

Lena: My 100 Children

US TV : 1987 : dir. Ed Sherin : : 125 min
 prod: Robert Greenwald : scr: : dir.ph.:

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 Linda Lavin; Leonore Harris; Cynthia Wilde; George Toullatos; John Evans; Sam Malkin;
 Torquil Campbell; Adam Kositsky; Megan Fahlenbock; Suzannah Hoffman

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Radio Times reviews:

"This moving drama, based on real events, tells the story of a woman who risked her life to help Jewish children escape from Poland just after the Second World War. Contains violence and swearing. *** "

"A much-lauded TV movie, this tale is based on the true and deeply moving story of Lena Kuchler-Silberman, the teacher who risked her life to ensure 100 Jewish children escaped from Poland to the Middle East just after the Second World War. The central role is wonderfully played by Linda Lavin. A highly superior double-hanky job. *** "

"Drama, based on a true story, starring Linda Lavin. Having survived the Holocaust, Polish Jew Lena Kuchler-Silberman tries to help 100 impoverished children escape from post-war Poland. *** "

"Linda Lavin smuggles orphans to a new life in Israel."

TV Quick note:

"True story of a Jewish teacher who survived the holocaust in Poland and smuggled kids to safety in Israel."

TV Times (?) note:

"Drama. The true story of a Jewish woman who escapes the holocaust , then helps to smuggle 100 Jewish orphans out of Poland and into Israel."

What's On TV note:

"True story of a Jewish woman who smuggled 100 children out of Poland to Israel."

"True-life drama about a Jewish teacher who survives the holocaust and helps smuggle 100 abandoned children out of Poland."

Cast:

Lena Kuchler-SilbermanLinda Lavin
 BellaLeonore Harris
 RheaCynthia Wilde
 PolonskiGeorge Toullatos
 SaniJohn Evans
 StefanSam Malkin
 HaroldTorquil Campbell
 SaulAdam Kositsky
 HankaMegan Fahlenbock
 MariaSuzannah Hoffman

[no listing in "Halliwell's Film Guide", "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001", "The Critics' Film Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Time Out Film Guide", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "he Virgin Film Guide"]

The Holocaust is well-trodden ground now, but still, fifty years on, a steady trickle of films try to take new angles on those oft-told events, the latest (July 2002) being a film by Costa Gavros about the Vatican's role, and the silence of the Pope on Nazi treatment of the Jews of Europe. "**LENA**" is not about the Holocaust but its immediate aftermath, the plight of the few remaining Jews in Communist Poland circa 1945. Earnest and elaborately staged for a TV movie (much of the footage shot in Hungary), it lacks genuine tension and the requisite atmosphere of terror, but its main drawback is that the central figure, Lena Kuchler-Silberman, is portrayed more as a committed social worker than a woman caught up herself in the horrors of ethnic cleansing. She's just a tad *too* self-assured when negotiating with the hostile authorities, a shade too sanguine of her own inviolability. She has only survived the war by the skin of her teeth (having passed for Catholic), but would not I think have been quite so optimistic that civilised norms had been restored as she often seems to be here.

At a refugee centre in Crakow Lena discovers 100 Jewish orphans, concentration camp survivors and displaced children, some of whom were sheltered by peasant families through the German occupation, and raised as Catholics. Having lost her own daughter, Mira, shot by the Gestapo, she sets out at once to expiate her guilt (for assuming a Catholic identity in order to survive) by taking over the care of these deeply-traumatised waifs. There is no food or medicine at the centre, but a sympathetic government official lets her have 1000 kilos of sugar to barter with, and this more than suffices. After a mob of angry Poles attack the gates of the centre, she decides the children must be removed from Crakow for their own safety. "I feel they should be in the country," she says, "where they can heal, and be educated." Some of the expository dialogue is very clumsy, but for once the children and adult refugees (despite American accents) do actually look the part, emaciated and haunted figures, and the script has the children panic – for instance when a van draws up to remove them to the country, or a doctor tries to give one of them an injection, or a boy who has passed as a girl is being stripped for the bath. Such details are telling, even if the script always feels a verbal elaboration is necessary.

The children are removed to Zaczopany resort, but the area is known for its anti-Semitism, and the local doctor refuses to attend the children there out of fears for his own family's safety. Lena begins teaching the children and preparing them for admission exams to the local school. An initial letter from the school informs her none of the teachers will be willing to conduct the exams for her children, but when she confronts the headmaster about this, he summons the staff, calls the letter a disgrace to Poland and promises to dismiss any teacher who will not teach the refugee children. Heartened, Lena packs the lot of them – who naturally pass their admission tests to a head – off to school, where naturally they are beaten black and blue by the village children on their first day. Lena stomps off to the local militia HQ to demand protection for herself and the children, but available manpower is already overstretched dealing with anti-Communist uprisings hither and thither, so she is simply given a cache of arms with which to defend herself. The older boys seize at these weapons hungrily, and before too long have occasion to use them. One night an elderly village woman comes to the resort to warn Lena that a mob of armed men on horseback are gathering with murderous intent.

The youths succeed in beating off that attack (though mysteriously without inflicting any casualties on the attacking mob) and Lena finally concedes defeat. The only safe haven for her brood will be in Palestine, and she uses the remnants of the Jewish underground in Crakow to organise bribes for the Polish border guards, and a train to ship the children to France, from where she hopes to embark for Palestine. Their mini-exodus is not uneventful, but in due course they make their way safely to France, where they have to wait a further two years until the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 (so a post-script informs us).

"**THE PIED PIPER**" dealt with an Englishman convoying a motley party of children out of Europe just at the outbreak of the war, while films like "**KORCZAK**" and of course "**SCHINDLER'S LIST**" recounted tales of individuals who tried to help Poland's Jewish

children during the height of the Holocaust, but this is the only film I can recall which highlights their continued suffering in Eastern Europe immediately after the defeat of Nazism. It verbalises so much, but curiously omits to underline the point that many Poles, Czechs and Russians fully supported the German programme of eradicating the Jewish presence from their countries, by whatever means.

No rationale is supplied for that hatred, shrugging it off as an ancient prejudice, but that's perhaps too disingenuous. Crude religious intolerance played its part, as did base hostility to any group of people who can be identified as "alien", but no persecuted group has ever been altogether innocent in its own persecution, and this resounding silence about the conduct of Jewish industrialists, landowners and whatever, which might have fuelled a wave of anti-Semitic feeling across Europe only plays, I'm afraid, into the hands of anti-Semites. It is too easy to write off all the hatred to Nazi and Communist propaganda. There is another side to that story still untold, and while it would not in any degree excuse the Holocaust, or the ethnic cleansing of Eastern Europe which continued after the war, it is important – not least for Jews themselves – to hear that side of the tale too, and confront some home truths themselves.

This story is Lena's, not really that of "her" children, and only three or four of the horde are even identified by name (particularly a little blonde girl, namesake of her lost daughter, whom she informally "adopts"), but it is sincere enough, within the inevitable constraints of a US TV movie, and avoids mawkishness. Unfortunately, numbers diminish human impact, and portraits of post-war children like "**GERMANA ANNO ZERO**" or "**THE SEARCH**" carried more punch precisely because they focussed on the suffering of a single child, not a whole trainful.

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