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Habermann

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It's meant as no insult that *Habermann* has all the trademarks of generic WWII film: a love story faced with insurmountable obstacles, a family on the brink of fracturing, a young soldier coming of age and a once-close community taking sides, often against neighbors they've known for a lifetime. What *Habermann* does with these trademarks though, is something special. The grit and emotional power of the opening scene, for instance, is shocking, easily eclipsing the infamous *Saving Private Ryan* opening without the raw violence that film employed. The film feels especially poignant when it's kept in mind that it's based on the true story of August Habermann, a German man trying to protect his family in a Czechoslovakian town hungry for justice during and after years of Nazi occupation.

In *Habermann's* opening, a woman is torn from her child by her neighbors who spit and shout obscenities while a man tries in vein to reach them, passionately calling out the woman's name. As mother and daughter are put on a train, destination unknown, we begin to rewrite the plot for ourselves, scrambling to fill in gaps of a story we don't yet understand—who is this woman and why have her neighbors turned on her? Who is the man who calls for her and what relation does this all have to a war that just ended? The editing of this sequence creates active viewers who, like detectives, look for clues to fill in a story we're immediately invested in thanks to beautifully composed shots that provide a surprising amount of information (the setting, time, character of this woman and the long road she has already been down). The construction of the scene involves us emotionally and informs us with impressive efficiency, with little dialogue and before we even know this woman's full name, Jana Habermann. The rest of the film is equally engrossing not just because of the subject matter, but because that content is handled with intelligence and subtlety.

The masterful construction of the opening scene tells viewers we're in capable hands; director Juraj Herz certainly knows the power of good editing and the "twist," as the later part of the film reveals. This second, arguably stronger, half is replete with issues viewers will want to debate after *Habermann* ends: the unconscionable things good people do when they're scared; the devastation xenophobia and scapegoating inevitably cause; what it means to be "crippled" by a traumatic injury, as one character puts it, and the randomness of suffering and luck. To be sure, *Habermann* deals with the extremes of human experience and wants to ask big questions. It does deliver on most of those questions by the film's end but has to lay a lot of groundwork in the first half to do so. As such, viewers looking for a whiz-bang kind of war film will find something different here. However, the film is punctuated with small moments that drop like a bomb, like when Jana sees a train full of Jewish children and can do nothing to rescue them, or the final twist that reverberates long after the film stops rolling.

Habermann ends on a landscape that fades into a sepia image, as though the story was animated freshly for us, and is now returning to its places as a memory, a faded photo in a history book. The image reminds us the film depicts a moment that has now passed, and what is most surprising is that we need reminding of that fact at all—that *Habermann's* story feels so immediate, and teaches its lessons with such fresh urgency that it feels like the story is happening *right now* is a measure of the film's success. As those who love WWII films can attest, to tell that history in an original way, to get audiences to feel the sacrifices of those who lived that period, is an impressive achievement indeed.