

Ed Sikov

Billy Wilder's World War II

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Let me thank the United States Air Force Academy for inviting me to speak on the subject of Billy Wilder's World War II. I am greatly honored. Since I'm currently teaching at Colorado College, I admit that it does feel as though I've ventured into enemy territory this morning, and since I'm well aware that the Air Force Academy takes no prisoners, I'm wondering what's going to happen to me if you don't like my presentation. The Geneva Convention is quite clear on this point: you are not allowed to torture me. I'm sure that you do, however, have other effective ways of dealing with insurgents, and I can do nothing but throw myself at your mercy. That's the first problem. The second is that my own alma mater, Haverford College in Pennsylvania, which is also the other place I tend to teach now and then, is run by the Quakers, who as you probably know are pacifists. A little of that has rubbed off on me, I'm afraid, so let me just say that I disapprove of everything you stand for here at the Air Force Academy, and if you shoot me for saying that, please understand that my noble sense of nonviolent morality will be the only thing preventing me from shooting back.

All of this is just my ludicrous way of saying that, in fact, I'm really rather embarrassed to be lecturing you on the subject of World War II. The fact is, I know next to nothing about World War II. I'm certain that everyone else in this room could bomb circles around me on the subject of World War II, so I won't even try to tell you much of anything about the reality of that bloody and, to my very ambivalent nonviolent mind, very necessary war. I may be a pacifist at heart, but I'm also born of Jewish parents, and I'm acutely aware that if it hadn't been for the Ameri-

can military, I wouldn't even have the chance to be speaking German now, because my parents would have been gassed and burned in a death camp long before they had even had a chance to meet, let alone get married and have me.

Now if you think I'm conflicted about World War II, imagine the highly ambivalent perspective of Mr. Billy Wilder. He was born to Jewish parents in a remote outpost of the Austro-Hungarian empire in 1906; he moved with his family to Vienna during World War I; he started his career as a newspaper reporter there before moving to Berlin in 1926; he rose to become a successful and well-paid screenwriter there in 1931 and 1932. And then Adolf Hitler was elected Chancellor in 1933. He left Berlin a matter of weeks after Hitler's election, heading first to Paris and then to Hollywood. (Mr. Wilder is still alive, by the way, and living with his wife of many years in a lovely art-filled penthouse on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles.)

Wilder went on to make write and direct such films as *Double Indemnity*, *The Lost Weekend*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *The Seven Year Itch*, *Some Like It Hot*, *The Apartment*, and many others. But he could scarcely see into the future and know that his professional life would ultimately be enhanced by his having run for his life. At the time, he was simply running. Wilder, always shrewd and calculating, saw the writing on the wall right away, and he ran for his life—*right away*. He was paranoid, but correctly so. His father had died, but his mother was still living in Vienna. She had remarried, and although Billy tried to get her to join him in America in the mid-to-late-1930s, she saw no reason to panic. So she ended up gassed and burned in a death camp while her son became a famous and very wealthy film director living in splendor in Hollywood. Wilder is a survivor, in all ways, but I think he's paid a tremendous price in guilt, ambivalence, and extended culture shock.

It should come as no surprise, then, to see that World War II occupies a central place in Wilder's always conflicted imagination. Let me jump to almost the end of his life story and tell you that it was he, in a way, who convinced Stephen Spielberg to direct *Schindler's List*. When the novel on which the film was based was published in the early 1980s, Billy tried to buy the movie rights—he wanted *Schindler's List* to be his final film project. It would have been perfect for him—a cynical opportunist, a man who lives only for himself and will do anything to make a few bucks, or Deutchmarks, or movies. In any event, the opportunist becomes heroic, almost against his own will, and ends up saving the lives

of some Jews. Billy was an old man at that point, however, and it would have been nearly impossible for him to direct such an expansive and difficult movie. Moreover, Spielberg had already bought the rights. But Spielberg still credited Billy for prodding him, in a moral sense, to actually get the picture made: "He made me look very deeply inside myself," Spielberg said, "when he was so passionate to do this. He tested my resolve."

Billy's own resolve, I think, was the product of nearly fifty years of self-loathing. Here is a man who rode out the war in the lap of luxury in Southern California. While his own mother and grandmother were being rounded up by the Nazis, forced into the Jewish ghetto in Krakow, and probably transported to Auschwitz and incinerated—I say probably because they really just disappeared; there are no records of the dead with their names on them—while this was happening to his own family, Billy was earning lots of money, buying and selling houses and paintings and sculptures in Beverly Hills, getting nominated for a couple of Oscars, screwing a beautiful starlet behind his wife's and four-year-old daughter's backs, screwing a beautiful big band singer behind the starlet's back, and generally having a swell time in Tinseltown.

This is not to say that Billy Wilder was oblivious to the war while it was happening. On the contrary. He's always been a newshound, and he followed the war closely in the papers. And as an Austro-German refugee in Hollywood he was personally active in committees organized to help fellow refugees make their way out of hell and find a place to stay and work in California. In addition, he wrote several very good screenplays that used the rise of the Nazis as well as refugee issues as a backdrop—I'm thinking of the romantic comedy *Ninotchka*, the war romance *Arise My Love*, and the refugee romance *Hold Back the Dawn*. In 1939, he even wrote an unproduced script, a romantic comedy, called, believe it or not, *Heil, Darling*. In this film, a cynical opportunist, a reporter who's only out for himself—are you seeing a theme developing here?—a cynical reporter falls in love with a beautiful blonde Nazi doctor in Vienna. The Nazi doctor measures people's skulls as a way of determining their racial background. The reporter's skull corresponds to that of a monkey, which is one step higher on the doctor's chart than the lowest of the low—the skull of a Russian Communist. At first, Josh, the reporter, simply tries to sweet-talk Wilhelmine, the Nazi doctor, into signing his racial certification, but when they get to know each other better in Josh's car on the way back from a pilgrimage to Hitler's birthplace, they begin

to fall tentatively, awkwardly in love. She explains Nazi theory to him—the uses of the rubber blackjack, the virtues of *lebensraum*, the return of German colonies. And here let me quote from Wilder’s long-lost treatment itself, which I unearthed in my research: “But she really warmed up when she started on the holy mission of the Nazi empire to save the world from the Russian plague. The moon had risen nicely and Josh gave out with a swell impersonation of Chamberlain and Donald Duck. In return, she recited for him the second chorus of the Horst Wessel song. They had a good time.” *Heil, Darling* would have been a very, very strange comedy.

In 1942, having directed his first picture, a screwball comedy called *The Major and the Minor*, Wilder took on the war directly when made a ripped-from-the-headlines combat film called *Five Graves to Cairo*. He and his screenwriting collaborator Charles Brackett began sketching *Five Graves to Cairo* at a time when the outcome of the battle for North Africa was still in doubt. The Nazis and their Italian Fascist allies were storming across the Egyptian desert in the spring and summer of 1942. The British troops trying to hold the territory were getting pounded by German and Italian troops led by Erwin Rommel, a brilliant military strategist who sometimes took orders badly and thus stood in constant danger of proving his superiors wrong—rather like Mr. Wilder himself in that regard.

In late May of 1942, Rommel’s Afrika Korps, consisting of two armored divisions and one motorized infantry division, together with eight Italian divisions, rolled across the desert and successfully repelled the British. Tobruk fell on June 21. Rommel was soon at El Alamein, only sixty-five miles from Alexandria, poised for the total seizure of Egypt. The consequences for the Allies were dire. From Egypt, Rommel could advance unimpeded through the Middle East and the Caucasus and meet the German armies on the Eastern Front for a vast offensive into Russia. It was at this pivotal moment that Hitler awarded Rommel the title of “field marshal.” Even the Allies couldn’t help but marvel at the Desert Fox’s skills, and he became a kind of dastardly folk-anti-hero in the American press.

But in June, Rommel’s imminent triumph began to fade under the onslaught of American and British fighter planes. At the end of August, Rommel launched a last offensive against El Alamein, but his troops hadn’t the strength they once did, and Hitler continued to allocate most of the Nazis’ military resources toward the capture of Stalingrad. By late

October, the British Royal Air Force controlled the skies over Egypt, and the Nazis' battle for El Alamein was lost. Rommel attempted a full retreat, but Hitler himself ordered the field marshal to hold fast. In the beginning of November, Rommel risked court-martial by disobeying the Fuehrer's direct order: he withdrew his troops seven hundred miles to a position behind the Libyan port of Benghazi. This retreat marked the Allies' most decisive victory in the war to date.

On Tuesday, November, 3, 1942, while Field Marshal Rommel was still in the act of retreating from his positions in the sands of North Africa, Billy Wilder took the 9:45 Sunset Ltd. from Los Angeles to Yuma, Arizona, the closest town to where the first location shooting for *Five Graves to Cairo* was scheduled to commence later that week. Imagine, if you will, the way this film's opening sequence might have looked in a brand new 35mm print:

In the endless desert sands, a dead body hangs out of a lone tank's turret, its head thrown grotesquely back, one of its arms hanging lifeless to the side. The camera stares for a moment before another dissolve leads to a closer shot of the corpse, its eyes fixed and open and pointing to the sky in a death stare. At this point Wilder cuts to a shot of the dead man's feet swinging helplessly inside the tank. As the sequence continues, the tank's dead driver lurches back in his seat as the tank heads up the side of another sand dune. When it reaches the crest and tips down the other side, the cadaver falls forward again, slamming against the steering mechanisms. This is an exceptionally morbid opening sequence—especially for a contemporary war film.

Wilder introduces his hero as an inadvertent survivor, a man who finds himself alive without reason. And still, the sequence is so breathtakingly beautiful that the art actually threatens to overwhelm the revelation of character, a rarity in Wilder's career. These are shots of extraordinary, luminous despair: a man staggers into consciousness, climbs halfway out the turret, passes out in the brilliant sun, is hurled from the tank when the vehicle tips over the crest of a dune, and snaps back into consciousness just in time to see the tank rolling away, leaving him alone in the scorching desert. Only in this moment of utter futility does Wilder give his character an identity.

Let's fast-forward now to the spring of 1945. On April 30, with the Red Army advancing into the heart of Berlin, Adolf Hitler ended the war—not to mention his life—by shooting himself through the roof of his mouth. He left instructions for his body to be incinerated—orders spe-

cifically designed to deny the Soviets the pleasure of mutilating it. One week later, when the Red Army finished pounding through what remained of the streets of Berlin, Germany officially surrendered. By that point Wilder had already left Los Angeles on his way back home. The U.S. Army had hired him to help in its de-Nazification program as well as to supervise filmmaking activities in occupied Germany.

According to Billy, a world-class storyteller, he was made a colonel. He was in New York on VE day (May 8), he says, where he reported to a paper-pushing functionary who became annoyed at Wilder's sudden appointment to the rank of colonel and demanded to know how much he was earning as a civilian. \$2,500, Wilder began to reply, whereupon the foul-tempered official berated him for taking a huge pay increase—all the way up to \$6,500 per year, though of course he wouldn't be working that long. No, Billy broke in, he had been earning \$2,500 *per week*. The idiocy of bureaucrats is always a pleasant topic of conversation and story telling, but there is something wrong with this particular anecdote. Billy may have been paid and billeted at a colonel's rank, but Army documents inevitably refer to him as Mr. Wilder, not Col. Wilder. And, perhaps needless to say, rank is everything in the military.

Whatever his role with the Army was, one of Mr. Wilder's tasks was supposed to be the direction of a documentary about the death camps. As early as the summer of 1942, American, British, French, and Russian intelligence officers knew that the Nazis were systematically killing the Jews of Europe. It was nevertheless a shock to most of the world to discover that fact in the spring of 1945. Once Allied cameramen began recording the barbaric physical realities of each of the death camps as they were liberated by Allied soldiers, it required no more proof. They filmed the crematoria and the ash piles. They filmed skeletal corpses, piles of shoes, lampshades made of human skin. They took motion pictures of mass burial pits, ovens made to burn vast numbers of people, dead babies, bones. Inhuman horror, previously unimaginable in scale, was recorded on celluloid. They shipped some of this footage to London, where it was waiting for Wilder upon his arrival there.

He began viewing this footage in London in mid-May, and he continued viewing it during the weeks the Army kept him waiting for his eventual posting in Germany. Whatever else he did in Europe, Billy wanted to use this footage as the basis of a documentary. He wanted to show Austria and Germany, and the world, what the Austrians and the Germans had done; they were his countrymen, after all. And these particu-

larly horrifying images for Billy Wilder because he knew that his mother's and grandmother's bodies might well have been in those acres of twisted, grimacing corpses. Every new frame of raw footage he saw thus held the potential of revealing his mother's fate. Every corpse might have been hers, but no corpse actually was. And I believe that since she did not appear in any image, each new frame of film led to an accumulating sense of failure and despair and guilt.

Because Wilder knew his way around the German film and theater communities, he was particularly qualified to oversee the Army's de-Nazification program as it involved the entertainment industry. At the U.S. Army camp at Bad Homberg, Wilder and others supervised the interviewing of former Nazis to determine, in the critic David Freeman's turn of phrase, "which ones were the least undesirable." Wilder knew or knew of many of these actors, directors, and other personnel. He remembered some personally and had heard about the exploits of others from fellow émigrés. One of the men Wilder interviewed was the actor Werner Krauss, known for his knack for doing horrible Jew impersonations in Nazi films. Anton Lang was another. Before the war, Lang had played the role of Christ in the Oberammergau Passion play. By the late '30s he'd removed his stigmata and joined the S.S. The Oberammergau's director asked Billy to re-certify Lang, who hoped to be able to dust off his cross and return to Golgotha. Wilder told him yes, Lang could act again, but only on one condition: "that in the Crucifixion scene you use real nails."

The documentary about the death camps did get made, but not by Billy. The production history of *Todesmullen*, which translates as *Death Mills*, is necessarily murky; there were too many people and too much footage involved—and, frankly, too many governments and military officers. The Allies recorded and collected at least 600,000 feet of film taken by American, French, British, and Soviet correspondents, newsreel photographers, and cameramen. By December, 1945, six separate versions of *Death Mills* had been assembled in various locations. Wilder did work on at least one of these versions, but his was not the one that was finally released. At the end of June, 1945, General McClure expressed his eagerness to see *Death Mills* completed, but—and please forgive me for this snide remark—for reasons that only someone attuned to military logic could ever comprehend, McClure remained convinced that Wilder's time and expertise were better spent on other activities for the Film section—managerial activities unrelated to filmmaking. The comple-

tion of *Death Mills* was once again postponed. Handed one of the world's leading film directors, a man supremely capable of making a stinging anti-Nazi film specifically for a German audience, the United States Army put him to work pushing paper.

What he did accomplish was some pre-production work on a romantic comedy he wanted to make—it would be set in that most romantic of locations—bombed-out Berlin. He finally got to film it in 1948; Wilder and his Paramount crew were among the first filmmakers allowed in to occupied Berlin—or what was left of it. The film opens with a Congressional delegation flying over bombed-out Berlin on a fact-finding mission. “Look at it,” one of the Congressmen says—“like pack rats been gnawing at a hunk of old moldy Roquefort cheese.” This, after all, had been Billy's home for seven years.

A Foreign Affair concerns the appropriately named Congresswoman Frost (Jean Arthur), who is sent on a moral mission: as she puts it, “12,000 of our boys are policing that pesthole down below . . . and they are being infected by a kind of moral malaria!” “Fumigate the place!” she demands.

But curiously, Wilder is clearly on the side of the moral malaria. His protagonist, an American soldier, is having an affair with none other than Marlene Dietrich, who is playing a sort of glorified Nazi whore. In one sequence, he successfully trades a homemade cake, brought to him from back home in the States by Congresswoman Frost, for a crummy and decidedly used mattress, which he intends to give to the whore. A fine, cynical Wilder touch is the tune on the soundtrack as our soldier rides through the horrifying piles of ash, stone, and rubble that constituted the heart of Berlin after the war: it's that great old chestnut, “Isn't It Romantic?”

It's important to stress that Marlene Dietrich herself was no Nazi. She was, in fact, an ardent anti-Nazi who worked very very hard to get refugees out of Germany and to support the troops—in any number of ways. She was also a close friend of Billy's. But onscreen in *A Foreign Affair*, she's a Nazi—and Wilder finds her particularly alluring as such. This is where Billy Wilder's World War II starts to get really perverse. In the end, of course, our Johnny ends up in love with Congresswoman Frost—Hollywood convention compels him to. But Marlene, clearly, is where the real action is.

In retrospect, then, one realizes that Wilder treated Rommel in *Five Graves to Cairo* in a very similar way. Franchot Tone is appealing enough as J. J. Bramble, the film's hero, but the truly intriguing character, the

one with pizzazz, is Rommel, especially as embodied by the great Erich von Stroheim. It's Rommel to whom Wilder most strongly responds; it's the dynamic German anti-hero, not the Allied soldier, who commands his respect.

It seems to me that Billy Wilder has long seen himself as a cynical, one might even say despicable opportunist, and he has tended to create any number of onscreen surrogates in this regard. His films are littered with sell-outs, hustlers, whores, and pimps. In *A Foreign Affair*, Marlene sings a song about hawking her wares on the black market. Look at the lyrics: it's a song about trading. There are no morals; it's all about selling out to the highest bidder. Wilder, having himself lived in Hollywood for almost fifteen years at that point, knows precisely what she's talking about. Referring to the fact that the black market sets no limits on the prices one can get for things, Marlene sings, "No ceilings, no feelings—a very smooth routine."

Let's fast forward again—this time to 1953, when Billy made his second film set during the war itself—a comedy about a Nazi prisoner of war camp in Austria. Yes, you read that correctly: it's a comedy about a group of Americans stuck in a squalid prisoner of war camp in Austria, and it's called *Stalag 17*. (It was the precursor to the Sixties TV show *Hogan's Heroes*.) The hero of *Stalag 17* is played by William Holden, and he is—guess what?—a cynical opportunist, not a hero at all, but rather somebody who trades with the enemy. There's a group of American soldiers—disparate ethnic types, just like in *Saving Private Ryan*, only these guys are stuck in a Nazi prisoner of war camp. Wilder does present images of bravery and heroism in the form of two men trying to escape from the camp, but he concentrates his attention and imagination on anti-heroism in the form of Sefton, the William Holden character. Like so many Wilder protagonists, Sefton is a man who sells out to the highest bidder. He's cold, calculating, cynical—a total realist and pragmatist who sees through everything and everybody and cares only about saving his own skin and, hopefully, making a little money—or in this case cigarettes—on the side.

"Did you calculate the risk?" asks Sefton at one point. That's a key line for Wilder, who inevitably calculated the risks on every transaction he ever conducted. Notice how hard-bitten Sefton is here: not only does he bet against his own comrades, but he offers to double the bet for anybody who doesn't believe the guys are really dead. He might feel a

little bad for the two dead guys—you can see it on his face—but that doesn't stop him from taking all the cigarettes when he wins.

Through the course of this film, Sefton does develop a certain strain of heroism, almost against his own will, when he discovers the identity of the Nazi spy living in the barracks and posing as an American POW. He then offers to take on the dangerous mission of escaping from the camp in order to escort a genuine hero to safety. Contrast Wilder's vision of military heroism to Steven Spielberg's in *Saving Private Ryan*. There, the Tom Hanks character behaves admirably, honorably, and heroically, despite his personal misgivings about the nature of his mission. There is no doubt that he's a great leader of men, and we respect him for it; we particularly respect him at the end of the film for his bravery. As the German tank advances on him, he doesn't give up—he keeps firing his pistol. His persistence itself is heroic. And, of course, in his dying breath he gives Private Ryan a piece of moral wisdom—one which Spielberg certainly invites us to endorse.

Consider in contrast the parting words Billy Wilder gives to *his* hero. Sefton remains a cynical smart-ass to the end. He makes it clear that he's performing his heroic mission—to help another prisoner escape—as much to save his own skin as for any patriotic reasons. He remains, to a great measure, only out for himself. He begins by telling the very likable guy who has asked about how to get into the Russian women's compound (a task Sefton has already achieved), "Tell you what to do—get yourself a hundred cigarettes for the kraut guards, then get yourself another face." His final, nasty words to his mates became infamous in the 1950s—exemplary of Billy Wilder's cruel selfishness and cynicism: "Just one more word—if I ever run into you bums on the street corner, just let's pretend we never met before." He disappears down the tunnel, pops his head back out and gives a sarcastic little salute, a final *screw you*, and leaves.

Now, I read the ending of *Saving Private Ryan* as being a great deal more conflicted than it's generally given credit for being, but even *I* have to admit that there's a level of sentimentality there along with the ambiguity. Specifically, I think Tom Hanks' advice to Matt Damon ("Earn it") is more a curse than an uplifting morale, and I think that the tragic expression on the elderly Ryan's face in the framing segment indicates that he's not at all convinced that his life was really worth saving in the end. Still, Hanks' advice to him is a sentiment I think we can all endorse:

Earn it. Make the saving of your life mean something. Again, consider in contrast Sefton's parting shot: "If I ever run into you bums on the street corner, just let's pretend we never met before." I suspect that if Steven Spielberg had ended his film on such an overtly sour note, it would never have been the blockbuster it ultimately became.

One can only imagine, then, what Billy Wilder would have done with *Schindler's List*. Who can really say what a work of art would have been like if it had been made by someone else? I suspect, though, it would have lacked some of Spielberg's sentimentality; I suspect it would have been a harder-edged film; I suspect it wouldn't have been such a big hit. I could be wrong. Wilder himself adored *Schindler's List*. But judging by Billy Wilder's World War II as represented in *Five Graves to Cairo*, *A Foreign Affair*, and *Stalag 17*, and judging also by Wilder's entire career, it would likely have been a great deal more conflicted—a lot more attuned to the director's own feelings of complicity—a lot more personally guilt-ridden—and, yes, to me anyway, a whole lot more interesting.

Ed Sikov is the author of *On Sunset Boulevard: The Life and Times of Billy Wilder*, which was recently selected as a "Notable Book of 1999" by the editors of *The New York Times Book Review*.