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'The Flat' is a fascinating detective story

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Oct. 12, 2012 NCR Today

"The Flat," an award-winning documentary, follows the story of Israeli documentary filmmaker Arnon Goldfinger, whose 98-year-old grandmother died in Tel Aviv a few years ago, sparking a search to understand who the woman really was.

Along with Goldfinger's mother, Gerta, his siblings and his cousins, he begins to go through the woman's flat, especially her papers and photographs.

In the flat, which Goldfinger describes as "Berlin in an apartment," they discover dozens of pairs of aged evening gloves, dress shoes, documents, books and photographs collected over 70 years. Gerta inspects every document before throwing them away, not interested in old letters and other items. The family fills dozens of trash bags with his grandmother's things. A reseller takes the furniture and books.

Yet two artifacts surface that capture Goldfinger's attention. One is a Nazi newspaper from 1934, *Der Angriff* ("The Attack," the worst of Nazi newspapers). The featured story is about an SS officer, Leopold von Mildenstein, who traveled with his wife and a Jewish couple to Palestine. The Jewish couple was Goldfinger's grandparents, Kurt and Gerta Tuchler. It is astonishing news to Goldfinger, who knew nothing of his grandparents' past.

The second artifact to capture Goldfinger's attention is a magazine in the flat that leads Goldfinger to seek out journalists who interviewed his grandmother in the 1980s. They wrote about the German Zionist Federation, to which his grandparents belonged. The writers still have the tiny travel photos that appeared in the magazine, which they give to Goldfinger. In the photos, the two couples look like trendy German tourists of the day.

One day, Gerta finds an envelope with the von Mildensteins' address in Germany. Goldfinger calls and speaks with their daughter, Edda, who is pleased to hear from the grandson of her parents' good friends. Goldfinger goes to visit, and Edda "presents her father as if he had no Nazi past." It is Edda who tells him about Susanna, his maternal great-grandmother, who would not leave Germany and was later killed in the Theresienstadt concentration camp in what is now the Czech Republic. Goldfinger realizes for the first time that he has a past, that his mother has only lived for the here and now and wants to keep it that way.

Goldfinger returns with his mother to visit Edda, but the second visit was not so welcoming because Goldfinger has dug deeper. Edda stalls, caught between courtesy and great discomfort.

The crux of this documentary is everything Goldfinger never knew about his family and everything his mother, a daughter of Zionist German Jews, and Edda, the daughter of an SS officer, refused to know or talk about.

There is so much more to this completely fascinating, simply told detective story. I want to read a book about it. In doing more research, I learned von Mildenstein was raised a Catholic, and I was deeply saddened, once again, at the part that Catholics played in the Holocaust.

The film could have been called "Cleaning Closets" because Goldfinger's grandparents and the von Mildensteins packed away a history neither of the daughters now wants to confront. It is better left alone to some, but not to Goldfinger, the one grandson to whom the past, the story, now belongs. He has found that "he could not relinquish the smallest piece of paper" from the flat.

"The Flat" has won numerous awards. It is 97 minutes long and is in English, German and Hebrew with English subtitles. It opened Thursday in limited release.

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