

Movie #1: The Boy in the Striped Pajamas

I finally had a chance to watch this movie in World Studies last year. I say “finally” because *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* is renowned; I’d heard people talk about it, they talked about how sad and heart-touching it is, and they said it is a masterpiece. I agree with them. The painful aspect of the Holocaust was revealed in a way that left the audience with unexplainable grief.

The Boy in the Striped Pajamas revolves around Bruno, a German boy who is the son of an SS officer. His father, Ralf, is assigned the role of managing a death camp (which he keeps a secret from his family), and so the whole family has to move to the countryside. There, Bruno and his sister Grete learn from a private tutor about Nazi propaganda and Antisemitism. Since Bruno doesn’t know it’s a death camp and thinks that it is a farm, he usually sneaks out of the house to get there, which is where he meets Shmuel, a boy of the same age. Eventually, they become friends and Bruno always brings food to Shmuel at the fence. Meanwhile, Bruno’s mom Elsa learns about the death camp and argues with her husband. She is disappointed in his husband for pushing a young soldier, Kurt, to the Eastern Front because he didn’t inform the authorities about his father’s move to Switzerland; another time during Ralf’s mother’s funeral, Elsa tries to remove the Nazi symbol since she knows the mother was against the regime, but Ralf insists anyway. Eventually, they conclude that the children should live far away from the camp. Bruno comes to see Shmuel for the last time, but there he learns that Shmuel’s dad has disappeared. Bruno decides to sneak into the camp to find the dad. There he learns that the camp is different from what he has seen in a propaganda film. Elsa and Gretel realize the disappearance of Bruno, and a search is launched. They eventually find Bruno’s clothes by the fence, but it is too late: Bruno and Shmuel have already been sent into the gas chamber, and killed.

Again, the movie left me with a feeling of sadness that could not be found in any other movie. [1] It is because Bruno and Shmuel are just little kids, who are sent to death in the game of adults; that what happens in the movie did happen in real life, in a more painful way for many; that all of this could have been avoided somehow. [2] If the deaths of the boys are already painful, it’s even worse to know what happens to Pavel. Poor him, he is old and yet still has to work for the family while being seen as a *Untermensch*; and when he fails to do his job, he is beaten to death by a young man fueled with Nazism and Antisemitism. I was infuriated watching that scene. But it is who to blame? The young man, or the regime? [3] So the movie is not just about a death camp and a gas chamber, it displays the division that existed between the people who were close to each other, who could have lived together in peace, like

how Bruno and Shmuel are. [4] And then there is the pain of losing someone in a family. Mom and Dad lose a son, a sister loses a brother. The fear that I think people all have, and that's what makes the movie even more emotional. I could see the colors of the movie changed drastically, from a bright and colorful tone to a darker and gray one. I don't want to say that Ralf, Elsa, and Grete take Bruno for granted (that is, to see his appearance in the family certain and not to think about what if one day he disappears), but honestly, it is shocking to see that Bruno was with them a few minutes (or an hour) ago, and now he is being killed by the very own thing that the family controls, in such a short amount of time. It left the audience (or just me) with a deathly stillness. [5] The ending appears to be rushed, but now I think it contributes to the sudden change of emotion, and thus exaggerates the feeling of sadness and grief at the end of the movie.

I remember that after finishing the movie, I searched on Google to read Wikipedia and some reviews. There I found criticism, which there should be since this movie is historical, and the topic is sensitive. One criticism is that the movie creates confusion between victims and perpetrators and encourages the viewer to feel sympathy for Holocaust perpetrators (Wikipedia contributors). I already talked about how the death of Bruno is actually what makes the movie so emotional, and not really what happens in the camp, so I think this criticism makes sense. Another criticism is that children were killed right upon arrival, unlike how Shmuel can survive and talk at the fence. But again, this is a movie, not a documentary, so fictional details are needed to create a story that is engaging. I don't blame the author because of that, just like there were dramatic scenes in *The Cinderella Man*, for example when Max Baer insults Mae, who knows if it happened.

After all, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* is not intended to be used as a historical source; this movie was made to bring the pain, the grief, and the "hard history" of the Holocaust to the audience of the 21st century, through effective storytelling and acting. I can tell that this movie will be played over and over again in classrooms, as a reminder to future generations never to forget the struggle and the cause of the Holocaust victims. Especially in the context of the war in Gaza, we must engage in the conversation with knowledge and reasoning, and not blindly express Antisemitism opinions and create a false equivalence between Holocaust victims, or Jewish people in general, and those who are responsible for the war, by just signing papers.

Movie #2: Valkyrie

“You may hand us over to the executioner, but in three months’ time, the disgusted and harried people will bring you to book and drag you alive through the dirt in the streets.” Valkyrie successfully captures the bravery of many people under the Nazi regime who were not deluded by the might of Nazism and fought to their last breath for freedom. With the acting of Tom Cruise and others, watchers will experience every tense moment of Operation Valkyrie, the last attempted assassination of Adolf Hitler.

Valkyrie follows Claus von Stauffenberg, a young colonel who stood against Hitler’s Germany and wanted to achieve peace in Europe. Many other generals and officials were standing on the same side with him. Together, they planned on how to assassinate Hitler, despite not knowing what to do next. That’s until when Operation Valkyrie captured Stauffenberg’s attention. He proposed a modification to the operation, which in case of Hitler’s death, they would be able to disarm the SS and take control of Germany. With support from the officials, the amendment was signed by Hitler, and the plan moved to the next stage. After the first failed attempt due to the absence of Himmler, Stauffenberg and Olbricht were warned to not continue with the plan of treason or they would be arrested. But the young, determined Stauffenberg was ready to do anything to save Germany. After gaining the trust of all people who were involved in the coup, Stauffenberg was now in charge of the operation. He would put the suitcase with the bomb in the room where the Fuhrer was having the meeting. After the blast, Operation Valkyrie was now activated, with the Reserve Army arresting multiple Nazi officials. Hitler’s Germany would witness its last sunrise, or so Stauffenberg thought. There was indeed a blast, but Hitler was still alive after that. Stauffenberg was so close to victory with many districts captured, but with the news that the Fuhrer was unharmed, the coup was stopped as people were sworn to the Hitler Oath. Stauffenberg and his men were executed, just a few months before Hitler committed suicide as the Allies captured Berlin.

Stauffenberg’s courage impressed me. It is impossible to think of launching a coup against the leader of a regime of terror, a task that would get anyone to a certain death. But still, we see the love for his country, his people, and the world, was greater than anything else. And isn’t it awesome to see that many people in Germany were not like Hitler? They were different, they fought for the right, and they had the power that Hitler couldn’t destroy, fueled by their love for a country and not for a government. Note that it is just one of 15 attempts, which shows us that people who were close to Hitler were also discontented with his brutal rule.

If Operation Valkyrie was successful, maybe Europe would achieve peace sooner, and maybe fewer people would sacrifice. But it wasn't, for some reason. Operation Valkyrie was filled with indecisiveness. First, the decision to not continue with the plan because Himmler was not there with Hitler, which cost everyone a chance to kill him, and put the plan at risk. The second time was when Olbricht wasn't certain of Hitler's death, and reluctant to activate Operation Valkyrie, which again almost dumped everyone's effort into the river. But despite the indecisiveness and although things almost worked out in the end, unluckiness kicked in. How stunned must Stauffenberg be when he found out that Hitler was still alive when it was he who set up the bomb and saw the blast? He was certain that Hitler was dead. But that's the irony of history: for just a brief moment the antagonist appeared to be the one who was blessed, the chosen one to continue on some sort of mission. Stauffenberg and others should have made it into history books as heroes of the world because they were. But how unfortunate things were.

Along with the intense operation, we see some heartfelt moments. The moment when Stauffenberg gave his medal to an injured soldier, or when Stauffenberg's wife saw his husband with one eye and several fingers lost, those scenes highlight the pain that the people of Germany had gone through, just because of the unrealistic dream of the leader. And then there is a lesson about launching a coup d'etat: it's not easy. Trying to overthrow a government is not easy; it's a game of the mind, not just straightforward violence. I already mentioned how I admire the courage of Stauffenberg, but his intelligence should also be noted. To remember that there is something called Operation Valkyrie, to come up with modifications to take advantage of it, and to single-handedly plan out the mission from the beginning to the end, it's very impressive. But again, launching a coup is not easy.

In conclusion, Valkyrie does a great job of telling the story about an operation of the same name. Watching the movie, people also feel a state of anxious suspense, just like how people involved in the coup felt. As far as I know, the movie is excellent in terms of historical accuracy, so watching the movie as part of the lesson might not be a bad idea. Valkyrie might not be a movie that resonates with people since it is just about a military operation, but if there is a takeaway, then it is that there were many brave people in Germany who were not Hitler; they were, instead, conscious and humane. No matter how bad the situation is, there is always a generation of heroes who have enough courage to step forward, do the right thing, and live up to their virtue. And I'll wrap this up with a fun fact: the name "Germany" is translated into Chinese (and then into Sino-Vietnamese) as "virtue."