
A Town with a Haunted Past

KZ

A documentary by Rex Bloomstein
2006, 97 minutes

Reviewed by Nina Johnson

KZ is not a typical Holocaust documentary. It shows no pictures of camp liberation, nor does it drive home the message of “never forget.” Rather, the film is about the town of Mauthausen in Austria, site of the last concentration camp to be liberated, and its residents today.

In retrospect, the subtlety of this documentary escaped me. It was not a tear-jerking film about never forgetting; it was a quiet film about how difficult it is to remember the Holocaust. This theme manifests itself best in a recording that plays at the former camp of Mauthausen, referred to as “KZ” (*Konzentrationslager*, or concentration camp), which is now a museum. The recording says:

You have come here and it is good. Regardless of the reason you may ever have had to come, this gives us the opportunity to talk to you and supply you with correct information which you may not get elsewhere. There is no need to grasp the full extent of the tragedy that took place here. There is a safety device inside you that will protect you, and that is a good thing. Otherwise there would be the danger that one might lose one’s mind. But we want you to return home safely, with a sound mind and to use it later on for the cause of freedom, justice, and truth.

When I finished watching the film, I was initially unimpressed. It seemed very choppy; I could decipher

no rhyme or reason in its progression. The beginning resembled a travel video, but the end became more of a documentary about the lives of Mauthausen tour guides. *KZ* jumped around indeterminately from descriptions of city life in Mauthausen to scenes at the local tavern that had once catered exclusively to German SS, from images of a tour group of German soldiers to interviews with tour guides, from reactions of tourists to memories of Mauthausen's older residents.

While I liked the film much more in hindsight because of its emotional effect, I am not sure that this impact compensates for the flaws present in its construction. *KZ* began with a tour group on its way to Mauthausen, a fact that was not made clear for several minutes. It then featured interviews with locals about the actual town of Mauthausen, its history and its present condition. From there, it moved to the first part of the actual tour of the former concentration camp. I could not help but think that the tour I was seeing on my television was but a pale copy of an actual tour. No additional

information was offered to enhance the experience.

From there, the documentary began to cover the local town, discussing the tavern and hearing from locals about what it is like to live in a former Nazi house. While the perspectives they provided were interesting, those interviewed provided little depth about their experience. Interviews were short and the interviewees were obviously nervous.

After another portion of the tour, the film turned its focus to the history of Mauthausen. Three old women who had lived in the town during and after the war shared their perspective of Mauthausen during the Nazi occupation. There was a rather confusing scene in which one woman spoke about how she had nearly witnessed an execution—the guard had waited until she walked a few yards away before killing several prisoners. One of the other women then confronted her, saying that they must not have lived in the same Mauthausen. This woman had had a marvelous time, marrying an SS man in

the chapel at the camp. Their different perspectives made me wonder about how life *actually* had been. I desired more perspectives as well as some objective facts. I got none.

A priest was asked whether anyone had ever asked him how God allowed Mauthausen to happen. He said no. At this point I became curious about whether the old church had been open while the camp was in operation, and whether SS had attended services. Once again, I received no additional details. These interviews were fairly interesting, but failed to provide sufficient information and context to give me more than a superficial understanding of what Mauthausen is like now, and how, if at all, the town has changed since the end of the war.

Throughout the documentary, the tour guides intrigued me. After the first part of the tour, one of the older tour guides was interviewed. He professed his obsession with Mauthausen and the ways in which this obsession had pained his life, and shared openly his reliance on alcohol and anti-depressants. I could not help but wonder what it must be like to give

tours, day in and day out, of a site that witnessed one of the worst episodes of human history. I wanted to know how the tour guides do it; how they live their lives trying to explain the sheer madness that happened there.

I got my wish, in part, when the three young tour guides were interviewed. They explained that they had chosen twelve months of civil service instead of military service. Each had a compelling story. Each had a grandfather who had served as German SS. One related, in the same tone that he had used in the gas chamber, that his grandfather had probably committed war crimes. Each shared how they had adapted to the horror of Mauthausen to avoid going mad. I did not envy them.

The plight of the tour guides was the most fascinating part of *KZ*. I would have appreciated more than the five minutes that were devoted to it. The question of how people can retain their humanity while surrounded by horror is a story that needs to be told, and could have been told in a lot more detail. Had the documentary focused on the tour guides' story, and their

story alone, it might have been more compelling.

Looking back, my safety device had definitely been activated. However, my most distinct memories from *KZ* are feelings that did not register with me at the time: the intense emotions I experienced during some of the transition clips. For me, realizing the silent emotional agony that the Holocaust inevitably brings with it required safety in the form of distance. The mediated style of showing tours allowed me to be much more affected than I would have been otherwise. The in-your-face style that most Holocaust documentaries employ is so powerful that I usually find myself raising my defenses to such a degree that little reaches me. By providing distance in the overall presentation, *KZ* actually brought me much closer to the events than it would have had it taken a more direct approach. *KZ* is well constructed for emotional recollection.

Transitions were marked by a clip of scenic footage: water, the train stop, rolling hills. This footage seemed

to serve as a resting place for people on a rigorous emotional journey. For the most part, I felt that these scenes were out of place. *KZ* never brought me anywhere near tears. The only time that I was truly grateful for such a pause was after a particularly gut-wrenching clip of a German tour guide in his mid-twenties, standing in the former gas chamber, explaining to a group of school children the step-by-step process by which thousands of prisoners were murdered. The most haunting aspect of the scene was the way in which he conveyed the details. His voice was incredibly direct, in a cutting, no-nonsense way, and his eyes were piercing. His slim and angular face surveyed the room and his unwavering eyes penetrated the souls of every member of his audience. He seemed to have abstracted from the tour to a frightening degree. For him, the words had no practical meaning. He was too far away in his thoughts to allow the gas chamber and the gory details to hurt him. This was the one moment of the film that I felt

really went beyond the raw emotional material of the Holocaust to tell a unique story.

KZ attempted to tell the complicated story of post-war life in Mauthausen in its entirety. It wanted to explore the difficulty of remembering and reacting to the Holocaust, whether you are an American tourist, an English schoolboy, a Nigerian citizen, a German soldier, a Mauthausen resident, or a civil servant assigned to give tours. Perhaps *KZ* bit off more than it could chew, which might explain its haphazard progression. In any case, this film has a powerful and

important message about how to live with the knowledge that some humans have done incomprehensibly terrible things to other humans. While I wish that it had been told more thoroughly by concentrating on one subject as opposed to skimming several, I am still deeply appreciative of the message and the mediation employed in sharing it.

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