

Resistance and *The Resistance Banker*: Dramas of the struggle against Nazism

By Joanne Laurier
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Resistance

The crimes of the Nazis, the greatest ever committed against humanity, generated some of the noblest and most self-sacrificing actions in the struggle against their barbarism. For both reasons, this dark period continues to be an important subject for historians and artists alike. The fascist threat has far from disappeared and opposition to it will once again require courage and moral determination. It is all to the good the population be reminded of that.

Resistance and *The Resistance Banker* deal with two lesser-known but significant episodes in the opposition to Nazi terror in occupied Europe.

Scripted and directed by Venezuelan filmmaker Jonathan Jakubowicz, *Resistance* is the tale of how the future world-famous mime Marcel Marceau (1923-2007) became a member of the French Resistance during World War II.

The movie's prologue begins on Kristallnacht, the brutal 1938 pogrom, when Jewish parents comfort their young daughter minutes before being arrested and killed by the Gestapo. "Why do they hate us?" the child asks. "Hitler is just blaming us for the suffering of the working class." She soon becomes one of the tens of thousands of children orphaned and in need of protection.

The movie proper opens the same year at a time when Marceau (Jesse Eisenberg) is still Marcel Mangel. The teen labors in his father's butcher shop in Strasbourg, in eastern France, but prefers to perform in cabaret clubs, honing his skills as an actor and mime.

His friend Emma (Clémence Poésy) is in the resistance, along with Marcel's cousin Georges (Geza Rohrig) and brother Alain (Félix Moati), sheltering scores of German children whose parents were murdered by the Nazis. Marcel decides to join them and uses his artistry to assist with the daunting project.

In the Jewish Resistance in France (Organisation Juive

de Combat, or OJC), Marcel is popular with the children. He forges identification papers and courageously succeeds in rescuing his brother Alain from the deadly clutches of the Germans. When the OJC moves a group of children to the south of France, it enters the territory supervised by the notorious Nazi Klaus Barbie (Matthias Schweighöfer), the "Butcher of Lyon," a sadistic killer. Seeking information on the Resistance, Barbie mercilessly tortures Emma's sister to death. (After the war, US intelligence services made use of Barbie for his "anti-Marxist" efforts, aiding his escape to Bolivia.)

In one of the most chilling scenes in *Resistance*, Marcel and other Resistance members are leading children on a perilous escape through the Alps to Switzerland with Barbie in hot pursuit. Having been taught by Marcel to climb trees and hide in plain sight, the orphans narrowly evade the Nazi bloodhounds.

The film's postscript explains that Jewish Resistance groups in France saved 10,000 children during World War II. The Nazis are estimated to have killed a horrifying total of 1.5 million children, including Polish, Romani, mentally and physically disabled and, above all, Jewish children.

Resistance is bookended by scenes in which General George Patton (Ed Harris) lectures his troops in 1945. The director inserts Patton into the narrative in an unnecessary tribute to the US military, even as American troops are poised to threaten his own country, Venezuela. This adds an element of political cloudiness.

It is entirely commendable that the director brings Marceau's resistance history to light, but the movie too often tilts toward complacency. While Eisenberg's characterization of the great mime is somewhat lackluster, Schweighöfer's terrifying Barbie manages to bring considerable harsh reality to the screen.

Resistance is not a great film, but the Marceau story is the stuff of great drama. (Marcel and his younger brother,

Alain, whose father perished in Auschwitz, adopted the name “Marceau” in homage to François Séverin Marceau-Desgraviers, a general of the French Revolutionary Wars.)

“The kids loved Marcel and felt safe with him,” Marceau’s cousin and fellow resistance fighter Georges Loinger told the Jewish Telegraph Agency in 2007, after Marceau’s death. “He had already begun doing performances in the orphanage, where he had met a mime instructor earlier on.” Speaking of the escape through the Alps, Loinger revealed that the “kids had to appear like they were simply going on vacation to a home near the Swiss border.” Loinger died in 2018, at the age of 108!

Marceau commented on his work in the resistance: “I will speak only briefly about my own deeds. It is true that I saved children, bringing them to the border in Switzerland. I forged identity cards with my brother when it was very dangerous because you could be arrested if you were in the underground.

“I also forged papers, not to save only Jews, and children, but to save Gentiles and Jews, especially Gentiles because there was a law in Vichy—occupied France—to send the young French men, who were eighteen, nineteen years old, to factories in Germany to work for the German Army.”

The Resistance Banker

Director Joram Lürsen’s *The Resistance Banker* is based on the real-life story of Dutch banker Walraven van Hall (Barry Atsma), who concocts a scheme to finance the Dutch Resistance to the German occupation of the Netherlands in World War II.

Walraven, or Wally, is a well-to-do banker with a loving family and comfortable existence. Appalled by the encroachment of the Nazi war machine, he and his brother Gijs (Jacob Derwig) set up an underground, shadow banking operation to pay the families of sailors who are working for the Dutch government in exile and to support and buy weapons and supplies for the Resistance.

As more money is needed, they expand their efforts to forging treasury bonds, swapping them for genuine bonds in the vaults of the Dutch State Bank. The stolen money is used to pay striking railroad workers, who are crippling the German Army’s movement of troops and supplies.

In this regard, it is worth noting that in February 1941, there was a general strike in the Netherlands organized by the then-illegal Communist Party against the Nazis’ anti-Jewish arrests and pogroms. The strike is considered to be the first mass protest against the Nazis in Europe.

After three days, the strike was brutally suppressed by German forces.

Wally adopts the underground name of van Tuyl, a famous Dutch pirate of the Age of Sail. He functions under the noses of the Nazis (“We’re smarter than the Germans, anyway”), including the relentless Dutch fascist, anti-Communist and anti-Semite Meinoud Rost van Tonningen (Pierre Bokma) who quips that “in this country, *only the sun* rises for free.”

Wally is an organizer of tremendous skill, audacity and heroism. Toward the summer of 1945, however, a doomed Third Reich ratchets up its repression and a terrible betrayal tightens the noose around Wally’s neck.

The Resistance Banker is made and acted with genuine commitment. The bleak cinematography bolsters the tension-filled scenes depicting a country in the vice-grip of fascism. Fockeline Ouwerkerk plays Wally’s wife Tilly, an intrepid supporter of her husband’s valiant undertaking.

“[Walraven] starts out resisting the resistance,” Lürsen said in an interview. “In the end, he becomes the spider in the web of the whole resistance.”

There is a running joke throughout the movie, whose punchline is only revealed at the film’s end: *What is the similarity between the Nazi Rost van Tonningen and the Dutch flag? They will both be hanging at the end of the war!* (In fact, Rost van Tonningen did die at the end of the war, although allegedly by suicide.)

All in all, *The Resistance Banker* is a more artistic and more cohesive film than *Resistance*.

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