

# Stalags [Film Review]

Stuart Klawans

2008

**Director:** Ari Libsker

**Country/Year:** Israel, 2007

**Opening:** April 9

**Where:** New York's Film Forum

"YOU BREATHED THE THICK AIR OF REPRESSION," Israeli-born scholar Omer Bartov says in the documentary *Stalags*, as he recalls with a sad smile the social atmosphere of his boyhood. Fifty years ago, about half of the people living in Israel had survived the Holocaust, and none of the population wanted to talk about it.

Not until 1961 did the Nazi era finally erupt into public conversation, through two events. The first was the trial of Adolf Eichmann, with its stacks of documents and eyewitness evidence. The second, though coinciding with the trial, was infinitely less consequential; but it, too, brought something repressed to the surface. Newsstands began selling a series of porn novels known as "Stalags"-tens of thousands of copies of them-each purporting to tell the true story of a U.S. or British pilot who had been captured by the Nazis and then raped, repeatedly and vigorously, by bodacious female SS officers.

The grimly factual and the luridly fantastic had gushed out together. This confluence is the theme of writer-director Ari Libsker-social critic, cultural archeologist, but above all showman, who begins his film with a come-on. He displays the paperback covers: cartoon extravaganzas in yellow and red, showing bloody, bare-chested he-men cowering at the boots of snarling Nazi beauties, their amply filled blouses popped open by the force of frenzied whip-wielding. I can barely stop writing about them. Nor can certain Israelis resist their allure, even today. In his opening scenes, Libsker cuts between these sensational illustrations and black-and-white shots of a middle-aged Stalag collector, his features discreetly shadowed in TV newsmagazine fashion. The message, reinforced by Libsker's voiceover, is that the *Stalag novels* have themselves become material to be repressed.

But if so, they remain a curiously open secret. In the next sequences, Libsker interviews a few artsy types-the kind who are willing to be photographed in daylight-who reminisce laughingly about the Stalags as a kitschy adolescent thrill. Archival footage is marshaled to demonstrate that in the Sixties and Seventies, Israeli film and television audiences assumed that young people took an interest in the books. The connection between the books' popularity and the Eichmann trial was obvious, too: you see contemporary copies of the magazine *Ha-olam Hazeh* with photos of Eichmann on the front cover and ads for *Stalag novels* on the back. Even the identities of the novels' pseudonymous authors were known. Stalags were supposedly written in English by "Mike Baden" or "Mike Longshot" and then translated into Hebrew; but a visit to the public library reveals that Stalags were catalogued with the note "The translator is the author."

For a non-Israeli who grew up using other forms of porn, all this is fascinating-especially when Libsker interviews the original Stalags author, Eli Keidar. He proves

to be a sorrowful, bullet-headed man, oddly reminiscent of Christopher Lloyd's Uncle Fester, who feels the Israeli market was inadequate to his talent.

But perhaps two-thirds of the way through his documentary, Libsker unexpectedly turns away from Keidar and the other Stalag creators. His attention shifts to an earlier writer: the equally pseudonymous Ka-Tzetnik (Yehiel Feiner De-Nur), an Auschwitz survivor who in 1946 brought out the first Hebrew literary account of the Holocaust. In 1961, Ka-Tzetnik was a witness at the Eichmann trial. In the Nineties, his books were incorporated into the school curriculum. Libsker shows scenes of tour guides in Auschwitz quoting the books today-especially the parts about Jewish women forced to serve as prostitutes. And then, through interviews with historians and literary critics, Libsker suggests that Ka-Tzetnik's account of sex in the death camps, though now part of official history, was fictional-an early version of a *Stalag novel*, without the exciting cover art.

Thematically, this is troubling and provocative material. Cinematically, it's a mess. The section about Ka-Tzetnik dangles from the rest of the film, rather than being integrated with it. Interview subjects of uncertain authority pop up and disappear; allegations are made on the fly, by association of ideas, rather than through argument. Even the opening premise-that *Stalag novels* are now taboo-is asserted without support. How much less does Libsker support the impression he leaves you with at the end: that Israelis in general get off on the Holocaust?

There may be truth in that conclusion-but how much truth, you won't easily determine from Stalags. Rarely have I seen an hour-long documentary that so badly needed an extra half-hour of documentation.

The Ted K Archive

Stuart Klawans  
Stalags [Film Review]  
2008

Film Comment. <[filmcomment.com/issue/march-april-2008](http://filmcomment.com/issue/march-april-2008)>  
Film Society of Lincoln Center Mar/Apr 2008

**[www.thetedkarchive.com](http://www.thetedkarchive.com)**