



Melanie Laurent plays a Christian nurse in "La Rafle."

'La Rafle' confronts vile chapter in French history

By Daniel M. Kimmel

A number of years ago the Movie Maven attended a screening of a Holocaust-related film with the late David Brudnoy. Coming out of the theater Brudnoy made an observation that has endured in memory. "The problem with this movie," he said, "is that the people who need to see it won't go."

That came to mind watching "La Rafle" ("The Roundup"), a 2010 French film opening at the West Newton Cinema. It is a powerful, heart-wrenching film about everyday bravery and about those who would collaborate with evil. The people who most need to see it wouldn't dream of attending.

"La Rafle" is the story of the roundup of French Jewry. Where Germany's fascist allies, Spain and Italy, resisted offering up their Jewish citizens for the Nazi Final Solution, there were many willing collaborators in France. Indeed, without the cooperation of the French, an operation of this size could not have taken place.

In July of 1942, some 13,000 Jews were taken from their homes, not only in the occupied part of France, but with the full assistance of the Vichy government in the south. They were transported to the Velodrome d'Hiver, a sports stadium where they lived under abominable conditions. They were subsequently transported, first to internment camps, and then to the death camps. These included the infirm, the elderly, women, and children. Of those who left, only 25 returned.

One of the hardest things to bear in watching this dramatization is how writer/director Rose Bosch makes us care for the children. We see them playing and interacting with their families, so that by the time they are imprisoned



Director Rose Bosch makes the children's plight particularly poignant.

Movie Maven

"La Rafle" opens July 22 at the West Newton Cinema, Newton. 617-964-8074 or www.westnewtoncinema.com.

they are youngsters we have come to know, not just anonymous figures.

We get involved with the adults as well, including Jean Reno as a Jewish doctor and Melanie Laurent as a Christian nurse, but the thrust of the film is how this genocidal madness would spare no one. We get ironic counterpoint as we see Hitler doting upon children at his mountain retreat while sentencing a million or more children to death.

There's a reason it's taken more than 60 years for French cinema to respond. It is an ugly stain on French history. Bosch lets us see the good people who hid or comforted Jews. Some 10,000 Jews simply vanished that day, spirited away by friends and neighbors beyond the reach of the authorities. However, all too many French officials were willing collaborators, providing the manpower and means to carry out the horrible plans, and we are not spared the brutality they willingly inflicted on their countrymen merely because they were Jewish.

This is a powerful and disturbing story that needs to be widely known. Unfortunately, it's going to draw mostly those moviegoers who already know something of the story of "La Rafle," instead of the people who have something to learn.

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Wouk wrestles with Feynman

By Len Abram
Special to the Advocate

Over 40 years ago, Herman Wouk sought out physicist Richard Feynman for information on the atomic bomb. Feynman worked on the Manhattan Project; the novelist was researching his two epic novels about World War II, "The Winds of War" and "War and Remembrance." Wouk had spent three years in the Navy, his last on a ship off the coast of Okinawa, dodging Japanese kamikazes. The atomic bomb ended his war and was to be an important part of his description of the conflict.

Wouk, who wrote the classic "The Caine Mutiny," is also famous for another classic, this one about why he is an Orthodox Jew, "This Is My G-d." It was inevitable that Feynman and Wouk would discuss not only Feynman's expertise in science, but the larger question of science and its conflict with religion. "The Language That G-d Talks" is Wouk's recollections of those discussions.

Nobelist Feynman could never accept that the physical world, what he called "fantastically marvelous universe," could be created "so that G-d can watch human beings struggle for good and evil. ... The stage is too big for the drama."

The drama to which Feynman was referring is the moral struggle toward righteousness, a Biblical interpretation of events. The vastness and complexity of space, the dazzling inner workings of subatomic particles, are for the physicist a totality too intricate for a simple morality play.

The Bible, of course, also contains a description of physics, that is, how the physical as well as the biological worlds came into being. Along with cosmology, the book introduces the Creator with laws and observances that make human life civilized and perhaps even holy. Many of these formulations represent the rise and establishment of a credo called Judaism.

To Feynman, the Biblical narrative has nothing to do with the laws of thermodynamics and special relativity. In the mathematical language of calculus – which G-d must use to talk, as Feynman jokes to Wouk – religion does not compute.

Other scientists had warned Wouk to stay away from the brilliant, but annoying Feynman; Wouk sought him out anyway, partly because of his genius and partly because Feynman was a fellow Jew. To his credit, Wouk appreciates Feynman, a delightful man full of the love of life and learning, regardless of his agnosticism. Wouk admires how Feynman went on to distinguish himself in the Challenger disaster, identifying the failure of the rubber O-rings in cold temperatures – and suggesting that NASA administrators had let public relations decide on the launch rather than scientific data.

If the scientists whom Wouk meets in person or in print have little interest in his faith, Wouk has much interest in science. He devotes chapters on investigating the work of Edwin Hubble, who helped discover that the universe

Book Review

"The Language G-d Talks: On Science and Religion," by Herman Wouk. Little Brown and Company, 2011.

is rapidly expanding – with galaxies fleeing each other – the red shift of their spectrum evidence of the growing distance.

Rather than a reason to flee religion, Wouk finds in modern cosmology evidence that might make scientists like Feynman question their own disbelief. The microwave echo of the Big Bang provides proof that there had to be a Beginning to the universe; Wouk is sure he knows – at least poetically and metaphorically – the Beginning, an explosion of Creation so powerful that galaxies still expand like shrapnel. All this suggests, to Wouk, a Creator.

For Wouk, the real issue is not science versus religion. Science has offered many benefits to humanity, which he acknowledges. Besides, faith is hope, he tells us, not fact. The instruments of science cannot

measure it. But as for Feynman's complaint that the universe, the stage, is too big for a moral drama, Wouk disagrees with his friend.

To make this point about good and evil, Wouk brings us to the Czech concentration camp Theresienstadt from his novel, "War and Remembrance." The camp with its cafes and orchestras was used by the Nazis to fool the Red Cross about the Holocaust. Wouk reminds us that Theresienstadt was a "sluice" for shunting thousands of inmates to Auschwitz.

Wouk's major character Aaron Jastrow, an American Jewish writer living in Europe, has been caught by the Nazis and imprisoned in the camp. A brilliant agnostic, much like Feynman, Jastrow left G-d and Judaism behind in his youth.

The SS commandant, with Eichmann himself watching, beats Jastrow for refusing to support the charade of Theresienstadt. Jastrow is shocked into recognition. Back in his room, Jastrow puts on phylacteries for the first time in 50 years. He had spent his life on the run, he thinks. "Now I turn and stand. I am a Jew."

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