

# *Phoenix*: After WWII in Germany, a woman rises from the ashes

By Joanne Laurier  
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*Christian Petzold's Phoenix is now playing in movie theaters in the US. This is an edited version of an article that appeared as part of the coverage of the Toronto International Film Festival on September 24, 2014. Labyrinth of Lies has yet to be released in the US.*

Whether their creators intended them as responses to the resurgence of German militarism or not, two films screened at this year's Toronto film festival, both set in the postwar period, dealt quite strongly with the devastating consequences of Nazism. One way or another, as the recent resolution of the Socialist Equality Party of Germany noted, "History is returning with a vengeance."

The fact that, as the resolution goes on to say, "Almost 70 years after the crimes of the Nazis and its defeat in World War II, the German ruling class is once again adopting the imperialist great power politics of the Kaiser's Empire and Hitler," must have the most significant implications for German filmmakers and artists.

Christian Petzold's *Phoenix* and Italian-born Giulio Ricciarelli's *Labyrinth of Lies* are both skillfully made, intelligent films that delve, in quite different ways, into the legacy of fascism.

In *Phoenix*, set in the immediate aftermath of World War II, a Jewish concentration camp survivor, Nelly Lenz (Nina Hoss, in another collaboration with Petzold), is grossly disfigured and traumatized. With the help of her close friend Lene (Nina Kunzendorf), Nelly undergoes plastic surgery in Berlin. Her face is altered, although Nelly did not want to forfeit any of her past identity, including her looks—presumably as an act of defiance toward her persecutors. It soon becomes clear that she also wants to be identifiable to her beloved husband Johnny (Ronald Zehrfeld).

Lene, who works for the Jewish Agency for Palestine, tries to dissuade Nelly from searching for Johnny,

claiming that he divorced her and betrayed her to the Gestapo. With a sexually enigmatic devotion to Nelly, Lene works toward their relocation to Israel.

Nelly, at one time a well-known performer, eventually locates Johnny, formerly a pianist, doing menial work in a sordid cabaret in the rubble-filled American sector of the city. Believing his wife to be dead, he does not recognize the surgically repaired Nelly.

Seeing an opportunity to get hold of his former wife's inheritance, he proposes to remake the mysterious woman (the real Nelly) into his wife. For various emotional reasons, including her need to be near Johnny, Nelly allows him to change her clothes, hair and walk—he is pleased that her handwriting is already a close match! Johnny is prepared to go to great lengths to convince friends and family that Nelly survived the Holocaust and is now able to claim her fortune.

Petzold's dark cinematography bolsters the film's portrayal of a devastated society, suffering from the impact of enormous historic crimes, and a population that has been nearly effaced, physically and emotionally. In the film, postwar Germany is a wreckage made up of broken people and places that cannot be put back together again.

Neither Johnny nor Nelly has any hope of returning to his or her prewar self. Their respective experiences have qualitatively and permanently transformed them. In a real sense, Nelly is "unrecognizable" to Johnny. Despite the war's end and despite the settling of personal accounts, there is no immediate relief from the almost universal suffering and sense of betrayal, both of which may be insuperable.

## *Labyrinth of Lies*

In the Allied-organized Nuremberg trials (1945-46), twenty or so prominent Nazi leaders were prosecuted and convicted. Nearly two decades later, the Auschwitz

(concentration camp) trials, which opened in Frankfurt on December 23, 1963 and ended August 19, 1965, marked the first time that Nazi officials were brought before courts in the German Federal Republic (West Germany). Some 1.1 million prisoners, 90 percent of them Jewish, died in the network of Auschwitz camps.

Of the more than 6,000 to 8,000 former members of the SS (Nazi Party paramilitary organization) who guarded Auschwitz between 1940 and 1945, only 22 came before the Frankfurt court.

Giulio Ricciarelli's *Labyrinth of Lies* opens in Frankfurt in 1958. An ambitious young prosecutor, Johann Radmann (Alexander Fehling)—a fictional composite of three prosecutors who participated in the Auschwitz trials—is eager for more challenging work than his current caseload of traffic violations. Although traffic court is where he meets and eventually falls in love with Marlene (Friederike Becht), whom Johann initially prosecutes for a minor infraction—the incident is also going to prove what an incorruptible, “by-the-book” sort of individual he is.

Coming into Johann's life as well is an energetic, contrarian journalist, Thomas Gnielka (André Szymanski), who forces the prosecutor to recognize how many former Nazis still function unimpeded in West German society. Chief Prosecutor General Fritz Bauer (played by the late Gert Voss, to whom the film is dedicated, who died in July 2014 at 72), well aware of the Nazi plague, encourages his young associate to pursue the matter. (See this three-part WSWs series: “Forty years since the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial,” part 1, part 2, part 3 .) Working with Gnielka and concentration camp survivor Simon Kirsch (Johannes Krisch), Johann is stunned when he learns the vast dimensions of the Nazis' machinery of extermination at Auschwitz and that many of those who ran the “factory of death” now have comfortable careers in public service. (“The public sector is full of Nazis. And none of them has anything to worry about.”)

Sifting through the chaotic records of 600,000 individuals stored at the U.S. Army Document Center, Johann discovers that thousands of former Nazis seamlessly returned to their prewar lives. In his pursuits, he is aided by the testimony of Auschwitz survivors, his endearing and principled secretary Schmittchen (Hansi Jochmann), and a fellow prosecutor, who initially ridicules Johann about the project.

In one of the film's most powerful moments, Auschwitz survivors file through Johann's office, one after the other, to provide testimony. There are no words

in the sequence, just a series of headshots of people with resolute, determined expressions and horror stories to recount. Schmittchen cannot contain her grief and shock.

At first, Johann is exclusively focused on capturing the elusive Dr. Josef Mengele at the expense of lesser targets. After discovering that his girlfriend Marlene's father was a Nazi, Johann begins to wonder about his own now-deceased parent, whom he idolizes and idealizes. At one point, one of Johann's hostile superiors angrily asks: “Do you want every young man in this country to wonder whether his father was a murderer?” *Labyrinth of Lies* successfully dramatizes the events leading up to hearings that helped illuminate the truth about the death camps and had a strong impact in particular on a younger generation of Germans.

Expressive of some of the current ideological difficulties, neither *Phoenix* nor *Labyrinth of Lies* makes any attempt to explain German fascism as a historical and social phenomenon. The Nazi regime is rather an appalling “given,” the starting point in both cases for a legitimate and compelling drama. Each work tends to reduce the problem to individual moral choices, summed up in this comment by one of the lead characters in *Labyrinth*: “The only response to Auschwitz is to do the right thing yourself.” This sidesteps the question, however, of how it was that Auschwitz came into being to begin with and whether its existence was inevitable.

Nonetheless, both are serious and sincere films and serve as warnings against any attempt to minimize or relativize the crimes of the Third Reich.

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