



In Heaven, Underground: Weissensee's Jewish Cemetery

Giulia Pines reviews Britta Wauer's "Im Himmel, unter der Erde", a new film about Weissensee's Jüdischer Friedhof...



Nobody is neutral on cemeteries. Maybe you're the kind of person who can't resist visiting them all, browsing through the names and dates like titles on a bookshelf. Or perhaps you can't pass one without holding your breath, remnants of childhood superstitions still fresh in your mind.

Either way, those slabs of stone always seem to elicit a reaction, and Berlin, adorned with a seemingly endless list of sprawling cemeteries, is a great place to delve into city history through the stories of the dead.

The new and enchanting documentary by Britta Wauer, entitled "Im Himmel, unter der Erde" (In Heaven, Underground) focuses on just one of these cemeteries: the Jüdischer Friedhof Weissensee. This sprawling jungle of vines, trees, and headstones in the north Berlin neighborhood of Weissensee is notable as the largest still-operational Jewish cemetery in Europe.

It stands out not only for its size and beauty, but also for the astonishing fact that it survived the Third Reich. The moment you enter the gates of the cemetery, however, and plunge into over one hundred acres of stone and green, the miracle of the place's continued existence is somewhat beside the point. You feel wholly embraced by history, and taken over by an exhilarating sense of wonder at the company you keep.

Wauer's documentary is exceptional in its ability to capture this wonder. The opening frames--a snail oozing over a headstone and a caterpillar cavorting across hallowed ground, followed by a sweeping overhead shot of the cemetery bathed in dappled sunlight and adorned with vines--depict it as a place pulsating with life. The sometimes fanciful, sometimes plaintive music of Karim Sebastian Elias, who composed the film's original score, does much to enhance this feeling. The viewer is struck early on by the energy that seems to surround the cemetery, a collection of over 100,000 graves.

It is also to Wauer's credit that she does not go the traditional documentary route, choking her film with historians and black-and-white footage (though there is certainly a tantalizing amount of it, including some truly stunning shots in which modern mausoleums, covered in green, fade into their black-and-white photographic counterparts).

Instead, she goes straight to the people for whom this place is perhaps most important--who have a personal connection with the cemetery because members of their family lie there. Her film is a pastiche of faces, names, and languages. She follows the stories of those who work at the cemetery, eventually and charmingly regarding it as nothing more than an outdoor office, and those who visit, sometimes making pilgrimages from halfway around the world to locate a relative they had only ever heard stories about.



One such visitor is Benny Epstein, a Jew who was born in Berlin but spent most of his life in the US. He is seen wandering solemnly through the cemetery with his wife and an attendant in tow, looking for a long lost-relative. Upon spotting the grave marked "Helene Epstein," that of his grandmother who was killed in the Holocaust, he bursts into tears. "I don't know why I survived," he says. "What did I do wrong? What did I do right?"

His sentiment could be echoed by half the elderly Jewish visitors who come trying to find some connection to their pasts through mere inscriptions on stone. It could also be shared by the thousands of Jewish dead who were buried in Weissensee from 1880, when the cemetery first opened, until the early 1930's.

Walking around the cemetery today, catching sight of a gravestone marked "1900" or even "1921," it is hard not to marvel at the twist of fate—and, yes, the good fortune—that allowed them to die when Jewish life in Berlin was at its peak. Resting in peace mere feet below the surface, they would thankfully never know the turmoil and tragedy that was to come to their beloved city and their children. What did they do wrong or right?

Another visitor is Harry Kindermann, whose remarkable story is woven through the documentary, illustrating how the cemetery played a central role in his life...and once may have even saved it. Kindermann was born in Berlin in 1927, shortly after his German-Jewish parents returned home from Palestine at the bequest of his grandfather, who wanted to see his grandson grow up in Germany.

As we join him on a walk around the neighborhood, he relates his comparatively fortunate fate: Because his father and grandfather worked as masons at the cemetery, he inherited specialized knowledge from them that helped him survive the Holocaust. When the Nazis saw that he could work with stone, he was plucked out of the thousands of Jews deported from Berlin in the 1940's and ordered to build bunkers for them.

As the sprightly eighty-three year old reminisces, shots of Friedhof Weissensee today are interwoven with his photographs of it before the war: children huddle together scheming in play, teenagers balance on a wall. The place seems wholly and utterly alive, and indeed it was: as Kindermann explains, one of the last places where kids could laugh freely in those years was "auf'm Friedhof."

He also offers up a theory about Weissensee's survival during the Nazi period: it was spared destruction, he believes, because the Nazis were afraid of the Golem, a monstrous, Frankenstein-like being who, according to folklore, could be conjured to defend Jewish communities against those who might seek to harm them.



In a position to affirm or contradict this statement would be Willi Wolff, the film's infectiously upbeat "rabbi-in-residence," who punctuates his every explanation of Jewish burial customs with a wink or even a giggle. Although he functions as the film's unofficial narrator, it is surprising to find—in the film's one

misstep—that he actually has nothing to do with the Friedhof Weissensee. Born in Berlin, Wolff spent most of his life in London working as a journalist.

At nearly sixty he fulfilled his childhood dream of becoming a Rabbi, and is now head of the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern Jewish communities. His witticisms, nevertheless, make up some of the most joyful moments in the film, displaying a touch of the dark humor on which Jews have so long prided themselves.

Although the film has already received its share of critical acclaim (it won the Panorama Publikumspreis at the Berlinale this year), it is hard to imagine it finding the kind of popular success it deserves (or much of an international audience, although it is slated to be released on DVD in October with English subtitles). Still, the non-Jewish Wauer, who herself barely knew the cemetery until it was suggested that she make a film about it, has accomplished quite a feat in creating such a glowing portrait of this cherished corner of Berlin.

Those who were unaware of the Jüdischer Friedhof Weissensee will find themselves intrigued, and those who know it will be driven to return. Upon revisiting, they may find that an even more sensory experience awaits them. Everything, from the names on the stones to the caretakers going about their business, becomes more noticeable, more intensely real, transformed in that strange way that it can only be, naturally, after it has been viewed through a camera's lens.

All images by Giulia Pines