

Sarah's Key

The Holocaust has made, and will continue to make, for gripping cinematic drama. A new entry, "Sarah's Key," carries a couple of new angles on the persecution of the Jews in Europe. The setting this time is occupied France, specifically Paris, and the plot highlights how French authorities—not the Nazis--rounded up for exile and slaughter thousands of French Jews in massive city-wide round-ups.

Directed by Gilles Paquet-Brenner and co-scripted by Paquet-Brenner and Serge Joncour, the film is based on a novel by Tatiana de Rosnay, who uses as background a true incident on July 16-17, 1942, when the Parisian police were ordered to round up more than 13,000 Jews and then harbored them in abominable conditions in an old velodrome called the Vel d'Hiv.

Subject to this historical calamity is the Jewish family Starzynski, and their story is intermingled with a contemporary narrative concerning an American journalist, Julia Jarmond (Kristin Scott Thomas), who is doing research for an article on that velodrome incident. The film toggles back and forth between the present and the historic.

Besides working on her article, Julia and her architect husband Bertrand (Frédéric Pierrot) are looking to renovate her husband's family apartment. Through her researches, she learns that the very apartment they are renovating once held a group of Jewish residents. It was her husband's family who, in fact, took over the apartment from exiled Jews. By quizzing her mother-in-law, Mamé (Gisele Casadesus), and an old uncle, Édouard (Michel Duchassoy), she pieces together how her family's fate intersected with the Starzynski's.

In the Starzynski's story, ten-year-old Sarah (Mélusine Mayance), her mother and her father are seized by the French police, but not before Sarah, in a panic, locks their little brother into a secret hiding place, a bedroom cupboard. The film follows the Starzynskis from the squalor of the arena (very convincingly re-created for the film) to another preparatory camp at Beaune-la-Rolande, also run by French elements.

All the while, young Sarah suffers agonies about her brother left behind as she clings to the cupboard key that could save him. Within the camp, Sarah--through the kindness of one French guard--escapes with another girl to find solace and a refuge with an old farmer and his wife, the Dufaires (Niels Arestrup and Dominique Frot). With their help, she is finally able to return to the Paris apartment, only to learn the worst. Undaunted and fiercely determined, Sarah is still able to fashion a life of her own, first in France and then, with tragic results, in the US.

Julia is able to piece together these shards of Sarah's life and even come to some kind of closure, both about her family's entanglement with the girl's life and for herself. She is also able to close the book on her search by making a final connection with a child of Sarah's (Aidan Quinn), who is unaware of his mother's poignant life story.

The film counterweighs the compelling Holocaust story of Sarah (told in flashback and with much more urgent, hand-held camerawork) with Julia's story, each supposedly offering equivalent dramatic substance. But to this reviewer, there is a serious imbalance in the picture, since the upscale travails of Julia and her privileged

family appear merely self-conscious and mundane against the overwhelming force of the Starzynski's trauma, the Vel d'Hiv incident, and its chilling aftermath.

A fine actress, Scott Thomas tries hard to impose emotion and gravitas as Julia, but the performance, through no fault of her own, seems overly earnest and mostly reactive--as she continues to uncover the latest revelations about Sarah. Her own family life, meant to be at a dramatic crossroads (there is a pregnancy and a divorce involved), is only thinly realized.

To repeat, it is the World War II episodes that resonate in "Sarah's Key," and it is sweet Sarah who is the key to this movie. As can happen in film, a new, relatively untutored talent can, in a natural, instinctual way, shine a special light on a film. Just last month, young Hunter McCracken was such a discovery in "The Tree of Life." He was, perhaps, the best thing in it. Here, you can say the same for Mélusine Mayance as Sarah.

The young actress, not yet an adolescent, gives a performance both haunting and forceful. She is splendid as the terrified youngster, uncomprehending what is going on about her, yet she also shows a vaulting determination that wills her to get back to her brother and save him. In sum, she exhibits the ineffable qualities of a survivor and does it with grace. M. Pacquet-Brenner deserves praise for finding her and using her so effectively in "Sarah's Key."

(The film, in English and French, is rated "PG-13" for scenes of Holocaust tension; it runs 102 min.)