

## The Counterfeiters

Austria / Germany 2007 99 min

### Credits

Director Stefan Ruzowitzky  
 Writers Adolf Burger,  
 Stefan Ruzowitzky  
 Original Music Marius Ruhland  
 Cinematography Benedict Neuenfels  
 Film Editing Britta Nahler

Salomon Sorowitsch Karl Markovics  
 Adolf Burger August Diehl  
 Sturmabführer Friedrich Herzog  
 Devid Striesow  
 Hauptscharführer Holst

Martin Brambach ..  
 Dr. Klinger August Zirner  
 Atze Veit Stübner  
 Kolya Karloff Sebastian Urzendowsky  
 Zilinski Andreas Schmidt  
 Dr. Viktor Hahn Tilo Prückner  
 Loszek Lenn Kudrjawizki  
 Abramovic Norman Stoffregen

### Synopsis

Berlin, 1936. Salomon 'Sal' Sorowitsch is a wealthy Jewish counterfeiter and bon vivant, who enjoys a luxurious lifestyle.

Sal is arrested by Herzog and sent to Mauthausen concentration camp, where he curries favour by painting portraits of the guards. He is transferred to Sachsenhausen, where he is met by Herzog, now heading the secret 'Operation Bernhard'. Sal is one of several Jewish prisoners brought in to forge vast quantities of sterling and dollars in order to flood the enemy economy and fill Nazi coffers. Working alongside him are Kolya, a young Russian artist, Loszek, who has lied about his skills to avoid execution, and Burger an idealistic printer whose wife remains in Auschwitz.

The Bernhard team are segregated from the other prisoners and given preferential treatment. They ignore the atrocities around them and successfully produce a convincing pound note - for which they are rewarded with a ping-pong table. Burger protests that they are funding the Nazi war effort and he sabotages efforts to produce a fake dollar, even though this puts the lives of the other men at risk. Sal goes behind Burger's back to make the counterfeit dollar in return for medicine for Kolya, who has TB, but Kolya is shot by a guard to prevent a TB epidemic. When the war ends, the men come face to face with their emaciated fellow prisoners. Unable to bear the guilt, Loszek commits suicide.



The idea of 'surviving' the Holocaust takes on many nuances in Stefan Ruzowitzky's stark and intriguing evocation of a largely unknown area of Second World War German history: the use of skilled prisoners to create counterfeit currency for Operation Bernhard, a plan to flood the British and American economies with fake cash. Ruzowitzky gives us Salomon Sorowitsch (Karl Markovics), a successful, Jewish forger in the pre-war Berlin of 1936 whose instinct for self-preservation is best summed up by his nonchalant attitude to the creeping pogrom: 'I am me – and the others are the others.'

Hours later, Salomon is arrested, and for the rest of the '30s and until the end of the war he finds himself putting his skills to a different use. He discovers that sketching Nazi officers brings a reward of better food, and soon his hosts transfer him to the 'golden cage', a hot-house of industry in the corner of a camp where uptight ex-bankers and criminals collude in producing dodgy notes in an environment of relative comfort. The film's core dilemma emerges when the team are on the verge of cracking the dollar: if they continue, will they betray whatever political instincts they have left? And, if they succeed, will they become surplus to requirements and lose their privileges or, worse, be killed?

It's the latter quandry which highlights some of the film's curious and daring psychologies. We're well-versed in Holocaust dramas in which the Nazis and the Jews are treated as separate, homogeneous entities; here, things are more complex. War doesn't bestow a new personality on Salomon, it simply offers a new context within which this lone gun – his background is strikingly sketchy – must survive. More importantly, Ruzowitzky is aware that not all moral standards can survive the perversity of the Holocaust. As such, we're invited to observe the behaviour in this studio within the greater theatre of war and rarely to judge, even when it comes to the Nazis. Ruzowitzky handles this perspective to excellent effect: we only see what Salomon sees – or, crucially, *wants* to see – even though we, like him, can hear the sound of gun-shots outside. He directs with urgency, lingering little, employing ample jolt-zooms and dousing his film in a colour palette that takes its cue from the grey stripes of the prisoners' uniforms.

**Dave Calhoun, Time Out London**