an 18th century military town that's neither quaint nor ugly. You really had to work hard to imagine the horror that took place there.

As one of the film's screenwriters, what do you think is the essence of the film and its characters?

For me the essence of the film is personal history and how we unintentionally pass on our own experiences to our children. My parents hated the war and were horrified when I was 5 and started drawing pictures of Spitfires shooting down Messerschmitts. Nobody in my family realized the effect of talking about the war constantly would have on me decades later. At the other end of the spectrum Kastle's father never, ever talked about his wartime experience and yet somehow the resonance of his experience, twenty years before she was born, was still implanted in her DNA. Whenever I see a newspaper report of a child who is being raised to be a racist or a member of some terrorist organization, I know that our work is never done and I'm reminded of Edmund Burke's quote: "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."