

The Counterfeiters

Though it was released in the D.C. area about ten days ago, the Austrian film *The Counterfeiters* is showing only in a few theaters and deserves an audience before it too quickly departs from the screen. Yes, it is yet another Holocaust movie, but with a fresh angle, and with a lead character not seen in previous camp pictures. It deservedly won this year's Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film.

Based on a true story, the film, directed by Austrian director Stefan Ruzowitzky, follows one clever Jewish concentration camp inmate, Salomon ("Sally") Sorowitsch (Karl Markovics) as he comes to head up a late-blooming Nazi scheme to produce counterfeit banknotes to disrupt the Allied economies. Sorowitsch is a notorious Berlin counterfeiter and hustler who is apprehended in 1939 and survives in camps until 1944, when he catches a break, being chosen by the regime to lead the counterfeiting effort at the Sachsenhausen camp. There he is in the company of dozens of other Jews, specifically chosen for their special skills as printers, graphic artists, designers, etc. They live a more benign—if hardly luxurious—life in austere barracks but with adequate food and basic facilities. Sally is, however, the key: the complete professional who can turn out the best work because of his proven forgery credentials.

This is one Holocaust story where you end up inevitably rooting for what is, in truth, a vile outcome. Because you identify with Sally and his colleagues so closely, because you value their struggle to succeed in making a "perfect" British pound, you can only cheer for them, and when they make a breakthrough on the currency, you rejoice with them—for aiding the Nazis! You must root, of course, for another reason: if the counterfeit team does not succeed, they will all die. To survive, they must produce that perfect bill.

The dilemma of life in this special camp is posed when Sally learns that one of the crew, Adolf Burger (August Diehl), is purposely destroying the printing plates to frustrate the Nazi's plan. He must be stopped or all in the unit will die—but he is clearly doing the "right thing" in sabotaging a wicked regime's plan. Sorowitsch is on the knife edge: does he give up Burger, whose principles he has grudgingly come to admire, or does he let the Germans get what they want for the rest to survive? It is of such excruciating moral quandaries that compelling Holocaust stories are made, and this is one of them.

The tale is much aided by the beautifully gauged, unfussy performance of Markovics who plays a cynic for whom mere drudging live is all there is, but who comes to see loyalty, sacrifice, and camaraderie in a new way. He is, ultimately, a survivor, yet not the kind of man he wants to be.

("The Counterfeiters" is rated "R", 98 mins.)

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