

EVENT REPORT

“The Rhine flows to the Mediterranean Sea”

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Event: Film Screening & Q&A; with Offer Avnon
Venue & Date: Gabriel-von-Seidl-Gymnasium Bad Tölz at the Capitol-Theater, 25.11.2025

“The Rhine flows to the Mediterranean Sea” – what a puzzling film title!

“Another strange idea from the English department,” thought 112 pupils in Years 12 and 13 at the Gabriel-von-Seidl Gymnasium in Bad Tölz when they were asked if they’d like to watch a film with that title and then meet its Israeli director, Offer Avnon.

Interest was particularly high amongst the Year 13 classes, as these young people in particular had, over the past two years, engaged with Germany’s past, the Shoah and ways of remembering through various projects.

One group had made their own film about the final days of the war and the experiences of a Hitler Youth member in Bad Tölz, and had therefore researched old newspaper articles, photographs and the recollections of eyewitnesses.

Many Q13 pupils are involved in the Student Council and have personally helped to organise commemorative events, such as a silent march to mark the liberation of Jewish prisoners from the ‘Death March’, which also passed through Bad Tölz. All Q13 pupils have had several opportunities to hear the survivor Abba Naor speak and to ask him questions.

All the Year 13 English classes had also studied the history of the British Mandate of Palestine and the founding of the State of Israel, as part of their work on the British Empire. In addition, they had all attended a lecture on anti-Semitism given by Professor Michael Wolffsohn at our school.

One class had read the novel “Return to Haifa” by the (not uncontroversial) Palestinian author Ghassan Kanafani, which, amongst other things, recounts the harrowing experiences of Polish Jews during the Second World War and whose main theme is the violence and wars between Arabs and Jews between 1948 and 1967.

Everyone immediately showed great interest in meeting an artist who had just arrived from Haifa and engaging in conversation with him.

The situation was different in Year 12. Whilst there was also a great deal of general interest here, there were also some negative reactions; however – as is so often the case at school – these were not discussed further due to time constraints or a lack of energy to deal with yet more ‘problematic’ issues.

A Turkish girl did not want to go and see a film by an Israeli director; a boy also expressed his opposition (and therefore stayed at school instead of going to the cinema). It was never established to what extent this opposition was motivated by anti-Semitism.

The film discussion should definitely be chaired by the young people themselves. A boy whose grandparents are from Iran and a girl with Korean roots wanted to take this on. They also watched the film in advance to give themselves a bit of a head start. They looked into Mr Avnon's biography and the reviews of the film available online.

During a preliminary meeting, all those involved – the presenters, the technical team and the director – were able to get to know one another and discuss the arrangements for the film screening. This very personal encounter was valuable and enriching for the young people – not only because it was their first encounter with an Israeli.

The timing of the film screening was certainly not ideal for everyone. Mr. Avnon does not exactly describe himself as an early bird, and the students (and their course instructors) are not at their best at 8:00 AM either. This made the high level of concentration that could be felt during the screening all the more astonishing.

The film makes great demands on its audience. The shots are long – at times a touch too long. There is no plot, no clear message. The director works with images and associations. The film is unwieldy and runs completely counter to today's viewing habits. It demands a great deal, particularly from young people with a TikTok attention span.

A glance at the young audience revealed, however, that everyone (with a few exceptions) was 100 per cent engrossed. Even during the discussion that followed, everyone was spellbound, which is quite astonishing given their age.

Some of the pupils, whom their teachers had hardly expected to be so captivated, were spellbound by the film and sat motionless in their cinema seats. Even whilst listening to their classmates' questions and Offer Avnon's answers, their body language betrayed extreme tension. Some leaned forward so as not to miss a single word or gesture from the director. This reaction caught the attention of several teachers, as it is truly unusual.

The two teenagers who chaired the film discussion were well prepared. They had thought of a few questions to ask as 'icebreakers' and also managed to transition smoothly to further topics. Frankly, a few clichés were uttered towards the end (such as: 'Never again...', 'Learning from history...', 'We have a responsibility...' etc.). However, in the follow-up discussion with the pupils, during which this issue was raised, it became clear that what adults who have been engaged with a 'culture of remembrance' for years refer to as 'sympathy bingo' is felt to be 'genuine' by the young people. Even if the phrases have been trotted out a hundred times before, for the 18-year-olds they are new, sincere and authentic. The teachers involved were able to learn a great deal from these observations.

As the film discussion had to be held in English (this was the only way the English student council could justify organising such a project outside of lessons, which takes time away from other subjects), some of the interested pupils did not dare to ask questions in such a large group.

However, as the director addressed the initial questions with great calm and sincerity, and gave the young people the impression that he was speaking to them as equals rather than lecturing them, more and more hands shot up.

The most 'audible' reaction during the film had been the audience's astonished laughter when the enthusiastic collector of Nazi memorabilia proudly presented his treasures in the Swabian dialect. Naturally, some questions centred on this incredible character. How does a Jewish director come to know such people, and how does he even manage to persuade them to admire the German Wehrmacht so wholeheartedly in front of the camera?

As expected, the young people were very interested in the director's views on the war with Hamas and the situation in Gaza. Contrary to what had been secretly feared, however, nobody sought to provoke or make accusations. The pupils were open-minded and genuinely interested in his political views. And they received a detailed, comprehensive response that reflected the complexity of the situation. A discussion ensued that was not driven by propaganda or deliberate manipulation, and it was probably precisely for this reason that it prompted even further investigation and reflection. Everyone came away realising that there are no quick, simple, black-and-white answers.

Unfortunately, the second part of the event – the film discussion – was far too short. Everyone cursed the restrictive framework into which everyday school life forces us. After all, many questions remained unasked.

In the classrooms and the staff room, however, the debate and discussion continued, though sadly without Offer Avnon. The feedback ranged from open enthusiasm ("What a brilliant bloke!") to detailed scene analyses.

There was a discussion about whether there should be more events of this kind at the school, or whether there are already 'too many' of them. Can engaging with the Shoah have a positive impact, or does it make pupils 'reluctant to remember' and desensitised? Should, or are teachers allowed to, take a political stance in the classroom? What if groups with links to the AfD, or even teachers themselves, organise events and bring them into the school?

The topics raised by the film screening and the interaction with the director from Haifa were wide-ranging. The question remains as to how much and what impact the event actually had. Who did we reach? There will be no answer.

TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE & CONCLUSION

The planning and organisation process led to a very clear realisation for the teachers involved. Frustrated by the resistance they faced and the red tape involved in organising such socially relevant events, the 'tireless ones' have had to organise themselves structurally.

Driven by concerns over the injustices and dangers posed by parents or pupils with links to the AfD – who have already caused considerable trouble for individual teachers at other schools (legal proceedings, etc.) and where there has been no solidarity from the school management or fellow staff – they wish to form a 'Democracy Working Group' (*Arbeitskreis Demokratie*).

In future, there should be no need for contrived narratives or justification strategies when engaging with history, the Shoah and the threats to our democracy. The working group will offer events and training courses, and those involved aim to support one another.