

## New Film Lets Germans Laugh With (Not at) Jews

By KIRSTEN GRIESHABER

**B**ERLIN, March 3 - It has been a while since Germans last laughed openly at a Jewish joke, especially one that pokes fun at Jews themselves. Sixty years after the Holocaust, most Germans still feel too guilty or insecure to address any Jewish matter in a lighthearted manner. But now a new movie is encouraging them to get rid of their postwar anxieties and join in for a good laugh.

Mixing slapstick humor and political incorrectness, "Alles auf Zucker!," or "Go for Zucker!," said to be the first German-Jewish comedy since World War II, has attracted huge audiences all over Germany. Its success suggests that humor could be an unconventional form of therapy for the strained relations between Jews and gentiles in Germany.

The movie, directed by Dani Levy, a German Jew who grew up in Switzerland, is a lively family comedy about a notorious East German gambler, who long ago distanced himself from his Jewish roots, and his Orthodox brother, who escaped to West Germany before the Berlin Wall was built.

The estranged brothers and their families meet for the first time in 40 years at their mother's funeral in Berlin. By the terms of her will they can inherit the family fortune only if they reconcile and mourn in the traditional Jewish way, by sitting shiva for seven days. The inevitable clash of secularism versus traditional religion paves the way for 90 minutes of quarrels, revealed family secrets and, eventually, a happy ending.

Since its opening on Jan. 6, more than 570,000 people have seen "Alles auf Zucker!," only the second ethnic film to become a box-office hit in Germany. The first, "[Head-On](#)," Fatih Akin's love story about a Turkish immigrant couple, was seen by 750,000 Germans last year and won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival in 2004. Only a few weeks after its release, "Alles auf Zucker!" was awarded the [Ernst Lubitsch](#) Prize for best German comedy by the Club of Berlin Film Journalists. "Levy's wonderfully incorrect comedy, which has been cast perfectly, makes fun both of itself and of Jewish life today," the German newspaper Die Welt wrote. "Mr. Levy portrays human neuroses and German -Jewish relations in a relaxed manner without being afraid to touch a taboo."

The weekly magazine Der Spiegel commented: "The audience is not laughing at the Jews but together with them. This is definitely a step in the right direction."

Paul Spiegel, the president of the Central Committee of Jews in Germany, publicly encouraged Germans to see the movie "because it helps bring Jews and non-Jews back on track to normality."

After movies like "[Schindler's List](#)," "[Life Is Beautiful](#)" and "[The Pianist](#)," it seems that Germans are relieved to watch a film that portrays Jews in a context other than the Holocaust.

"In my movie I don't want to show Jews as victims but as normal people like you and me who try to live their chaotic everyday lives like anybody else," Mr. Levy said during an interview at a coffee shop in Berlin. "They just happen to also be Jewish."

"One should never forget that 80 to 90 percent of all Germans have never met a Jew," Mr. Levy added. "Together with all the guilt feelings they have accumulated in the last 60 years because of the Holocaust, this creates an almost irrational fear of the Jews as a 'strange people.'"

Mr. Levy, 47, grew up in Switzerland. His mother escaped Nazi Germany as a young girl in 1939, and many of his relatives were murdered by the Germans. This did not stop him from moving to Berlin in 1980.

He was a founder of X-Filme, a production company known for blockbuster movies like "Good Bye, Lenin!" and "Run, Lola, Run." He also became one of Germany's most successful filmmakers.

Mr. Levy said one of his main goals was to tear down barriers. "Alles auf Zucker!" is the eighth in a series of films he has made dealing with Jewish themes.

"I always wanted to make a comedy because this genre allows me to play with the typical Jewish stereotypes," Mr. Levy said. "I am confronting the audience with their own prejudices and clichés, but in the end I make sure that they will love the characters of my movie."

The focus of the film is the two male leads -the gambler, Jaekie Zucker (Henry Hübchen), and his Orthodox brother, Samuel Zuckermann (Udo Samel) - but their spouses also provide plenty of material for jokes. Samuel's wife, Golda, played by Golda Tencer, a Yiddish theater star in Poland, is presented as a traditional Jewish mother who soon realizes that her brother-in-law's family is "as kosher as pork chops."

Jaekie's wife, Marlene, played by the leading German actress Hannelore Elsner, is not even Jewish. But since her husband has gambled away all their money, she is keen on the inheritance and pretends to be a good Jewish housewife. She spends hours trying to make her refrigerator kosher and reads books on Jewish habits and customs, but she never gets it quite right.

"I don't remember the last time I laughed so much during the shooting of a film," Ms. Elsner, 62, said in an interview. "We should have made this movie 10 years ago. It's had such a healing effect after all the pain the Nazis inflicted on us."

Still, it took Mr. Levy almost three years to raise the money he needed to make the film. With the financial support of two public television stations and a budget of 1.5 million euros (about \$2 million), he shot it in only 24 days.

"I was surprised how much opposition I faced when I pitched my screenplay to different organizations," Mr. Levy said. "The mere mentioning of the words 'Jewish comedy' made people shy away. Everyone was so afraid to appear anti-Semitic."

Distributors from Israel and Italy have bought the rights, a spokeswoman for X-Filme said, and the company is screening the film in the United States as it seeks distribution there.

To Mr. Levy, the most important achievement of his comedy is that it revives a tradition of Jewish humor that was once popular in German entertainment but was wiped out in the Holocaust.

"Sixty years after the liberation of Auschwitz, we know that the Nazis failed to kill the Jewish culture, their humor and soul," he said. "It has come alive on screens in Germany again."