



The Boy in the Striped Pajamas

With Easter less than a month away, it is worth thinking about Jesus' sacrifice on a dark Friday 2000 years ago. Few recent Hollywood movies have focused on that world-changing event, except Mel Gibson's *The Passion*. But some illustrate powerfully the act of self-sacrifice and shed light on Jesus' ultimate act. *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, a 2008 Holocaust movie, is one of them.

How do you explain the Holocaust to an 8 year-old boy? How would it appear to him if he saw a concentration camp with his own eyes not knowing what it was? This is the premise of *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, based on the book by John Boyne. Although the story is told through the eyes of a boy, Bruno (Asa Butterfield), this movie is so powerful and emotionally moving that viewer discretion is recommended for pre-teens. But for teenagers and adults, this is a must-see film.

The movie opens with a happy scene. Bruno is running through a Berlin square followed by three friends, all pretending to be planes. This city is festooned with bright red German flags and swastikas. As they run carefree through the streets, they are juxtaposed with harsh reality: German soldiers restraining savage dogs rounding up Jewish families.

When Bruno's father, a German officer, gets promoted to be the commandant of a concentration camp Bruno sees it as a displacement from his friends. Arriving at the new home in the country, it is a stark contrast to the home they left. Where that was open and airy, classically defined; this new one looks more like a prison. Even the cinematography emphasizes his claustrophobic confinement: when we see Bruno on

the staircase he is behind full-length banister rails that make him look like a jail-bird.

Apart from all his friends, Bruno is lonely. When he discovers a way out of his own "prison compound," he discovers a place with a barbed wire fence and a little boy, Schmuel (Jack Scanlon), his own age sitting by it. This boy is wearing striped pajamas with a number. Bruno thinks it's a game. Little does he know...

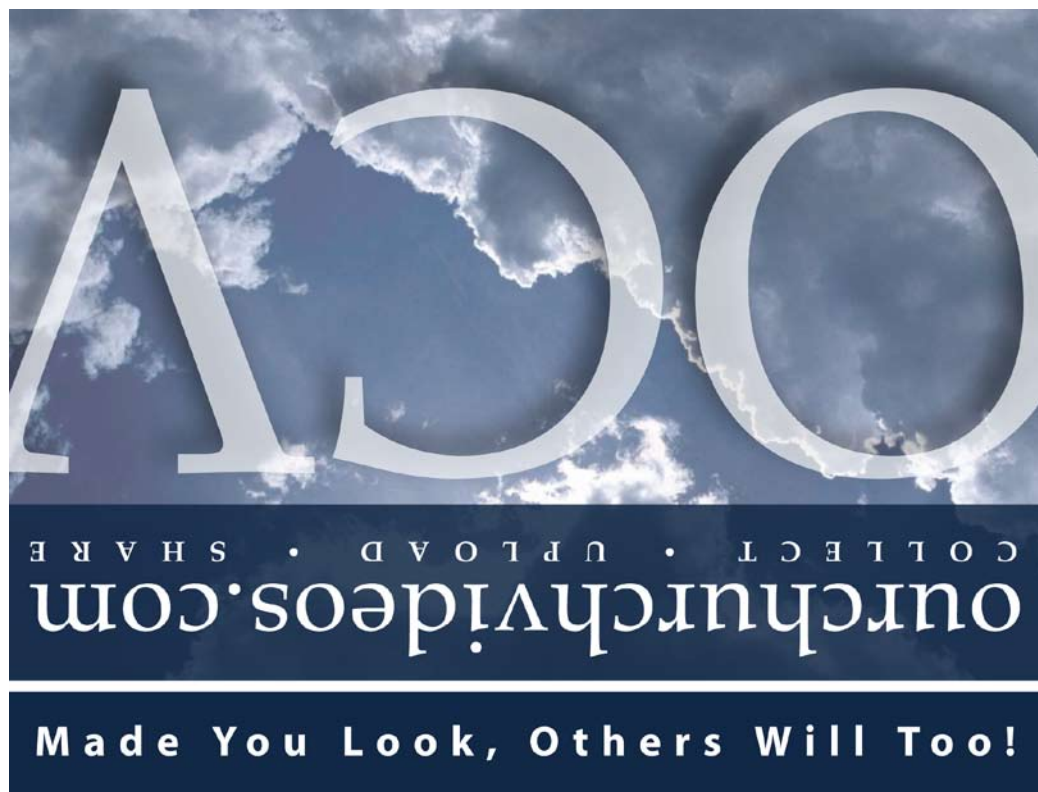
As the film progresses, so do the characters. Bruno begins to see that Schmuel and the others in pajamas are different, or at least are treated differently. He is confused. He likes his friend, Schmuel, but learns that he is a Jew, and Jews are supposed to be evil, animals, the cause of all that is wrong with Germany. Meanwhile, father (David Thewliss, Lupin in the Harry Potter movies), is simply doing his duty serving his country, unquestioningly killing the Jews in the gas chamber, while mother (Vera Farmiga, from *The Departed*) knows nothing. Life goes on for her until she finally discovers what the foul-smelling smoke from the camp really is. Then she is devastated and starts to come unglued.

The casting director for *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* really scored. Asa Butterfield, in only his second

feature film (his first was *Son of Rambow*) is astonishing. His large blue eyes, seen so often in close-ups of his face, convey an innocence and naivety. With the restrained direction of director and screenwriter Mark Herman, Butterfield looks like a veteran. The other boy, Scanlon, cast after Butterfield was in place, has excellent chemistry as the powerless and hungry friend. This is his first feature and certainly won't be his last. The two adults hold their own, too. Thewliss eschews cliché in his role, playing the commandant not as a total monster but as a person who loves his family while slowly sliding down the slick slope of sin and evil. He based this performance on the autobiography of Rudolph Höß, commandant of Auschwitz, written during the Nuremberg trials. But Farmiga, as mother, shows perhaps how some Germans must have felt, truly conflicted about the awfulness of Hitler's "final solution."

The screenplay avoids stereotypes and portrays the Germans as multi-dimensional characters, real people who could convince themselves that what they were doing was right. None in the film was completely evil, none was completely good. Even Bruno, the hero throughout, lies to save himself at one point, at a terrible cost to another.

The *Boy in the Striped Pajamas* is indeed a staggering and compelling story. Slow to begin with, it has a subtle pace but by the last 20 minutes of the final act, its momentum is unstoppable. It moves toward a climax that is inevitable and unavoidable, but still staggeringly shocking. When the camera lingers on a static image in the closing scene, I was left breathless and stayed rooted to my seat.



The Holocaust has been the focus of other movies, such as Steven Spielberg's epic *Schindler's List*, winner of the 1994 Best Picture Oscar (and six other Oscars). Indeed, the 1999 Best Foreign Picture Oscar-winner, *Life is Beautiful*, dealt with a boy in a concentration camp. But this is a deadly serious movie, and it stands up with these two modern classics.

There are a number of ethical and moral issues addressed in this film, but three stands out. First, the dehumanizing treatment of the Jews as evil sub-humans is obviously morally abhorrent. Jews are people just as all humans are people. We are all made in the image of God, regardless of race, sex, color or creed (Gen. 1:26-27). To treat people with brutality, even killing them because of their religion, is a sin and a crime that cannot be condoned. It goes against everything that Jesus, a Jew himself, taught. It must be resisted and vigorously opposed. If the 20th century infamously gave us the genocide of the Jews, the Hutu-led Rwandan genocide of the Tutsis, and the Bosnian genocide by the Serbs the 21st century has not started much better. Darfur, Sudan,



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remains a center of conflict and killing. The root of the issue is the pervasiveness of sin in the human heart. But genocide is fueled by the language of hate and the use of polarizing propaganda, leading to separation and extermination. The solution is radical, self-giving, division-destroying love.

Through Bruno we also get a picture of an innocent who wants to place himself beside, associate with, and even take the place of "a sinner". This is a beautiful image of Jesus, the innocent but suffering servant of Isaiah 53. He gave up his place of honor and power at the side of his Father to take on the form of humanity (Phil. 2:6-8). He came alongside us, lived with us as Immanuel, literally God with us (Matt. 1:23). He took our place (1 Pet. 2:24). In him and in him alone we can find our salvation (John 14:6, Acts 4:12).

Finally, Bruno's friendship with Schmucl is a forbidden friendship. Despite clear instruction to not befriend Jews, he sees beyond labels to the true hu-

manity beneath. Bruno was a soul in need of company. And Schmucl was in a similar condition. Both, in their own ways, were victims of incarceration. Schmucl was incarcerated physically. Bruno was a prisoner of his father's making, isolated from friends and imprisoned in the jail cell of racial hatred and intolerance. Yet, they formed an unlikely friendship, a kinship that traversed the barbed wire that separated them.

How often do we let labels or emotions separate us from others? How often do we find ourselves alone and wonder why? What is the cause of our imprisonment? Is it ourselves or is it imposed on us from others? If platonic and pure, how can a friendship really be forbidden? Let's be like Bruno. By becoming like a child, perhaps we can gain or strengthen our faith in God and our love for others (Matt. 18:4).