Der Anständige Heinrich Himmler
Interview with Vanessa Lapa

Frédéric Crahay
DER ANSTÄNDIGE
HEINRICH HIMMLER

**DOCUMENTARY** “In life one must always be decent, courageous and kind-hearted”, writes Heinrich Himmler in a letter to his daughter Gudrun. However, the newest documentary of Vanessa Lapa, an Israel-based filmmaker, is absolutely not about decency. The title, *Der Anständige* or *The decent one*, is in fact an ironic reference to this word that is cited over a thousand times in Himmler’s writings.

→ Interview by Frédéric Crahay

L apa’s 90-minute film issues from over 700 documents, 300 numbered letters Himmler exchanged with his first wife and his daughter, diaries, various correspondence with his mistress, movies and pictures. It was chosen as the Best Documentary at the 2014 Jerusalem Film Festival and presented in the official selection of many other festivals, including the Berlinale. The documentary was screened in New York, Los Angeles, Vienna, Paris, and at Kazerne Dossin in Mechelen.

Important archive material was retrieved from the house of the Himmler family in May 1945. What kind of documents are we talking about? How many? And where are they kept today?

Vanessa Lapa : The documents were taken by the Americans when they entered the house. The collection contains about 350 letters Himmler sent to Marga [Margarete Boden, his wife] between 1927 and 1945. Also, 15 diaries were found, including the diary of his daughter, the diary of his wife and Marga’s diary. Some of the notebooks really reflect the daily life of the Himmler family: the spending diary, the Christmas presents diary, the household diary, so we even know how much money they were spending on which items during the years 1940-1945. There is also the Hitler-

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jugend document of the adopted son and his school report, plus about 135 family pictures.

We don’t know what happened with the archive between 1945 and 1960. But in 1960, the collection comes into the hands of Rhein Rosenthal, an Israeli man, who literally kept it under his bed for 40 years. In 2006 his son convinced him to hand it over to someone, so it could be put to good use. This son contacted a professor at the Tel Aviv University who knew me and told me about it. As for the gap between 1945 and 1960, there are three options: Rosenthal found the documents either on a flea market in Brussels or on a flea market in Los Angeles, or he got them from an American couple who was crossing the American-Mexican border. Today the archive belongs to RealWorks, our production company, and it is kept in a safe deposit box in Tel Aviv.

A part of the film archive that has been used was originally in colour. Yet you have chosen to present the entire film in black and white. Why?

V.L.: In the collection there are no moving images, so the footage in the film is the result of five years of visual research. 151 sources were included, most of them from private archives and home videos. You are right that a small part of those images are in colour because rich families, even as early as in the 1920s and 1930s, were filming in colour. In order to create continuity, however, we had to make a decision. Mixing up coloured and non-coloured images would cause confusion concerning the chronology of the film, I believe, because black and white refers in my mind to the past. Had the budget allowed it, I would have coloured all images to give an idea of presence, and to create an accurate picture of how it really was back then. This would have cost us millions of dollars, so we went with black and white instead. Our team was trained in London for digital restoration and then started to work on the footage for ten months, two shifts a day, in order to create this black and white continuity.

The documentary requires prior knowledge of Himmler but also of national-socialism, the interwar period and the Second World War. Who is the main target audience for the documentary?

V.L.: I hope we can reach a broad audience: younger people, older people. It is true that we assume that the viewer knows one or two things about Himmler and the Second World War before watching the film. But then again, I myself didn’t know anything about Himmler, and I selected as much as possible information that is not yet widely known. Since there is no narrator, the film contains chapters that outline the historical context and framework. But overall I give priority to the text, and not to the context. I hope – no, I am sure that the film provides sufficient information for the audience to understand the story. The story, to me, stands on its own.

We learn that the direct environment of Himmler asked him personal favours to, for example, get someone out of a concentration camp. What do the letters in the archive tell us about this? Did it happen very often?

V.L.: It was frequent; that is why we included a scene in the film. The requests were not addressed directly to Himmler, because in 1936, when he opened Dachau, he was already high up in Nazi hierarchy. People therefore would not send letters to him, but to his father instead. Political opponents, communists, Catholics – not Jews of course – asked him to help them and keep them away from the concentration camps.

In your documentary, you use the figure of Heinrich Himmler to raise much broader questions. Himmler can be considered as an “ordinary man”, who had to make choices and made the wrong ones. Can you relate his story to the concept of the “banality of evil” as it was defined by Hannah Arendt?

V.L.: The story of Heinrich Himmler is to me a much bigger story: through his biography I’m trying to tell the story not only of all the other middle class Germans of his time, but of many Europeans as well. Himmler made his choices, and he chose evil. I think there is nothing banal about the evil of Himmler; there is nothing banal about his choices. Most of his contemporaries were in fact making different choices, less extreme ones. Therefore, there is nothing banal about Himmler’s trajectory. In an economic and geopolitical situation where a leader like Hitler can rally a whole population behind him, these choices become very dangerous. They can lead not only to the downfall of a whole country, but to the massacre of millions of people, as we have seen.

Himmler is Der Anständige, the decent one, fatsoenlijk in Dutch: this is repeated throughout the documentary. During your research, you were in close contact with the Himmler family. Do you consider them “decent”? •••
For Himmler, clearly, decency was the most important value in life, the value he taught his soldiers and his children. It comes to a climax when, in 1943, Himmler asserts that there is a “decent” way to kill.

V.L. : It’s a beautiful translation, fatsoenlijk. I believe the Dutch is more accurate than the English “decent”. But of course, Heinrich Himmler was not decent. There was nothing fatsoenlijk about him. We chose the expression as a title because Himmler used it all the time; we encountered it numerous times in the archives. In the film, you hear the word thirteen times. For Himmler, clearly, decency was the most important value in life, the value he taught his soldiers and his children. It comes to a climax when, in 1943, Himmler asserts that there is a “decent” way to kill. The expression then reflects the outright perversion of this man: everything that is decent in the eyes of Himmler, is loathsome in our eyes.

Himmler’s daughter Gudrun, also known as Püppi, was after the war active in Stille Hilfe, an organization that helped former Nazis to escape Europe. Did you have any contact with Gudrun Himmler during your research?

V.L. : I really wanted to interview her, talk to her, meet her. Not least because her diary, written between age twelve and sixteen, is part of the collection that was found in the family house. When we first started our research on the archive material, we suggested that we would hand her back her diary in exchange for an interview. She did not agree. I even offered an interview “off the record”, without cameras, but she still refused. She has been turning me down for the past seven years.

I understand that you cooperated with Katrin Himmler for this project?

V.L. : Yes, that is correct. Katrin was in fact the first person I approached. She is the great niece of Heinrich Himmler, the granddaughter of Himmler’s youngest brother. Moreover, she is an academic, a social worker, she wrote a book fifteen years ago about the brothers Himmler, so I knew that she would be interested in the subject. That is why I reached out to her and asked her to become a research partner. Parallel to working on the film, Katrin wrote a book about the archives of the Himmler house together with Michael Wildt, an historian from the Berlin Humboldt University. The film and the book came out simultaneously in Germany, around February 2014. The text is now translated in fourteen languages.

In one of his letters, Himmler discusses with this wife “the paradise that they created and which no one could ever take away from them”. These words coincide with images of Hitler on the screen. During this scene, the music builds up and becomes almost threatening. We see a smiling Hitler on the screen, but you feel that things can quickly take a turn for the worse. The viewer can almost sense the danger in this moment.

V.L. : That was exactly my intention. When Hitler comes in, something goes wrong on a family level, and something goes very wrong on a global level.

By juxtaposing Himmler’s words and Hitler’s portrait, do you imply that Hitler helped creating this “paradise” or, on the contrary, that he is the one who would put an end to it?

V.L. : Well, you can interpret this in many different ways, and this is precisely the challenge of the film, the engagement that we ask from the viewer. By connecting Himmler’s phrase “Nothing will destroy our paradise” to Hitler’s portrait, I was actually referring to the fact that Hitler destroyed the love life of Marga and Heinrich. Heinrich loved the nation, and therefore the Führer, more than he loved his wife. This is where he betrayed Marga for the first time. Hitler was the one who took away the paradise Himmler and Marga had been living in. I like the idea of Hitler as someone who destroys the human paradise.