

MOVIES

Jews Hidden in Assisi Monasteries, Film Shows

By Father Kenneth J. Doyle

Assisi, Italy (NC) — The Italian hill town of Assisi has a new look.

A visitor to the placid city of St. Francis, 100 miles north of Rome, sees strange sights for 1984. Swastikas mark buildings and German jeeps and motorcycles roar through the town's tiny streets.

More than 100 of Assisi's 5,000 residents have donned the uniforms of World War II German soldiers. They are extras in a film being made about a sad but proud chapter in the life of the town.

From September 1943 until June 1944, while German troops occupied the surrounding region, more than 300 Jews were hidden in 20 of the town's monasteries and convents. A film is being made now in Assisi telling the story.

Cannon Production Company of Italy began shooting in mid-March and plans to end in May. It is making the film at the very sites where the events happened 40 years ago. Distribution in the United States by MGM is planned for October.

The film is called "The Assisi Underground" and is based on the 1978 non-fiction book of the same name.

The film has a budget of \$8 million and stars Ben Cross, James Mason, Maximilian Schell and Irene Papas.

Cross is the British actor who played a Jewish Olympic runner in "Chariots of Fire," winner of the 1982 Oscar for best picture.

Now he is portraying Father Rufino Niccacci, the Fran-

ciscan who ran the clandestine operation which saved Jewish lives.

Father Marino Bigoroni, 65, is now vicar at the Chiesa Nuova, near Assisi's town hall. He was a seminarian living at the San Damiano Monastery in Assisi when Father Niccacci was superior in the early 1940s.

A consultant to the film, Father Bigoroni commented on the events in an interview.

"Certainly true, beyond a shadow of a doubt," he said of the film's basic story line. He produced chronicles kept by nuns at San Quirico, where the greatest number of Jews were hidden, and notarized testimony from Jews who were sheltered. They told how San Quirico's superior, Sister Giuseppina, let the Jews into the convent's cloister as Nazi officers marched up the street in search of them.

Sister Giuseppina, still alive and now in her late 80s, is played in the film by Miss Papas, a star of "Zorba the Greek."

Father Bigoroni said Father Niccacci, who died in 1976, "came from a peasant background and had a farmer's openness. He knew and joked with everyone in the area, and so he was the perfect man for Bishop Nicolini to pick to carry out the plan."

Bishop Giuseppe Placido Nicolini of Assisi was the one who conceived the idea of hiding Jews.

Initially, he had the 32-year-old Father Niccacci take 10 Jews from Rome to Florence, where they were then spirited north to Genoa and escaped by ship.

Then realizing that border security was growing tighter, Bishop Nicolini thought of an alternative. He would bring Jews by the dozens to Assisi, many of them from Trieste, and Father Niccacci would hide them in Religious houses, sometimes dressed as priests or nuns.

Father Bigoroni called his former superior "a courageous man who did a dangerous thing." Several times Father Niccacci was stopped by Nazi officers and questioned, but there was never enough evidence to make charges stick.

According to Father Bigoroni, the Vatican was "certainly aware of what was going on here. It would have been impossible for them not to know of it."

To support his view, he cites the intimate participation of Cardinal Elia Dalla Costa of Florence in the plot.

A famous cyclist of the day, Gino Bartali, regularly biked the 120 miles from Assisi to Florence and back. Ostensibly he was training for a race in France. But often rolled up in his handlebars were false identification papers, counterfeited by an Assisi printer, sent from Bishop Nicolini to Cardinal Dalla Costa to safeguard hundreds of other Jews in the Florence region.

To prepare for the role of Father Niccacci, Cross, a Catholic, lived for 12 days with the Franciscan priests in Assisi at San Damiano. He told NC News about a "pragmatic spin-off" from the time he spent there.

"I learned little things," he said, "like the way the priests sometimes tuck their thumbs in their cincture, or swing the cord and hit people playfully with it."

Cross followed the monastic routine, rising at 5:30 a.m. for Lauds and Mass.

Although his motive for living at the monastery was a professional one, Cross said he received an unplanned bonus.

"It was a sort of health farm for me — I came away placid," he said. "Beyond a doubt, I learned something spiritually from the experience."

"I certainly don't want to propose myself as a role model for Catholics," the 36-year-old Cross said. "I have some questions about the church."

He said he had felt "comfortable" with the priests at San Damiano, especially 78-year-old Father Salvatore Butler, a native of Pittsburgh.

"I could discuss things with him," said Cross, "air my questions about the church, my differences."

While at San Damiano, Cross read some of the writings of St. Francis and the history of the Franciscans.

It was the character of Father Niccacci, Cross said, which attracted him to the part. Throughout the interview Cross referred to the priest familiarly by his first name, Rufino.

The British actor said, "I'm not particularly interested in playing holy men. I'm interested in playing human beings, and Rufino was a human being."

Cross said of the priest he plays, "he was slightly unorthodox, perhaps. He smoked, a bit, it seems. He surely liked a glass of wine. And when he saw a pretty girl, he appreciated it and commented on it."

"Yet there was nothing hypocritical about Rufino," said Cross. "He lived fully his vocation as a priest."

"As I discovered at San Damiano," he added, "people are well able to live a normal life and yet allow Christ to have an important place in that life — after all, Jesus was a human being, too."

One effect of Cross' 12 days at San Damiano was that he went to confession immediately afterwards, for the first time in 22 years.

"I don't know just why I did it," he said. "But I felt a sort of inner pressure — that if I were going to play this priest Rufino truly, I should do this."

The writer-director of the film is a 63-year-old Polish Jew, Alexander Ramati.

Ramati, now a U.S. citizen, was a Polish war correspondent in Assisi when the region was liberated by the Allies on June 17, 1944. He saw dozens of fellow Jews pouring out of monasteries and convents and he knew then that he would someday write the story. From 1972 on, he spent five years interviewing Father Niccacci and others in Assisi and gathering testimony from 50 Jews who had been saved.

'Moscow on Hudson' Dissappoints

By Michael Gallagher

New York (NC) — "Moscow on the Hudson" (Columbia) is writer-director Paul Mazursky's sentimental valentine to America, specifically New York, and to what the country and city mean to a new generation of immigrants.

Mazursky's hero is Vlad Ivanoff (Robin Williams), a Russian saxophonist who defects during the American tour of the seedy circus for which he plays.

He chooses Bloomingdale's for his act of defiance, and there he finds not only freedom but also friendship with a security guard (Cleavant Derricks), and love with a beautiful sales clerk (Maria Conchita Alonso). Never were the advantages of shopping at Bloomingdale's better illustrated.

The movie's heart is in the right place and it has some appealing moments, but it's fuzzy and undramatic, slowing down to a crawl after some of the initial tension that culminates in the actual defection. It also glosses over the harsh realities that the hero would have to face.

Everything works out much too neatly for Vlad, prompting any viewer who doesn't wholly love him to wonder about such troublesome points as how does he, a non-citizen, get jobs with such ease. And why should the Soviets send such a third-rate circus on tour to begin with?

Mazursky also unfortunately steps over the line in some bedroom sequences, showing much more nudity and sexual activity than are called for. As a result, the U.S. Catholic Conference has classified it O — morally offensive. The Motion Picture Association of America Rating is R — restricted.



Robin Williams stars as a gentle Russian circus musician in Columbia Pictures' "Moscow on the Hudson."

"Up the Creek" (Orion)

College men and women compete in a raft race in this most recent "Animal House" clone, featuring the usual abundant nudity and crude sexual humor. The U.S. Catholic Conference has classified it O — morally offensive. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.

"Where the Boys Are, '84" (Tri-Star)

Four college women go to Fort Lauderdale for spring break and carry on like amateur hookers, but we're supposed to believe it's very wholesome and therapeutic. Because of its appalling moral outlook, nudity and sexually oriented humor, it has been classified O — morally offensive — by the U.S. Catholic Conference. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.

Capsule Movie Reviews

"Hard to Hold" (Universal)

A rock star (Rick Springfield) falls madly in love with a sophisticated lady (Janet Eilber) whom he meets by accident, a traffic accident. A listless, awkward movie with bad acting by all concerned, bad direction by Larry Peerce and a wretched script by Tom Hedley. Because of some rough language and a benign view of sex outside of marriage, it is mature fare. The U.S. Catholic Conference has classified it A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America has classified it PG — parental guidance suggested.

Recent Movie Ratings

New York (NC) — Here is a list of recent films which the U.S. Catholic Conference Department of Communication has rated on the basis of moral suitability.

The first symbol after each title is the USCC rating. The second symbol is the rating of the Motion Picture Association of America.

These are the USCC symbols and their meanings: A-I — general patronage; A-II — adults and adolescents; A-III — adults; A-IV — adults with reservations (an A-IV classification is for certain films which, while not morally offensive in themselves, require caution and some analysis and explanation as a protection to the uninformed against wrong interpretations and false conclusions); O — morally offensive; The word "recommended" appears behind the titles of those films that merit such a designation.

Here are the Motion Picture Association of America symbols and their meanings: G — general audiences, all ages admitted; PG — parental guidance suggested, some material may not be suitable for children; R — restricted, under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian; X — no one under 17 admitted (age limit may vary in certain areas).

- Against All Odds, O (R)
The Big Chill, A-III (R)
Blame It on Rio, O (R)
Broadway Danny Rose, A-III (PG)
Children of the Corn, A-III (R)
The Dresser, A-II (PG)

- Educating Rita, A-III (PG)
Fanny and Alexander, A-IV (R)
Footloose, A-III (PG)
Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter, O (R)
Gorky Park, A-IV (R)
Greystoke: The Legend of Tarzan, A-III (PG)
Hard to Hold, A-III (PG)
Harry and Son, O (PG)
Hotel New Hampshire, O (R)
Iceman, A-II (PG)
Ice Pirates, A-III (PG)
Lassiter, O (R)
Lonely Guy, A-III (PG)
The Man Who Loved Women, O (R)
Mike's Murder, A-III (R)
Misunderstood, A-II (PG)
Moscow on the Hudson, O (R)
Never Cry Wolf, A-II (PG)
Never Say Never Again, O (PG)
A Night in Heaven, O (R)
Night of the Shooting Stars, A-II
Over the Brooklyn Bridge, A-III (R)
Police Academy, O (R)

- The Prodigal, A-II (PG)
Racing with the Moon, O (PG)
Reckless, O (R)
The Return of Martin Guerre, A-III
Reuben, Reuben, A-III (R)
The Right Stuff, A-III (PG)
Romancing the Stone, A-III (PG)
Scarface, O (R)
Silkwood, A-III (R)
Splash, A-III (PG)
Star 80, A-IV (R)
The Stone Boy, A-II (PG) (Recommended)
Stuck on You, O (R)
Sudden Impact, O (R)
Swing Shift, A-III (PG)
Tank, A-III (PG)
Tender Mercies, A-III (PG)
Terms of Endearment, A-III (PG)
Testament, A-II (PG)
To Be or Not to Be, A-III (PG)
Uncommon Valor, A-III (R)
Under Fire, A-III (R)
Unfaithfully Yours, O (PG)
Up the Creek, O (R)
Where the Boys Are '84, O (R)
Yentl, A-III (PG)
Zelig, A-II (PG)