

Jakob the Liar (1999)

We continue our tribute to Robin Williams in this review, reprinted from the November 1999 issue of Visual Parables. The film failed at the box office, possibly because many of his fans could not associate him with such the terrible human tragedy of the Holocaust. Most critics were also harsh in their assessments of the film. However, I still stand by the opinion expressed below that the film is worth seeing.

Rated PG-13. Our content rating: Violence 5; Language 1;
Sex/Nudity 2.

Our star rating (0-5): 4

Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause

against an ungodly people;

from those who are deceitful and unjust deliver me!

*For you are the God in whom I take refuge; why have you cast
me off?*

Why must I walk about mournfully

because of the oppression of the enemy?

...

Why are you cast down, O my soul,

and why are you disquieted within me?

Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,

my help and my God.

From Psalm 43

Hope deferred makes the heart sick,

but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life.

Proverbs 13:12

*For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord,
plans for your welfare*

and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

Jeremiah 29:11

Although some might think of *Life Is Beautiful* when they hear that Robin Williams is the star, *Jacob the Liar* is not in the same comedic vein as Roberto Benigni's film. Humor aplenty there is, but you do not have to accept this film as "a fable"—there are too many evidences of Nazi brutality to permit this, even if it were the intention of the filmmakers: when Jakob tries to catch a wind-blown sheet of newspaper, he passes by a gallows where several victims have been executed, their bodies left hanging as a warning to others. It is near curfew time, and a German guard orders Jakob to report to the commander inside Gestapo headquarters. The terrified Jew hears a snatch of a news report on the radio in the commander's vacant office, indicating that the Russian army has re-invaded Poland. When released, Jakob has to stealthily sneak back to his apartment, because now it *is* past curfew, and a patrol could shoot him on the spot if they should catch him.

While stealing through the train yard he encounters Nina, a young girl whose mother had sent through a small hole in the bottom of the box car where the two had been imprisoned with fellow prisoners being shipped to a death camp. Jakob reluctantly agrees to take her with him and hide her in the attic of the building where he lives. The next day he tells two despondent neighbors that he has heard a radio report of the Russian drive against the Germans just a few hundred kilometers away. He cannot tell where he heard the radio bulletin, lest they think he is a Nazi collaborator—no Jew emerges from Gestapo headquarters alive or unbeaten. News of

the report spreads through the ghetto, resulting in the belief that Jacob has a radio. He is horrified, as the penalty for owning the forbidden device is death, and those who know of one and do not report it are also subject to the penalty.

To Jakob's horror a friend rushes out to a trainload of Jews that has stopped in their town in order to tell them the good news. Spotting him, the guards shoot him because he has crossed a forbidden line. The brother blames Jakob for the death. The distraught Jakob tells his neighbor Samuel the truth, and the next morning the old man is found hanging. Jakob sees his quandary all too clearly: whether he tells the truth or a lie, men die. He decides to tell the lie, as his good friend Dr. Kirschbaum observes what a change in the ghetto his "news" has made. Jakob's "lie" is, as they might say then, a doozy: not only are tanks coming to liberate their camp, but they are accompanied by an American jazz band and three female singers sounding like the Andrews Sisters.

Not since *Shawshank Redemption* has the theme of hope been so well treated in a film. As Viktor Frankl has observed in his 1946 book chronicling his own experience in a Nazi labor camp, *Man's Search for Meaning*, without hope people give up and die when the pressures—the horrors—of life become too great. Jakob's lie is doubly ironic in that hope is engendered by what he thinks is a lie, and yet in reality the Allies are winning the war and deliverance really is on the way.

The film is also a story of courage, sacrifice and grace. One moment of grace occurs when Jacob has sneaked into the guard's toilet to read the newspapers being used as toilet paper. Their guard tries to get in to use the facility, but finds the door locked. He hangs around, waiting, thus preventing Jakob from leaving without being discovered. Jakob's friends are watching at a distance, filled with apprehension and suspense. Finally one of them does an idiotic dance, drawing the guard to him so that Jakob is able to leave. The friend is beaten for his antics.

The sacrifice comes at the climax of the film, lifting the story out of its comedic vein, reminding us that courage and love for one's neighbors often comes with a great price.

Also moving is the scene in which Jakob, who has just bolstered Nina's failing hope by imitating a BBC radio broadcast while hiding behind a partition, comes out and dances with her. A touch of Zorba in a desperate situation where its is needed! This is a film probably too sentimental for the Eastern critics. Don't miss it!