

AN INTERVIEW WITH IRENE ANGELICO, CO-DIRECTOR

OF DARK LULLABIES

**When did you first conceive the idea for this film and what made you go ahead with it?**

In 1977, Marcel Ophuls was invited to the National Film Board of Canada to show his films and do a workshop with filmmakers. Tom Daly, my producer at that time, suggested that I take advantage of this opportunity, to which I replied that I never went to see films about the Holocaust because I found it too painful. But a week later, I found myself in the theatre watching an interview with Albert Speer, Reich Minister of Armaments, in Ophuls' film **Memory of Justice** .

That interview gave a jolt to my consciousness from which I never recovered. For the first time, I realized that the people who had created so much suffering and horror were not easily identifiable monsters but human beings that appeared to possess positive and reasonable qualities. This began a flood of questions and confusion in me which became the seed for the film.

But after 30 years of passionately avoiding everything to do with the Holocaust, I was not yet ready to make a film on the subject. I wrote the idea down on a tiny piece of paper and completely forgot about it for the next three years.

In the meantime, though, I had taken a turn, and began to explore very slowly and carefully the landscape of the Holocaust. My parents are both survivors of the concentration camps. A year after they were liberated and finally reunited, my father wrote a manuscript about his experience. That was the year that I was born. I had known about the manuscript, but it was only then that I was able to read it. What I read amazed me. This was not only a story of horror and grief, as I had expected, but a powerful story of love and hope, as well.

I then read **Anna** by Susan Fromberg Schaeffer and began to imagine what my mother's experience had been like, from before the war in Warsaw to the beginning of a new life in the new world. It was still too difficult for me to discuss with her, but I began to understand her tremendous courage

and commitment to life, and the effort she made to protect me from the pain she had experienced herself.

But the Holocaust was too enormous to be shielded from, and the survivors could not protect their children from the lasting impact of that event. When I started to ask questions about the Holocaust myself, I discovered that there were many other children of survivors who were also searching. We were a generation possessed by this history in which we played no part. Finding this extended family gave me the support I needed to make a film in what had by now become a profound and pervasive part of my life.

Well into the fifth year of working on the film, by the way, I discovered the piece of paper with the film idea jotted down, and only then realized how long I had been thinking about the film.

**What was the sequence of events once you decided to go ahead with the film? What was your parents' reaction to your decision?**

After a long period of soul-searching on whether or not I should make a film on this subject, I began to imagine and plan what the film would be. I knew I did not have a meaningful contribution to make in terms of understanding the Holocaust. I had neither the experience nor the wisdom to do that.

What I did understand was how the Holocaust affected the children of survivors, and my preliminary research was all in this area. Very soon, I realized that it was not only the children of survivors that had grown up in the shadow of the Holocaust, but also the children of Nazis themselves, and my vision of the film grew to encompass their experience as well.

It took me much longer to realize that the questions that I kept asking, and that most of the children of survivors I spoke with were asking, were questions not only about the effects of the Holocaust on our generation, but questions about the past. The past and the present were inextricably interwoven in our lives; it was impossible to make a film about us without incorporating our parents' experience as well.

When the film was sketched out on paper, I went to speak to my parents. My mother supported the project from the beginning and, after many intense

discussions, I won my father's support as well. The issues that came out of these discussions came up again and again when I spoke with other Jewish survivors, and when I tried raising money for the film. First, the phenomena of children of survivors was questioned - how were they different from anyone else? Even most children of survivors did not realize the common bond that exists until Helen Epstein's book **Children of the Holocaust** was published and the phenomena began to be discussed. The survivors who had tried to create a new life for their children after the Holocaust did not want to know that some of that horror had been passed on to their children.

The idea of going to Germany was an even more difficult issue for the survivors and became a plaguing question for me - was it a betrayal for me, a child of survivors, to go to Germany and speak to the children of Nazis? Perhaps this was a film someone else should make, or perhaps not enough time had passed for the trauma to subside before bringing it all out again? I resolved these questions for myself, but not before deciding twice that I could not make this film. Don Angelico helped me through these periods, reminding me of the importance of the film and encouraging me to continue despite my fears.

**Q: What kind of groups did you approach to finance the film and what reactions did you get?**

Irene: The people and groups I approached for financial support were not at all encouraging, and the questions I had resolved for myself were still major obstacles for almost everyone I approached. I started working with Abbey Neidik on the project, and we began a close collaboration that was tremendously rewarding creatively, and absolutely dismal financially. We wrote hundreds of letters to individuals and organizations in Canada and the U.S. We applied to scores of foundations and granting agencies. We approached multitudes of corporations, like Esso who told us they would not touch the Holocaust with a ten foot pole. We asked for passage from El Al and Lufthansa and were refused. We spent all the money we had trying to raise the budget for the film. When all our heating and telephone bills were at the collectors, there was still no money in sight. The whole process of fundraising took 3 years before we could finish shooting the film. Even then, we had to defer part of our salary in order to continue shooting.

But the process was not completely bleak or we probably would not have been able to continue. In November 1980, we got a PAFFPS (Program to Assist Films and Filmmakers in the Private Sector) grant from the National Film

Board of Canada and another from Multiculturalism Canada through the Saidye Bronfman Center in order to film the first Canadian Children of Survivors Conference which was held in Montreal. Several months later, Bonnie Klein, a filmmaker with Studio D, the women's unit of the NFB, brought the project to the attention of Kathleen Shannon, the Executive Producer of the Studio.

I had been working with the Studio since its creation in 1974, but since I did not think the project fit into the Studio's existing mandate, I had not presented it myself. In fact, Kathleen Shannon liked the project and felt the Studio was ready to embrace a wider range of human rights issues. She offered to provide a crew and all services and facilities for the project. This represented nearly half our budget. Backed by the NFB, which also agreed to guarantee the completion of the film, a long, creative and supportive collaboration began which would be the dream of any independent filmmaker in the world.

We still had to raise over half our budget and, even with the NFB's backing, this was tremendously difficult. Early on, we had gotten financial support from Morty Brownstein, Irwin and Steven Tauben and other Montreal business people, but we still had much money to raise and almost no one left to write or call. We had only one possibility left. Alan Rose, the National Chairman of the Canadian Jewish Congress, arranged for us to meet with Andrea and Charles Bronfman and screen some excerpts from the material we had already shot. The Bronfmans were moved and excited by what they saw and offered to provide the backing we needed in order to complete the film. This was more generous than our greatest expectation and, of course, we were elated. The added benefit has been that the Bronfmans, along with all our investors, have provided not only their financial support, but invaluable creative and critical feedback during the final stages of the film.

**Did your concept for the film change during this period?**

With one major exception, once the concept of the film was developed, it changed surprisingly little, although it took several paths and a lot of experimentation before arriving back to where it began. We did give up the idea of including the so-called experts in the film and included only those who spoke from their own experience, whether we loved or hated what they had to say. What did change during the process of the film were the subjects themselves, which includes myself. The survivors and children of

survivors have come together in a very close and honest way. The legacy of the Holocaust has been passed on, and many children of survivors embrace the responsibility to understand the past and work today against the forces that allowed the Holocaust to happen: prejudice and oppression of any kind, blind obedience to authority, indifference and silent complicity, or the lack of moral accountability and the courage to act upon one's convictions.

The one fundamental thing that has changed from the film's original conception is the addition of my involvement as the principal subject of the film. This was Abbey Neidik's idea and it took months before he convinced me that it had to be. In this, he was supported by Eddie LeLorrain, who joined our team as NFB co-producer of the film. Using my journey as the main thread of the film gave coherence to the vast and complex subject we were filming. And allowing myself to be vulnerable as well seemed right, when I was asking other subjects to reveal feelings and thoughts that had been buried for so long.

**What was your experience while shooting, particularly in Germany?**

Montreal and Israel were filmed on a shoestring, but the experience was extraordinarily rich. We met survivors whose stories were painful to hear but who had built new lives that were vibrant and rich. In Israel, we met Israeli children of survivors, like Rivka Miriam and her brother Joshua, with whom we spent one of the most joyous evenings of our lives.

Going to Germany was, of course, a much greater mystery for us. It is ironic that Germany, which had been the most controversial aspect of our project and our fundraising efforts, turned out to be the place where we had the most time and money to research and shoot. Everyone warned us that we could never find children of Nazis who would agree to be interviewed, much less the wide range of reactions that we knew were necessary to give an honest view of Germany today. We had many contacts in Germany but no one seemed right, yet we were sure that the key to the shoot was to find just the right person to work with. When time was running out, I happened to be in New York where I saw a film called **Now, After All These Years** by Harald Lüdgers and decided that he was the person we were looking for. I called Abbey in Montreal late that night and discovered that he had just seen the very same film. We knew we were on the right track. We contacted Harald and, through a miracle of combined will, got our schedules to work together.

Harald helped us with the preliminary research in Germany and when Abbey and I arrived, the three of us travelled over 7000 kilometers together choosing subjects and locations, and talking about the film. It was a very intense and creative collaboration that we plan to do again. Part of the film and the experience was very personal, of course, and these aspects I worked out alone or with Abbey.

**What was the most memorable experience for you during the making of the film?**

The most important experience for me was the day in Dachau, which touched me in the deepest place in my soul.

**Who do you hope to reach with this film?**

I hope the film will reach everyone because its issues are universal. They involve everyone who is concerned about prejudice and human dignity and, even more so, those who are not.

**What's your next project?**

I have been given an investigate in Studio D at the NFB to do a film about racism and human rights, and am particularly concerned with apartheid in South Africa. I would also love to do a film on bridges of peace being created by people who are working in small ways to come together in places of hostilities, beginning with the efforts of Palestinians and Jews in Israel.