

Crossing over: how is *Dark Lullabies* like *Romeo and Juliet*?

Irene Lilienheim Angelico

It was in the summer of 1983, the night before we were supposed to interview Antje Mulka, the granddaughter of the Vice-Commandant of Auschwitz that I decided that we could not go on with the film. In a moment of clarity, I realized that I was betraying my parents, all the Survivors of the Holocaust and all those who had died at her grandfather/s command. What the hell did I think I was doing?

It had taken five years to get to this moment in Berlin. Much of the time was spent raising money for the documentary we were trying to make. The Jewish community was against the very idea. Most of us would not even buy a Volkswagen, much less go to Germany to speak with the children of German perpetrators and even the children of Nazis. God forbid!

I understood this very well, of course. My parents were Survivors, and every other member of my family was murdered by the Nazis. I grew up hating the murderers and confused that I was born in that land drenched with blood.

And yet, the next morning I found myself sitting with Antje.

Antje was in her 20s, a classic

blonde, blue-eyed German woman. She was as nervous about the interview as I was.

Until she was thirteen, Antje said, she always loved her doting grandfather. Then, one day a friend said to her, "Your grandfather – he was the vice-commandant of Auschwitz." I asked her how she dealt with the crushing weight of this legacy. She said she began years of daily psychotherapy to become her own vigilantly conscious person.

After our interviews, my co-director/husband Abbey Neidik and I always make time to take our subjects out for a meal. We made an exception when interviewing the neo-Nazis, but for some reason Antje was invited. Near the end of the meal, I decided to go to the post office and, instead of just giving directions, Antje offered to walk me there. No thank you, I thought. This is the very last thing on Earth I want to do. But it came to be.

Antje acted as translator with the postman, who in arguably typical Germanic fashion refused to mail my post card, because I had in arguably typical Jewish fashion written all around the side where the address goes and, even worse, around the place for the stamp. Antje accepted his verdict readily, but I was ready to argue my case. "Tell him to sell me the

stamp and I'll mail it myself," I said to Antje. Antje, now the reluctant one, asked in German. He refused. After several increasingly absurd exchanges, he finally instructed us to go to the stationary store, buy an envelope, put the card in, address it properly, come back, and then he would sell me a stamp.

Our expedition continued to the stationary store a few blocks away. When we got there, we saw a sign on the window, "Closed until 2 PM." Somehow this struck us as very funny – both from my perspective as an anarchist Jewish postcard writer and hers as an obedient citizen of the German postal system.

Abbey and our crew of four were finishing lunch, when they saw us returning – the daughter of concentration camp Survivors and the granddaughter of the Vice-Commandant of Auschwitz laughing together uproariously as we walked up the street.

This was further than even I ever intended to go. Why would I cross over this divide at such great peril to my conscience and at such great risk of hurting the very people I loved, even worshipped, for their courage and humanity?

Thirty years later, the Stratford Festival invited Abbey and I to show *Dark Lullabies* at the inauguration season of The Forum, a series of events the Festival designed to connect the plays they are performing to the issues of the day. The theme was Communities Divided and the role of the Outsider. I was to connect *Dark Lullabies* with *Romeo and Juliet* – particularly to relate my experience of reaching out to Germans born after the war.

Dark Lullabies is about the effects of the Holocaust on the children of Survivors and the next generation of Germans. *Romeo and Juliet* is about the effect of an ancient feud on two teenagers from the feuding families. When the teenagers dare to cross over the divide, they have to negotiate their loyalties to family and community with their newfound love for each other.

Shakespeare never tells us why his family the Montagues and the Capulets hate each other – the cause



Irene Lilienheim Angelico, left, cites Elie Wiesel to Antje Mulka in the documentary *Dark Lullabies*.

is not important. He is focused on what *Romeo and Juliet* must do now, and what the community must do to end the feud.

When *Romeo* sneaks into the party at the Capulet's, he is crossing the great divide into the enemy's camp. Like many an outsider, he builds the bridge that first he and *Juliet*, and then the families on both sides were finally willing to cross, though only after the deaths of the young lovers.

Like *Romeo*, I crossed over against the will of most of my community, and found myself right in the heart of the enemy camp. There were answers, or at least clues there, that I could not find on my side of the divide. For the next generation of Germans, especially the children and grandchildren of Nazis, the bridge was even more difficult to build.

But bridges must be built and crossed if wars are to end.

Romeo and Juliet and *Dark Lullabies* may be utterly different in that the feud between the Montagues and the Capulets is between "two households, both alike in dignity" and equally alike in guilt. There was dignity in the Jewish innocence and resistance, but nearly no dignity on the German side.

But *Romeo and Juliet* and *Dark*

Lullabies were utterly similar in the need to cross over, the only way to fully understand what needs to be known and the only way, as Shakespeare so eloquently and powerfully dramatized, to live in love, dignity and peace for all.

I saw Antje again in 1986, three years after our first meeting. *Dark Lullabies* was being screened by special invitation at the Berlin Film Festival and I invited her to attend.

I don't know how much Antje had anticipated what it would be like when *Dark Lullabies* was shown in Germany, but now the film had arrived.

"I think I better make an appointment with my therapist," she responded on the phone.

After the screening, we went out for ice cream.

Irene Lilienheim Angelico is a film director, producer and writer, the recipient of numerous international awards including a Gemini Award for best writing in a documentary. Her work was included in The Fifty Greatest Documentaries of all Times at the National Film Board's international Salute to the Documentary.

Dark Lullabies screens in Montreal, Jan. 27 to 30 at Cinéma du Parc, 3575 Avenue du Parc.



The writer in Berlin. [Abbey Neidik photo]