

New Directions in German Cinema

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Chapter 4

Music after Mauthausen: re-presenting the Holocaust in Stefan Ruzowitzky's *The Counterfeiters* (2007)

Brad Prager

Based loosely on Adolf Burger's memoir *The Devil's Workshop* (*Des Teufels Werkstatt: Die größte Geldfälscheraktion der Weltgeschichte*, 1983), Stefan Ruzowitzky's film *The Counterfeiters* (*Die Fälscher*, 2007) was widely acclaimed and won the 2007 US Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. Much in Ruzowitzky's work had to be falsified (or counterfeited), partly out of deference to Holocaust survivors such as Salomon Smolianoff, the real historical figure at the story's centre, who was no longer alive to offer his consent. Moreover, much had to be fictionalised owing to the conventions surrounding cinematic representations of the Holocaust, which dictate that it is preferable merely to 'base' such stories on the truth because the truth itself (or the 'truly truest truth', to cite the title of Dani Levy's satirical and self-reflective Hitler film of that same year [*Mein Führer: The Truly Truest Truth About Adolf Hitler* (*Mein Führer – Die wirklich wahrste Wahrheit über Adolf Hitler*)]), about the atrocities endured in the camps is generally taken to be nearly if not entirely unrepresentable.

At the centre of the story on which Ruzowitzky based his film's screenplay are the workings of 'Operation Bernhard', a secret Nazi plot named after SS Major (*Sturmbahnführer*) Bernhard Krüger. Although the film refers to the scheme as Operation Bernhard, Krüger is not mentioned in the film. Some of Ruzowitzky's characters, particularly the Nazis, are composites, and the character Major Friedrich Herzog (Devid Striesow) can be seen to stand in for Krüger. The aim of Operation Bernhard was to wage a campaign against the US and British economies by flooding their respective markets with a surfeit of counterfeit pounds

and dollars. The plan has been attributed to Alfred Naujocks, a man said to have started World War II by orchestrating (or counterfeiting) an attack on a German-operated radio transmitter at the end of August 1939 in order to justify the invasion of Poland to the Germans (as is depicted in the DEFA film *The Gleiwitz Case* [*Der Fall Gleiwitz*, 1961]).¹ Naujocks suggested the scheme to Arthur Nebe, chief of the SS Criminal Police and adaptor of the mobile gas vans that were used to kill large numbers of Jews before the gas chambers were constructed. Nebe and SS Group Leader (*Gruppenführer*) Reinhard Heydrich, who was an avid reader of spy fiction, were particularly enthusiastic about the idea (see Malkin 2006: 5). Ultimately, according to Lawrence Malkin, it was Heinrich Himmler who came to Krüger with orders to carry out the plan. The later stages of the operation, those put into effect in a special clandestine block in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp starting in 1942, were under Krüger's direct administration, and constitute the primary setting of Ruzowitzky's film.

The Counterfeiters has been described as a crime thriller ('*Krimi*') (see Schulz-Ojala 2007), and the director speaks of his main character, who is based on Smolianoff but is named Solly Sorowitsch in the film (and played by Karl Markovics), as 'a film noir character in a Holocaust movie' (Ruzowitzky 2008). The director's comment is revealing insofar as it affirms not only that Holocaust film is a recognisable genre, but that it could be in some way connected to – as either compatible with or distinct from – film noir. Additionally, the subgenre of the German or German-language Holocaust film makes matters even more complex. Volker Schlöndorff, who directed the similarly themed and similarly debated film *The Ninth Day* (*Der neunte Tag*, 2004), famously noted that the Germans should not simply leave Holocaust filmmaking to Steven Spielberg and the Americans, adding 'it's a challenge you have to meet' (Schlöndorff 2004). Ruzowitzky's film calls these terms to mind not only because the filmmaker is Austrian, but also because he is the director of *Anatomy* (*Anatomie*, 2000), a conventional genre-based horror-thriller about medical students in Heidelberg, which references the legacy of German perpetration (and in particular that of Nazi medicine), as well as *All the Queen's Men* (2001), a comedy-drama (dramedy) about World War II spies featuring the US television star Matt LeBlanc.² *The Counterfeiters'* predominant genre can, however, be most closely identified with the German-language 'heritage film', a label imported from British film studies by Lutz Koepnick, and referring to that familiar wave of high-profile,

affirmative and box-office-friendly German films from the end of the last century including *Aimée & Jaguar* (1998), *The Harmonists* (*Comedian Harmonists*, 1997), and *Nowhere in Africa* (*Nirgendwo in Afrika*, 2001) (see Koepnick 2002). Such films are distinct from the well-known Ismail Merchant and James Ivory productions that are the calling card of the British heritage genre insofar as German heritage films tend to centre on German life during the Second World War. They generally depict the war years in a way that romanticises the history of German-Jewish partnerships and excises the spectre of racist zealotry among all but the most diabolical Nazis.

Though the film shares some thematic overlap with the German heritage films that preceded it and carved out its marketing niche, its connection to such films has less to do with its subject matter – which diverges from them insofar as it aims to depict a predominantly Jewish story and not a story of German-Jewish symbiosis – than with its apparent emphasis on emotionality, or how this period film affects its audience in a manner consistent with expensive, studio-based cinematic melodramas. In an anti-Brechtian proclamation Ruzowitzky praises costume dramas, explaining, ‘I like greatly emotive cinema – its pathos, grandiose sets and costumes’ (Ruzowitzky 2007). Because the director himself finds emotional filmmaking (*‘Gefühlskino’*) compelling, and because his film won wide international acclaim, it is little surprise that *The Counterfeiters* has been linked to other successful German melodramas such as *The Lives of Others* (*Das Leben der Anderen*, 2006).³ All of this generic embedding (that it is a *Krimi*, a Holocaust film with elements of film noir, and a melodramatic German heritage film) suggests a degree of over-determination insofar as genres establish audience expectations. Viewers are meant to know in advance what to expect from genre films. Yet an acknowledgment of *The Counterfeiters’* conformity with expectations becomes complicated once one acknowledges the ambiguities that necessarily attend the interpretation of any cinematic object: images do not always (or ever) mean in singular ways, and films frequently do not produce the meanings their directors and producers intend. Moreover the gaps between sound and image – or in this case between the drama and its accompanying *meloidía* – allow for slippages between the filmic *fabula* and *sujet*, ones that make dogmatic ideological critique, even of consensus-building and affirmative German heritage cinema, difficult. Films, including those that aim to establish national consensus, build upon existing conventions and put the past squarely in the past,

always produce a multitude of meanings. As with most historical films, *The Counterfeiters* is more complicated than its generic labels suggest. It aims towards building consensus about the Holocaust, yet it is, at the same time, slippery in terms of what it concludes about that past. The film thus may not function seamlessly as an ideological instrument.

Another initial consideration as to how to approach Ruzowitzky's film concerns its country of origin. As Randall Halle has noted, many of today's transnational – a modifier for which he opts in place of 'postnational' because national boundaries are still a relevant determining factor in film studies – productions have to be understood in multinational contexts (2008: 25). *The Counterfeiters*, although it is Austrian, can also be described as a German-language film, one that features high-profile German actors such as Devid Striesow and August Diehl, and which was co-funded by German companies including Studio Babelsberg (in Potsdam) and ZDF (in Mainz). And although Ruzowitzky is Austrian-born, he is descended from Nazi grandparents and grew up in Germany.⁴ Despite the Academy's need for national categorisation, *The Counterfeiters* is only partly an Austrian film. This fact, however, may productively inform interpretations. Austria, like Germany, after all, has its own troubled and complex relationship to Holocaust atrocities. In the terms of Austria's cultural memory, it seems – in relation, for example, to the election of President Kurt Waldheim, a former Wehrmacht intelligence officer – that much of Austria's population has difficulty accepting obvious evidence about their nation's massive collaboration with the Nazis and still today view Austria as foremost among National Socialism's victims.⁵

Concerns about the legacy of Austrian perpetration arise not only in connection with debates around Waldheim or the late xenophobic politician Jörg Haider, but also in connection with discussions surrounding the site of the former concentration camp Mauthausen, a stone quarry near Linz in which hundreds of thousands of prisoners were worked to death, and which constitutes one setting of *The Counterfeiters*. Early Austrian quarrels about how to memorialise the site of the camp included a discussion of whether or not it should be adorned with an enormous illuminated cross (Perz 2002: 155). Subsequent debates centred on the European fascination with 'event culture'. A spectacle called 'Mauthausen 2000', at which Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* (1823–24) was played in the quarry to commemorate the fifty-fifth anniversary of the camp's liberation set in motion a

controversy about the inappropriateness of calling upon the Vienna Philharmonic to play Beethoven – something they had done at Hermann Goering’s request in 1938 – in this sacred place. Beethoven’s *Ninth*, generally linked with Friedrich Schiller’s *Ode to Joy* (*Ode an die Freude*, 1785) to which its final movement is set, has a special history, having been twice played for Hitler on his birthdays in 1937 and 1942 (Buch 2003: 205). Objections to ‘Mauthausen 2000’ were expressed by Elie Wiesel, who cancelled plans to attend, and by Marta Halpert, the director of the Central European office of the Anti-Defamation League, who found the project distasteful and told the *New York Times*, ‘this is the worst sort of event-culture, like taking the Three Tenors to the Baths of Carcalla.’ She added, ‘You can hear the screams in the quarry. You should not make any other sounds’ (Cohen 2000 and Morrison 2000). The controversy thus concerned more than merely the choice of the piece, which makes for a complicated objection insofar as Beethoven’s work is by no means an explicit endorsement of fascism and has been the official anthem of the European Union since 1985.⁶ Simultaneously, although Beethoven is not Wagner, for some he retains an unfortunate metonymic link with German cultural hegemony under the Nazis.

At issue is less Beethoven’s *Ninth* than the relationship between silence and sound where Holocaust memorialisation is concerned, and the question of whether one can or must ‘still hear the screams in the quarry’. Bertrand Perz compares the playing of Beethoven at Mauthausen unfavourably with a project that resulted in *Chronicles from the Ashes* (*Mauthausen – Vom großen Sterben hören*, 2000), a piece by the jazz keyboardist Joe Zawinul composed specifically for the Mauthausen memorial site and thus untainted by darker cultural legacies (Perz 2006: 256). The chief element of the disputation, therefore, is not whether there may be music after Mauthausen (if one may vary Theodor Adorno’s famous formulation),⁷ but what uses of music and silence are more or less appropriate to Holocaust memorialisation. It makes sense to weigh the various meanings of sound against those of silence, and *The Counterfeiters* engages in this type of negotiation. The film can be analysed in light of questions similar to those raised by ‘Mauthausen 2000’ as a reflection on Holocaust memory and on what serves as a proper balm where deep wounds – in this case German and Jewish wounds – are concerned. The film moves between its music and certain sound effects that are calculated to draw attention to the soundtrack’s function vis-à-vis

violence. The choices made in regard to the film's audio reflect its orientation towards, on the one hand, the questions of collaboration that form *The Counterfeiters'* central theme, and on the other the larger question of whether it is possible to comprehend atrocities endured during the Holocaust. Subsequent to a consideration of such issues – of the film's depiction of the victims' sufferings – the film's choices concerning its music and sounds can be interpreted anew.

Following *The Counterfeiters'* first twenty minutes most of the film is set in Sachsenhausen concentration camp, where the labour associated with Operation Bernhard took place. Mauthausen is, however, briefly depicted in early sequences as the camp to which Sorowitsch is first deported. It plays a key role in portraying the lessons the main character learns in order to survive. At Mauthausen Sorowitsch acquires privileges and opportunities based on his artistic skills. He paints flattering portraits of the guards as a means of acquiring additional food. Through presenting Sorowitsch's management of his predicament, the film speaks to the issue of collaboration. He adopts a false persona and, one might say, plays to Mauthausen's cruel rules. The theme recalls discussions around an incident described in the memoir of Dr Miklos Nyiszli and later explored in Primo Levi's discussion of 'the gray zone' in which a soccer match was played at Auschwitz between members of the SS and the *Sonderkommando* (Levi 1988: 54–55).⁸ Levi suggests that the division into two teams on a single playing field was one among many ways in which the SS taunted the *Sonderkommando*, coercing them into performing the part of equals and thereby undercutting the otherwise obvious moral distinction between the group that wilfully coordinated the gassing of Jews and the group of prisoners who were made to incinerate the victims' bodies – to dispose of the evidence – under penalty of death.⁹

Although there is no explicit reference to Levi in Ruzowitzky's film (as there had been in Schlöndorff's *The Ninth Day*, which adapts passages from Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved*, 1986), *The Counterfeiters*, consistent with Levi's position, declines to demonise Sorowitsch for playing a role, and even for the fact that he counterfeited in the service of the Nazis, thereby advancing Germany's war aims.¹⁰ The film thematises the difficulties in assuming high moral ground with respect to the compromised situations depicted in the film. For example, when Major Herzog tries to convince Sorowitsch to cooperate, he encourages him by explaining that Sorowitsch should not engage in deceit because

the two of them are now 'on the same side'. Herzog is coercing Sorowitsch, and as such his position is deeply cynical. They are only on the same side insofar as Sorowitsch's fate rests in Herzog's hands. Sorowitsch is admonished to perform his role convincingly, and, as he learned at Mauthausen, it is important to allow one's behaviour to be falsified (or counterfeited) as need be. The issue arises throughout the film, but was already a theme in Adolf Burger's memoir. Burger, for example, recalls playing ping-pong with Squad Leader (*Hauptscharführer*) Werner (a man who resembles the film's diabolical character Holst). Because of the counterfeiters' special privileges – that they were, like the *Sonderkommando*, in the unusual position of having access to diversions such as ping-pong tables and being periodically treated otherwise than as animals – the rules were different; ordinary prisoners would never have been in the position of playing ping-pong against guards. Burger recalls that he beat Werner the first time, but then, realising his mistake, he let Werner win. He credits his survival to this concession.¹¹

How does the masquerade in which Sorowitsch is engaged square with his character's noir-ishness? Karl Markovics's performance recalls Humphrey Bogart's in *Casablanca* (1942), and his character is presented as someone who is predisposed to opportunism and self-interest. Ruzowitzky underscores the fact that Sorowitsch was a forger prior to the war. On the eve of his 1936 arrest we see the character express his longstanding interest in forging the dollar. He was an accomplished criminal before the Nazis took hold of him, and his criminality is highlighted to draw attention to his willingness to place his own needs first and thus as a measure of insight into his survival. The noir-ishness may be understood to introduce a gap, or a Brechtian defamiliarisation between the viewer and the protagonist. Given the situation, however – that he is more or less a sympathetic figure who negotiates with Nazis for his life – it is difficult not to identify with him. Sorowitsch's criminality instead offers insight into the film's links with Levi, making explicit what we are meant to conclude concerning the central protagonist's navigation of the grey zone. Levi points out in his discussion of who in the camp was 'drowned' and who was 'saved' that those prone to moral compromise were most likely to survive. He writes, 'The "saved" of the *Lager* were not the best, those predestined to do good, the bearers of a message,' and adds, 'what I had seen and lived through proved the exact contrary. Preferably the worst survived, the selfish, the violent, the insensitive, the collaborators of the "gray zone".' (1988: 82).

To describe Sorowitsch's character as selfish misses the mark; given the context, this term does not fit. Based on his study of oral testimony, Lawrence Langer observes that actual experiences in concentration camps were such that the terms heroism and selfishness do not apply, and that normal reactions in situations such as these, which grossly exceed any conventional moral guidelines, are predicated on one's capacity to improvise. Langer is interested in 'how an individual reacts when situation rather than character controls response', and he notes that in the absence of certain rules, 'one is left vulnerable to desperate gestures that have little connection to the moral assurances we customarily associate with efforts at self-preservation' (1991: 139 and 123). Ruzowitzky, however, opts to present us with a protagonist who was morally pliable before the war began – a forger who sometimes barter for sex. He is not unusually nefarious, beyond engaging in some loan-sharking, yet he is surely inclined to improvise where his survival is concerned. Unlike the priest Henri Kremer in Schlöndorff's *The Ninth Day*, a protagonist who finds high moral ground through self-sacrifice and refuses to compromise, Sorowitsch survives because he has from the outset relinquished any stake in his own sanctification.

Sorowitsch is not wholly insensitive, and is at one point depicted taking pains and risks to acquire tuberculosis medicine on behalf of Kolja (Sebastian Urzendowsky), a young Russian art student he had paternalistically befriended on the way to Sachsenhausen.¹² Sorowitsch is a paradigmatic Levian subject, who here practices an improvisational form of solidarity called 'us-ism'. Levi describes 'us-ism' as 'selfishness extended to the person closest to you', which, he explains, was the only manifestation of generosity and self-sacrifice left to those in the camps (1988: 80). Sorowitsch, however, does not want his response to be mistaken for solidarity. When Burger (played by August Diehl) lauds Sorowitsch for having shared his food with Kolja ('That was solidarity!'), Sorowitsch corrects him ('That was *soup*'). When it comes to toeing a moral line, he is resolutely cynical and would not wish to be seen as an exponent of an ideology, particularly a moralising one.¹³

As much as Herzog serves as a foil for Sorowitsch, the contrast between Sorowitsch and Burger illuminates key distinctions within *The Counterfeiters'* attitude to how these prisoners can understand, identify with and forgive one another. Burger, the character on whose memoir the film is largely based, worked in *Kanada*, the area of

Auschwitz-Birkenau where the stolen possessions of murdered Jewish prisoners were collected and sorted. He is apparently repulsed by the extent to which he and the other forgers are expected to collaborate, and argues for open revolt – an option Sorowitsch, and the film itself, view as untenable. Burger is idealistic and explains to Sorowitsch that he cannot play by the Nazis' rules – that his wife, a victim of the Nazis, used to remind him that printing presses such as the one they are using to abet the Nazis' criminal enterprise were made for printing the truth. Though Sorowitsch is not sympathetic to Burger's past political orientations, his constant pestering strikes a chord. When the two play a game of ping-pong and shots ring out from the other side of the wooden wall, Burger, still agitating for rebellion and trying to awaken Sorowitsch's conscience, provokes him with the words 'Be glad we're standing on this side of the wall.' The film here addresses the heavy burden associated with inhabiting the grey zone. It emphasises both the connections between the prisoners as well as the limits placed on solidarity in the camp, a contradiction that is difficult for even an opportunist such as Sorowitsch to bear.

That the counterfeiters are ultimately all on the same side and share a common predicament is made evident when Sorowitsch is first



Figure 4.1: Soli Sorowitsch reacts dismissively to the accusation that he is a criminal.

shown around the workshop. He is introduced to Dr Viktor Hahn (Tilo Prückner), who, upon noticing the green triangle on Sorowitsch's uniform, is indignant that he should have to work with a criminal. Hahn comments that the only criminals before Sorowitsch's arrival were the ones wearing Nazi uniforms. As Levi would have recognised, in light of the magnitude of the real crime that was taking place – the Holocaust – the distinction between the prisoners is specious. This is not to say that some of the career criminals who became *Kapos* were not vicious, but Sorowitsch is no *Kapo*. The error of labelling Sorowitsch a criminal, given the circumstances, is a shadowy reflection of an error made after the war by Major Krüger himself, who, in a 1958 interview with *American Weekly*, commented that Soli Smolianoff (the real Sorowitsch) was 'the only criminal we ever had in Operation Bernhard' (Krüger 1958: 22). Krüger seems to have forgotten to judge himself alongside everyone else who oversaw the forced labour. A comment of this sort made during the war is evidence of confusion; making it 13 years later is perverse. The character Sorowitsch, by contrast, is depicted as having an intuitive and immediate understanding of the false dichotomy where the prisoners are concerned. Ruzowitzky seems to second his character's dismissal of Hahn's self-righteousness (Sorowitsch replies, 'Kiss my ass!' [*Leck mich!*]) through his use of *mise-en-scène*: Hahn and Sorowitsch hold their conversation through a superfluous set of bars that serve little more than an ornamental function in the workshop. The film asserts that the inhabitants of this grey zone – Sachsenhausen's barracks 18 and 19 – were all in the same boat, and although the prisoners each managed the situation differently, the terms heroism and selfishness lose their traditional meanings. Ruzowitzky's screenplay presupposes that the moral playing field among these forgers is level and that they can ultimately see eye-to-eye with one another. Whether we can understand them – whether the truth of their experience can be represented adequately, and what purpose such representation serves – remains a separate question.

How the wounds associated with the real story behind *The Counterfeiters* are confronted, and whether one still 'hears the screams', is reflected in the implied distinctions between what the film's characters hear and what the film intends for us to hear. The music on the soundtrack plays a prominent role, repeatedly serving to cover over painful parts of Sorowitsch's experience. The most recurrent *motif* is the tango, performed here by the Argentine harmonica player Victor Hugo Díaz. The music is frequently introduced non-diegetically as

memory, and if one makes the working – though by no means absolute – assumption that this non-diegetic music reflects Sorowitsch’s subjective state of mind (as opposed to source music’s apparent ‘objectivity’), then we are being drawn into Sorowitsch’s past and made aware that he is returning in thought to a time before the war (Stilwell 2007: 190–91). Although we hear the strains of the tango at the film’s beginning (Diaz’s ‘Mano a Mano’ [‘Hand to Hand’]), the earliest chronological point at which they are heard in the film is 1936, Sorowitsch’s last night of freedom before being arrested by Herzog, who was then working with the Criminal Police. The tango appears diegetically when Sorowitsch turns on the record player (the piece is Diaz’s ‘Volver’ [‘Return’]), quickly becomes non-diegetic as a means of stitching together the ensuing montage, and again – as ‘Mano a Mano’ – returns non-diegetically as memory later in the film. That the tango permits Sorowitsch to return in his mind to happier times corresponds to how music is employed in the Sachsenhausen barracks. He learns shortly after his arrival that the forgers have the privilege of listening to music, but that the operas they play on their phonograph are meant primarily to overwhelm the horrific sounds that would otherwise seep in through the windows, specifically the cries of pain associated with a cruel ritual during which Sachsenhausen prisoners were made to run through the camp in ill-fitting shoes (Malkin 2006: 84).¹⁴

Music is thus entangled with the attempt to cover over cosmetically what cannot be covered over; what is repressed will surely return. In both its diegetic and non-diegetic forms, music conceals pain, as in the workshop, where the forgers play music to divert them from their forced labour. The first time Sorowitsch and Burger are shown their work assignments we hear diegetically ‘Mein Herr Marquis’ (also known as ‘Adele’s Laughing Song’) from Johann Strauss’s *Die Fledermaus* (1874). At the centre of *Die Fledermaus* a character is avoiding going to prison, and the song thus not only picks up on one of the film’s key themes but echoes the other ‘light’ songs on the soundtrack, ones borrowed from operettas such as Strauss’s *The Merry War* (*Der lustige Krieg*, 1881). This song in particular concerns a masquerade: Adele, the maid, has gone to a ball dressed as an actress and is laughing to disguise the fact that she has been mistaken for what she is – a maid. The ‘joke’ of being mistaken for a criminal in the midst of a wholly criminal enterprise could likewise serve as the conceit at the centre of an Austrian operetta were it not so tragic.

There are, however, points at which the film offers a contrasting acoustic paradigm, or where it acknowledges the limits of music's ability to paper over wounds. In an early sequence of the film we glimpse Sorowitsch in Monte Carlo immediately following the war, when he has picked up a woman (Dolores Chaplin) at the casino. She is not a professional prostitute, but she seems to be comfortable accepting money in exchange for sex, which, in underscoring the role of exchange in defining human relations, recalls one of the themes of the film. As she notices the number tattooed on Sorowitsch's arm, the noise of waves lapping against the Mediterranean shore becomes suddenly strange. The pleasant sounds, as if one were standing on the beach, now call to mind the experience of drowning. This noise suggests either deep memories that refuse to rise to the surface or Sorowitsch's sense that he had been drowning during his imprisonment. On this point the film is not specific. The 'drowning' may be Sorowitsch's own, insofar as we hear it again upon his arrival at Mauthausen, but it may also be a sound evoked by watching others drown: we also hear it when Sorowitsch realises the 'new' jacket with which the Nazis have furnished him was taken from another Jew, one recently sent to his death.

These sounds return once again at Sachsenhausen in a dramatic sequence in which the sadistic Squad Leader Holst explains to Sorowitsch how worthless he is and then urinates on him. Sorowitsch's anger initially manifests itself as virtual silence. The camera swings, following the bodily motions associated with his fit of rage, and as his own anger subdues the sounds of Nazi laughter and he goes to wash himself off, his footsteps begin to echo thunderously. The ensuing silence is not absolute, but rather, insofar as the noise is meant to reflect what is taking place inside his head, is deafening. The film here alludes to a mode of sublime anger – an experience that exceeds Sorowitsch's ability to generate an acoustic inner representation that would facilitate more than the barest comprehension of what has transpired. A similar profoundly deafening silence is depicted in a subsequent sequence in which Holst executes Kolja, the art student Sorowitsch had struggled to protect. Sorowitsch watches from the bathroom as Holst executes the young prisoner with a single shot to the head. He shakes and shudders, and in its initial moments the musical composition (named 'Kolja executed' on the soundtrack) very fleetingly evokes harmonious play of stringed instruments as though Sorowitsch were struggling to recall the comforting sounds of Argentine

tangos but cannot. It is as though he finds himself submerged once more. He then returns to the barracks only to hear Holst giving a perverse eulogy for Kolja, and everything is muted; it is almost as if Sorowitsch himself has been partially deafened by the gunshot.¹⁵ Again, the film gestures toward a sublime screaming, or suggests an inner response so violent and tumultuous that it exceeds representation. Only after Holst walks out can Sorowitsch return to 'normal', which is to say that he can again begin to function as he had done habitually, by recalling the strains of Diaz's 'Mano a Mano'.

Most of the film depicts how Sorowitsch and this group of forgers – who were afforded special treatment, could grow out their hair and were given enough to eat – were separated from the general population of Sachsenhausen. At the film's end, however, once the camp is liberated and the emaciated inmates have stormed the barracks, the forgers, alongside the starved and dazed survivors (a group who, at this point, appear to constitute the filmmaker's principal depiction of the unprivileged or 'real' victims of Sachsenhausen) listen to music on a phonograph. One member of this latter group places a hand on Burger's shoulder, which may be meant to suggest that the two could reach an understanding of one another's experience despite the enormity of the gap between them. Although Burger looks bewildered and wonders what he is to do with the shame that now overshadows his survival – the guilt of having collaborated, however unwillingly, to keep a set of privileges not available to others – the survivor's gesture seems to indicate the possibility of forgiveness.

The song that plays on the phonograph is Beniamino Gigli's rendition of 'Rimpianto' ('Regret'), a serenade by Enrico Toselli. The song is about memory and lost love. Gigli sings,

Like a golden dream
it is carved in my heart.
The memory still of that love
that no longer exists [...]
But it was very brief in me
the sweetness of it truly vanished
this beautiful golden dream
leaving sorrow within me.

When Gigli reaches the line 'dark is the future' ('cupo è l'avvenir') and sustains the final syllable (the *-ir* in 'avvenir'), Ruzowitzky cuts away



Figure 4.2: Adolf Burger shares a sympathetic moment with a uniformed survivor of Sachsenhausen.

from the camp to a tight shot of Sorowitsch in a Monte Carlo casino following the war. In that moment it seems that Sorowitsch has decided to be done with his past, to deliberately gamble away every penny of the counterfeit money he had kept. At the onset of the film, when we first encountered Sorowitsch staring at the water, he seemed lonely and may have been considering drowning himself, but later, at the very end of the film and in the company of an attractive woman, he dances on the shore and comfortably professes – in a forger's *double entendre* – that if he needs money he can always make more. His future hardly seems dark, and the tango for two has returned to close the wound and replace Gigli's lonely serenade.

Levi remarks that liberation from the camps was difficult, and that, 'coming out of the darkness, one suffered because of the reacquired consciousness of having been diminished.' He explains that this was, 'not by our will, cowardice or fault, yet nevertheless we had lived for months and years at an animal level' (1988: 75). However, the depiction of Sorowitsch's release gives an indication that his experience could be left behind him. Surely this was the story of a uniquely privileged prisoner (a fact of which Ruzowitzky was well aware)¹⁶ and perhaps for that reason Sorowitsch is depicted as less traumatised. Such subtleties, however, may be lost on audiences. Insofar as he stands

for other survivors, his experience, difficult as it was, is presented as something that can in the end be assimilated into his postwar life and made comprehensible to the viewer. The film's status as emotive cinema (*Gefühlskino*) is predicated on the presumption that we can grasp what he has endured.

On the road to Ebensee, the concentration camp near to Mauthausen from which the real forgers of Operation Bernhard were liberated (rather than from Sachsenhausen, as is falsely depicted in the film), some forgery equipment, SS files, and a good number of remaining counterfeit pound notes were dumped in the water (at Traunsee and in Lake Toplitz [Toplitzsee] in the Alps). The metal crates eventually became buried treasure, themselves drowned, and exploration for them became tabloid fodder in the years that followed. Lawrence Malkin observes that the 'hands down winners' of the story of Operation Bernhard were the tourist operators around Lake Toplitz, 'who have in recent years turned it into an Austrian Loch Ness, complete with its own website' (2006: 207).

Whether as tourism or as event culture, popular modes of coming to terms with the Holocaust presuppose that there can be some understanding between victims and contemporary observers. This is by and large false currency and is predicated primarily on purchasing reconciliation and papering over collective wounds. Recent films that have reflected on the obstacles in the way of coming to terms with the past include Robert Thalheim's *And Along Come Tourists* (*Am Ende kommen Touristen*, 2007), which was directly concerned with whether a young German, born forty years after the end of the war, could understand anything of the Holocaust past, and whether he owes any debt to the victims. Similarly Rex Bloomstein's documentary film *KZ* (2006) was directed specifically at Austria and cast a critical eye on tourist culture in and around the site of Mauthausen concentration camp. Thalheim's and Bloomstein's films excel at illustrating how the past remains far from having been properly worked through. Whether by accident or by design Ruzowitsky's film engages with the question of representation, specifically in the choices it makes concerning its music and sound. As with a symphony played at the site of Mauthausen's quarry, music can be treated either as a sufficient or an indecent measure of how one memorialises and reflects. *The Counterfeiters* is not without its complexities; it acknowledges the challenges inherent in depicting traumatic experiences and thematises

its central protagonist's difficulty processing his sufferings and the sufferings of those around him. However, to judge from the sense of closure its final waterfront tango provides, Ruzowitzky's film, akin to its heritage film counterparts, inclines toward the affirmative assertion that the case can be closed – or in this instance, that the forger's case can be emptied and discarded – and that the past can be left behind.

NOTES

- 1 Adolf Burger (2009: 125) and (2007: 127) attributes the scheme to Naujocks.
- 2 On Ruzowitzky's *Anatomy* as a thriller and in relation to its depiction of the past, see Prager 2006: 301–2.
- 3 On *The Lives of Others* as a melodrama with similarities to German heritage films, see Fisher 2010.
- 4 Speaking about his Nazi grandparents, Ruzowitzky explains, 'Living in Austria, if you're not completely blocked [off], you are aware that this is part of your history – your family history, your country's history – because the remains are everywhere. My grandparents weren't some huge war criminals, they were just average people fascinated by the Nazi's [sic] ideas' 2008.
- 5 On how Austrians see themselves as victims, see Perz (2002: 151) and Stuhlpfarrer (2002: 235).
- 6 On the politics of *Ode to Joy*, see Buch 2003: 209.
- 7 Adorno raises the question of what constitutes appropriately critical art for the culture that created Auschwitz throughout his postwar writings. The most common reference point is his remark that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' in Adorno 1981: 34. His remarks are commonly misunderstood as an assertion that no art is justifiable after the Holocaust.
- 8 The reference to the soccer game can be found in Nyiszli 1993: 68.
- 9 Debarati Sanyal describes the soccer-playing scene as an example of 'coerced mimesis between executioner and victim'. This is, in other words, another example of Jews being forced to play a part at the behest of the Nazis – in this case, for their amusement (Sanyal 2002: 2).
- 10 On the use of Primo Levi in Schlöndorff's film, see Prager 2010.
- 11 The story is recounted in Burger 2009: 160 and 2007: 163.
- 12 The figure of Kolja seems to be inspired by Pjotr Sukiennik. See Burger 2009: 178–79 and 2007: 180–81. The English version renders his name Sukienik.
- 13 An inspiration for Sorowitsch's cynical persona may have been the Greek philosopher Diogenes of Sinope (also known as Diogenes the Cynic). A

story is commonly told that when Alexander the Great met Diogenes, who was lying in the sunlight, Alexander asked him if there was anything he could do for him, to which Diogenes simply replied, 'I would have you stand elsewhere than between me and the sun.' Given Sorowitsch's cynicism, the scene in *The Counterfeiters* in which he asks Burger to move out of his sunlight may be taken as a conscious evocation of Diogenes.

- 14 The description of this ritual can also be found in Burger 2009: 113 and 2007: 115.
- 15 The 'eulogy' has an origin in Burger's memoir. According to Burger, after Senior Squad Leader (*Oberscharführer*) Heizmann shot Sukiennik he told the other prisoners, 'Although he knew he would be shot, he was so brave. He made a deep impression on me' (Burger 2009: 178 and 2007: 181).
- 16 In interview Ruzowitzky explains, 'I would not have dared to make a movie that tries to show the normal life of a concentration-camp inmate because I think that that is not possible. It's not possible because we cannot identify with such a person. We cannot say, "What would I do if I was an inmate in a concentration camp?" because the situation is so extreme and so far away from what we know' (Archibald 2008).