

## Harry Rasky's The Spies who never Were

*"When knowledge comes, memory comes too. Knowledge and memory are one and the same thing."*

This quote, spoken by narrator Harry Rasky at both the beginning and the end of his latest two-hour documentary, *The Spies Who Never Were*, is central to the film's intellectual and structural conception. Through an intricately woven montage of living memory and frozen images of the past, the film chronicles the ironic tragedy which befell 3000 German, Austrian and Italian (mostly Jewish) refugees from Hitler's fascist regime. They fled to England, a country they considered to be their ally. Instead, they were suspected of being "spies and troublemakers," and Churchill ordered his authorities to "collar the lot." They were detained on an empty holiday resort, the secluded Isle of Wight, until it was seen fit to deport them to internment camps in Canada and Australia.

Like Alain Resnais' 1955 documentary on the horror of the Nazi death camps, *Night and Fog*, Rasky's is structured to draw more upon personal memory of these allied internment camps than the camps as they actually existed. As some of the 900 men who were eventually interned in Canada recount their bitter-sweet memories before the camera, a mental image of the time builds in the viewer's mind.

The film cuts back and forth from World War II film clips and still photographs, to contemporary colour footage of the remains of the camps; to other places which, now benign, were once fraught with unhappier circumstance; and to the vessels of memory, the men themselves.

The memories are real and present within the minds of the men who lived them. These highly perceptive and intelligent men have that peculiarly acute awareness and sensitivity born of suffering. They are beyond bitterness and reproach for the injustices dealt them.

Instead they are filled with a sense of the irony and absurdity of life, while at the same time guided by an inner moral strength.

As they recall the ironic, bureaucratic blundering which forced them to become prisoners in the very countries they had hoped would give them refuge, their memories translate to knowledge in the viewer's mind. We understand how fear and hatred breeds ignorance, particularly poignant in a democratic country such as Canada - a country which prides itself in being tolerant.

It is essential that these memories, as well as the memories of Japanese-Canadians who suffered parallel circumstances during the same war, should be brought forth now and become documented chapters of Canadian history. They do not belong to the dead past; they are a part of our living present. The fear and hatred which breeds ignorance has not gone away. The uncaring anonymity of bureaucracy is with us more than ever.

We are first introduced to these rememberers in their contemporary Canadian context. For the most part, they have thrived to become some of the most distinguished Canadians of the post-war era. Among them are Rabbi Emil Fackenheim, professor of philosophy at the University of Toronto; Joseph Kates, ex-chancellor of the University of Waterloo; Roman Catholic theologian Gregory Baum; Helmut Blume, ex-dean of the Music Faculty at McGill University; Jack Hahn, industrialist; the renowned pianist John Newmark; and comic novelist and television broadcaster Eric Koch.

When these men disembarked in Quebec City, one fine summer day in 1940, they were full of hope that they would be granted the freedom to start a new life. Instead, they were greeted by insulting Canadians and the now-familiar barbed wire and armed guards. The anguished disappointment led one youth among them to commit suicide. They were herded off to prison camps in Quebec, Ontario and New Brunswick, where they were to remain for two and a half years. Many of these refugees found themselves thrown together with actual German prisoners of war, who taunted the Jews with anti-Semitic

songs.

Canadians had been notified by British authorities that these "enemy aliens" were potentially dangerous, and strongly suspected of being spies. Fackenheim remembers overhearing two Canadian guards discussing the refugees. "They seem to speak English well," said one guard. The other replied, "Those are the most dangerous."

Much of the film deals with memories of internment camp life. The mental anguish the refugees endured at being imprisoned by their perceived allies was transcended in part by a spirit of community and a commonality of conviction amongst the refugees. They organized sports teams. Trees were planted and work was divided up accordingly. The more educated among them taught classes in their specialties. Notebooks were fashioned from the rough and durable camp toilet paper. This kind of self-motivated activity looms larger in the memories of the ex-internees than does idleness or boredom.

As time wore on, it became increasingly evident that these men presented no threat to the security of Canada nor to any other Allied country. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find a group of people within the Allied world who were more committed to the destruction of Hitler's Germany. Nevertheless, it was a tiresome, lengthy process convincing Canadian bureaucrats to give them refugee status. No one wanted to admit that a mistake had been made. Two and a half years after they set foot in Canada, all the men had finally been released. They went on to repay their inhospitable treatment with major contributions to Canadian society.

No official apology was ever offered by the Canadian government. The last words of Rasky's narrative are: "By the way, the internment process did not catch a single German spy."

Lyn Martin ●

### THE SPIES WHO NEVER WERE

d./p. Harry Rasky d.o.p. Kenneth W. Gregg, C.S.C. asst. cam. John Maxwell ed. Paul Nikolich asst. ed. Marie Lyons sd. Eric Hoppe mix. Clark Deprato narr./sc. Harry Rasky graphic design Geoff Chesbrough consult. Eric Koch p.c. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation colour 16mm running time 112 min.

## Brigitte Berman's Bix - "Ain't None of them Play like Him Yet"



● Bix and his cornet

Brigitte Berman's reverential documentary on the legendary white jazz cornetist of the '20s, Bix Beiderbecke, is crammed with evidence of the musician's greatness, but one is left with the incomplete feeling that the man has eluded us. Perhaps that is because he was an elusive character in life. Bix was his music, and from a very early age, he let his music speak for him. In 26 on-camera interviews with Bix's fellow musicians and friends, they speak worshipfully of his genius. Describing him as quiet, dedicated, conservative and considerate, they are ultimately unable to bring him to life for the film. This, ironically, in spite of the fact that he has never really died for them.

Compounding this problem of elusive characterization is the fact that most photographs of Bix - and Berman must have unearthed virtually all in existence - are static group shots. The camera centres on the group, picks Bix out, then zooms in on him (this technique is used with almost every still in the film). Bix's expression doesn't change much from shot to shot. The camera reveals a sensitive, almost-angelic face, with a shy smile and big, glistening brown eyes.

There is also precious little film footage of the jazz great, although all that is available is contained in the film. Given these limitations, Berman has done an

● Even in Canada, the grey prisoner-of-war camps

