

The Stanford Daily

Exploring Jews in Hitler's army: One-man play "The Mitzvah" comes to Stanford

by
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Last Monday night, Roger Grunwald – the child of a Holocaust survivor – brought his thought-provoking one-man play "The Mitzvah" to Hillel on Stanford campus. Presented the day before the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the play and the lecture following it resonated academically and personally with many in the audience. In particular, Grunwald examines prejudice and identity by focusing on Mischlinge serving in Hitler's army during the war.

Mischling. That was the term used during the Third Reich to describe people with mixed ancestry – Jewish and Aryan. Some of these were "reclassified" as Germans by Hitler's own hand during World War II, through a process called *Deutschblütigkeitserklärung*, or a German Blood Certificate. If you had one or two Jewish grandparents, you were a Mischling. If you had three or four, you were a Jew. Most of the Mischlinge were just as unlucky as "full" Jews, but if you had a talent the Third Reich found useful, you could be declared a German (conditionally, that is – until the end of the war).

Grunwald opens a window into the life of a Mischling soldier, the fictional Christoph Rosenberg, serving as a lieutenant in the German army. We see how Rosenberg's life interacts with Schmuël Berkowicz, a Polish Jew from Bialystock who ends up working as a doctor in Auschwitz. At one crucial moment, Rosenberg makes a decision to put a tortured woman out of her

pain, but also to end the life of the German soldier torturing her. In doing so, he ultimately dooms himself. Grunwald certainly does an admirable job shifting from each of his three main characters to the next, but the focus of this event really isn't the play. He wears a simple but effective

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soldier's costume, but there isn't really lighting or set design. The focus is to educate and connect with his audience. This is why he succeeds beyond a shadow of a doubt. We learn in his lecture of the historical accuracies about how Hitler treated Mischlinge. We hear about the deep familial connection to the Holocaust that Grunwald bears, and about how conversations with his mother and his aunt informed his creation of the play.

It is truly valuable to bring events like this to campus, as Hillel, The Taube Center for Jewish Studies, Theater and Performance Studies and the Stanford Jewish Students Association came together to do. I wish more students had been in the audience. With two Jewish grandparents, I would

have been a Mischling during Hitler's time. "The Mitzvah" really shows the way that labels were forced on people to otherize them, to deem them less worthy. Particularly with the anniversary of Auschwitz's liberation landing this week, this horror is important for us to remember.

"The Mitzvah" is meant to provoke that reminder, but also to give us a perspective on a facet of Jewish identity that is discussed less when we look back at the Holocaust. It's meant to be performed with the subsequent lecture and question-and-answer session, because "The Mitzvah" isn't really about theater. It's about drama and storytelling as vehicles to learn, to educate, to remember, and to prevent.

Learn more about The Mitzvah Project here.

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Roger Grunwald as German half-Jew Christoph Rosenberg in THE MITZVAH, a one-person drama.