

SHADOWS OF THE DECEASED

Proposal for a feature-length film and television serial (4x50)

Vladimír Körner © 2003
Director : Milan Cieslar

The theme of a woman's fate set against the background of a historical situation is related in a way, not least because of its historical content, to the previous work of both film-makers *Pramen života* or *Spring of Life* (Berlinale 2000, it also received the main prize at international film festivals in 2001 - Troia, Laon, Gottbus, Rimouski, Chemnitz, it was also shown at others such as IFF Montreal, Shanghai, Jerusalem, AFI Los Angeles, Fort Lauderdale, Palm Beach), plus to the author's screenplay *Anděl milosrdenství* or *Angel of Mercy* (Prix Europa 1994) or to the well-known cult film *Adelheid* from the director Vlášil that was made at the end of the 1960s.

Here the events are split into the four different seasons of the year, against the backdrop of little known periods in European history, about which little is ever said. These are merely the background and a distant echo for this chamber, but strongly poetic tale, which takes place for the most part in a backwater of the Moravian-Silesian Hills.

1st part *WINTER 1939* - an episode from the Soviet-Finnish winter war and the first winter of the Second World War, set in a mountain sanatorium on the territory of the Third Reich

2nd part *SPRING 1945* - the liberation of Czechoslovakia and the expulsion of ethnic Germans from the country after the end of the Second World War

3rd part *SUMMER 1956* - the echoes of political changes in nearby Poland, leading towards the autumn revolution in Hungary and the consolidation of communist rule in the satellites of Russia

4th part *AUTUMN 1961*- a seemingly peaceful and yet eventful year, ending somewhere in the Belgian Congo...

In the four separate episodes we follow the fate of a mother and later on her daughter during a period of time in which very little changes despite the changes in the political environment. This all takes place in a setting that underlines the drama of a woman who is caught up in the affairs of the world and by the blows of fatal chance. It is as if no-one can escape their fate, the entire tale is interlinked with the same level of fatefulness and the rituals between life and death, with a subconscious longing for resurrection and the journey towards salvation through the life of a pampered child.

The tale starts at the beginning of the war with the amorous story of the Baltic noble Arno von Lieven and a young Czech girl, Helga, who belongs to the staff at a German military hospital in the Sudeten Lands (part of former Czechoslovakia, which was occupied before the outbreak of the war by Germany). Both of them are betrayed by the circumstances of the time, powerless and betrayed by the games of

those in power (the annexation of the Baltic states by Russia after the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the occupation of the Sudeten Lands in former Czechoslovakia by Hitler). Arno fled as a volunteer before the Soviet threat and fought in the war in Finland, where he fought side by side with the Finns against the Russians. In one of the battles he was wounded and almost froze to death. In what is nothing short of a miracle he was saved and brought to recover in the German military hospital, where Helga works. However, the frozen soldier, who is on the verge of death, is resurrected thanks to Helga. There follows the short, romantic story of their first love. Rather than follow the orders that are to send Arno into another, even worse battlefield of the war, in the end he chooses to end his own life.

From his relationship with Helga, however, a new life is created after his death and forces Helga to change her life completely. After the war the revenge of the victors is meted out against the mother and her child, they both share the fate of the defeated armies, because everyone around her knows whose child that Helga had given birth to. Helga is raped, disgraced and condemned to leave the land of her birth. In what is little short of a miracle she is taken in by the former Jewish owner of the sanatorium, who has survived the concentration camps and lost his entire family; for a time at least he provides her with a secure place to lead a modest life...

In the moments when she is a hair's breadth from death and is ready to give up to her fate, she has symbolic visions of the sea and a Knight of the Cross, a dream that recalls of the shadow of her departed father Helga's fateful first love. He is still with them...

After all these years Arno literally rises from the grave, his body is exhumed and this moment also marks the end of the childhood for Helga's growing daughter Dorli. Because of her origins and her psychological make-up she is separated from her peers, but she carries inside her the ghost of her dead father, whom she subconsciously wants to find and follow. She tries to run away with a Greek boy, also an exile, an immigrant in the area at the time. They plan to run away somewhere to the Baltic states, so the land of the visions she has in her dreams, from where they will go by boat to Greece, where the boy longs terribly to return. But their attempt to run away is soon stopped by the Polish border police. It is 1956 now and not even the death of Stalin has managed to dampen the vigour of communist repression. Helga must sacrifice herself for her daughter and her freedom, she throws herself on the mercy of a torturer from the STB (communist secret police), a former captain in a concentration camp, who desires she is supposed to satisfy. At the last moment, however, Helga rebels and is imprisoned as a result.

Dorli blames herself for her arrest. The last part of the drama takes place in the autumn, following the construction of the Berlin Wall. In order to save her mother, who is dying in prison, Dorli is forced to co-operate with the communist secret police. They are more interested in her inheritance from the family of her dead father and her property in Germany. Dorli saves her mother, only in time for her to be able to come home. This allows Helga to die on the same fateful stone on the border, where a long time ago she experienced love with Arno. The world and schools now open to the girl, which had hitherto been closed to her. But she wants to play out her pact with the devil, so she chooses the only correct path: away from Czechoslovakia, away from Europe! During her escort, which is accompanying her so that she can transfer

all of her property to the state, she manages to escape and seek asylum among some sisters of mercy. She then travels with them to the Belgian Congo. But even there fate overtakes her. Those whom they have cared for destroy and kill everything around them (1963 – the military coup in the Congo, the rise to power of “progressive forces” and the defeat of the right-wing regime). Dorli has but one chance, to escape on board the last helicopter, which is evacuating the last remaining workers at the local aid station. The number of places in the helicopter is limited, rebels are already pouring through the barbed wire around the station, and they have no love lost for whites. There are only seconds left to go before the rescue helicopter takes off and there are many more people interested in escaping than there is room in the small vehicle... Dorli gives her passport and ticket out of there to rescue an unknown woman whom she knows has been made pregnant by a French doctor who has deserted her there and left her to her fate. Dorli thereby saves two people at once and her soul at the same time, and she herself merely awaits her death calmly. And then something appears to her despite the tropical autumnal heat... Snow appears and on it her deceased father comes towards her across it, in order to take her away from the filth of this world to the kingdom of eternal, quiet ice...