

'HOLOCAUST' REVISITED

## *Kolkata Film Festival*

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The 15<sup>th</sup> Kolkata Film Festival (Nov'09) continued to be a platform for film culture. The cascade of films included tributes to Bimal Roy, Elia Kazan (USA), Federico Fellini (Italy), Andrej Wajda (Poland), Yilmaz Guney (Turkey), Ousmane Sembene (Senegal), Rogerio Sganzerla (Brazil), Marta Meszaros (Hungary), Caroline Link (Germany) and Nikos Panayo-topoulos (Greece).

Mark Herman's "**The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas**" (UK/USA,2008, Colour, 94 mins) observes a child's encounters with the adult world, during the Nazi era. Children play with outstretched hands in Berlin of early 1940s, where Nazi flags flutter in the town square. Jewish families are being rounded up in military trucks. Rolf (David Thewlis), an officer in the German army has just received a promotion. Before he moves out of Berlin on his next assignment, there is a party to celebrate his promotion. His nine-year-old son Bruno (Asa Butterfield) is unhappy over moving out of Berlin. There are 'Heil Hitler' chants as Rolf, in uniform, descends a staircase to join guests and party. Bruno's grandparents recall childhood costumes, which have now been transformed to uniforms. Bruno stares at the empty house, as the family drive off in an open car, while other children bid farewell. A night train journey, followed by a car drive through woods, brings the family to a new home bungalow at dawn.

As the goods are being unloaded, Bruno's sister, Gretel, clutches her dolls. Rolf attends to his business. One Nazi soldier surveys Bruno and his mother, Elsa (Vera Farmiga). Bruno looks through the window lattice and notices a farm with children, and strange looking farmers, who wear **striped pyjamas**. He tells his father, Rolf, that he wants to return to Berlin, and is curious to know as why the farmers wear pyjamas. The parents bolt up the windows. Bruno plays checkers, all day by himself. A prisoner servant, Pavel brings in the vegetables. Bruno sits around feeling miserable, and plays alone. One day Bruno sneaks outside the house compound, and sketches the restricted area with men wearing striped shirts and pyjamas. There is no school for Bruno and Gretel, but a tutor would visit them twice a week. Bruno makes a swing from an old tyre, and suffers a fall, from a torn rope. The prisoner servant Pavel bandages Bruno's right leg. While peeling onions, he states that he was a doctor, and mother Elsa is grateful. A tutor comes and teaches the children current affairs.

One afternoon Bruno jumps out of a window, runs through woods over undulating grounds, along a stream. Through barbed wires, Bruno observes towers, trolleys and children in prisoner's striped uniforms. Bruno speaks to a little boy, Schmoll, who is also eight years old. Bruno explains that he is exploring. Schmoll asks for food, and enquires whether there was food in Bruno's house. Huts are being built and children push carts. On hearing a whistle, children return to their barracks. Bruno returns home, and picks up a chocolate from the kitchen table for his friend. He rushes to the cellar in search for a football. With a torch, he finds piles of dolls. In fear, Bruno drops the ball. The tutor reads to Bruno the history of the German people. When Bruno's mother goes to town in the car, Bruno leaves the tyre swing, and runs towards the barbed wire fencing. When Bruno

asks Schmoll as to why he wears pyjamas all day, Schmoll replies that soldiers took away all clothes. Schmoll states that his father made boots for soldiers. Schmoll explains that people were not allowed to go near the barbed wires and the chimneys. Schmoll was a Jew. Bruno leaves abruptly.

At home Bruno wants to know more about the horrid smell from chimneys. The tutor teaches that Jews were not creative but destructive. Bruno packs his satchel with cakes. At the fencing, Schmoll eats the cakes, but pitches the football over the wires, as it was too dangerous. There are whistles for return to barracks. The mother, Elsa smells something burning. The sky is full of smoke. The German lieutenant soldier does not explain. The father, Rolf is sworn to secrecy, and feels everything is part of war. Bruno's grandfather joins the family for a dinner. When the prisoner servant, Pavel spills wine on the table, he is beaten by the German lieutenant. Later sister, Gretel explains to Bruno that the adjacent enclosure was not a farm, but a camp for Jews, and Jews were evil, enemies and dangerous, responsible for Germany losing World War-I. One day there is a requirement of tiny fingers, and Schmoll is summoned to clean glasses in the kitchen. Bruno offers him cakes. The German lieutenant scolds and slaps Schmoll for talking to somebody in the house. Bruno lies that he had never seen Schmoll before, and found him eating. Sitting in a room in remorse, Bruno cries.

Bruno rushes back to the kitchen, and finds the maid, Maria wiping glasses. He does not find Schmoll at the barbed wire fencing. There are an unusual number of cars and motorcycles. Propaganda documentaries are being screened for German soldiers. Bruno climbs up a door shutter, and watches the film on the prisoner camps. With two badminton rackets and a toy aircraft, Bruno visits the fencing. But Schmoll is missing. Later Bruno finds Schmoll sitting next to the barbed wires, with the right eye battered. Bruno relates just seeing a film depicting life being so nice in the internment camps. He apologizes for not saving Schmoll, and Schmoll reaffirms friendship, shaking hands through the barbed wires. The German lieutenant is moved to the front, for being disloyal to the Nazi party, in not informing that his father who was a professor of literature, had left for Switzerland. Meanwhile, Bruno's grandmother dies from the bombings in Berlin, Schmoll tells Bruno that his grand parents had died, but there were no funerals at the camp. There are quarrels between Bruno's parents. Rolf is burdened by the ability to carry the weight of work. Elsa feels that Rolf's present place of work was not the right place for childhood. Schmoll expresses concern for his own father who is missing. Schmoll's father went to work somewhere, but did not return.

One day Bruno runs to the fencing with a sandwich for Schmoll, along with an iron rod and a spade. Bruno and Schmoll exchange clothes, and Bruno puts on striped pyjamas. Through a hole they have dug. Bruno enters the prisoner's enclosure. Bruno tries to find Schmoll's father. He walks through the prison camp, with his head covered in a prisoner's cap. Soon German soldiers run in and herd the prisoners to gas chambers. In the rush, Bruno is pushed inside a gas crematorium. Elsa rushes to a military meeting and informs Rolf that Bruno is missing. It is raining, and the gas shower chambers are ignited. Bruno's clothes are found, and the parents along with soldiers rush to the crematorium. The iron door is locked, and guards are wearing gas masks. Mother Elsa collapses over Bruno's clothes. It continues to rain, and father Rolf is in a state of shock. The camp prison lights are dim.

Beautifully shot by Benoit Delhomme, Mark Herman's film is an intimate parable, full of imagery that suggest nine-year-old Bruno's growing awareness of the cruel holocaust

world around him. In this expose on the perils of Nazism within a German soldier's household, performances are imposing. The visual flourishes add to the unpredictable thrills in the narrative. □□□