

# NEW YORKER

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Jaecki Zucker (Henry Hübchen), the hero of the German comedy “Go for Zucker,” loses his family when the Berlin Wall goes up, in 1961. His mother and his brother, Samuel, leave East Berlin for Frankfurt and capitalism, while fourteen-year-old Jaecki, né Jakob Zuckermann, stays behind, drops his Jewish identity, settles in as a Communist, and eventually turns himself into a celebrity sports announcer. More than forty years go by, Communism has collapsed, and Jaecki is out of a job. He has become, in his own words, a “reunification loser”—he just gets by on his skills as a pool hustler. Widely described as the first Jewish comedy made in Germany since the Second World War, “Go for Zucker” was an enormous hit there last year, and part of the reason must be that Jaecki, a liar, a drinker, and a gambler, has so much life in him that he’s impossible to dislike. Living completely without shame is a kind of liberation, and the veteran German theatre and film actor Henry Hübchen gives this middle-aged rogue a Bellovian gusto. Hübchen has the eyes of a gentle bull and a teen-ager’s manic energy; he turns Jaecki into a showoff who admires his own succulent flesh. Well into his fifties, Jaecki comes home after a night spent gambling and brawling, his face bruised, and promises his worn-out wife (Hannelore Elsner) that he will make amends. She doesn’t believe him, but, with a hustler’s self-approving logic, he expects her to appreciate his effort. Jaecki, who stages several fake heart attacks in the course of the movie, is always playing the long odds, and for him losing is just a form of winning. A loser, after all, is still in the game. Not playing is the only defeat Jaecki could imagine.

Jaecki’s mother dies, and the Orthodox Samuel (Udo Samel), whom Jaecki hasn’t spoken to in decades, shows up in Berlin with his messy family: his large wife; his ultra-devout son, with black beard and hat; and his wild, man-eating daughter. The two brothers, according to their mother’s will, can inherit her estate only if they agree to sit shiva with their families under a rabbi’s supervision and resolve their differences. Jaecki summons his own children, a repressed bank officer and a lesbian physical therapist. The stage is set for farce. In some ways, “Go for Zucker” resembles a commercial American comedy like Jay Roach’s “Meet the Fockers.” Once again, the members of two families—one sensual and irreverent, the other severe and pious—are forced to break bread and endure each other’s company. Roach, working in sunshiny Florida, jammed together Christians and Jews, but these two families are both Jewish, and they meet in gray, damp Berlin, where they have to stay indoors and, literally, sit. The comedy plays out with the peculiar irritable rancor of intimacy.

The writer-director of “Go for Zucker,” Dani Levy, is a forty-eight-year-old German Jew who was born in Switzerland (his mother got out of Berlin in 1939). As a teen-ager, he spent some time as a circus clown, then, in 1980, he moved to Berlin and, after a few years, got into filmmaking. He’s an entertainer who is not above using obvious comedy tropes now and then—Samuel, for instance, inadvertently gets high on Ecstasy and is soothed into happiness by a Palestinian party girl. That’s a little cheap, but, in general, Levy does not caricature Samuel, an intelligent if priggish man who is not entirely wrong

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in his contempt for the dissipated Jaecki. The quarrel between the two brothers has Biblical overtones, yet Levy avoids cliché by sending the polarities spinning: he and his co-writer, Holger Franke, turn the Communist Jaecki into a “capitalist” personality, all appetite and greed, and they give the capitalist Samuel an austere and forbidding “Communist” temperament. Levy makes further mischief by giving the brothers’ children a hidden sexual history. The males of the next generation turn inward, toward greater orthodoxy and fear, while the women become adventurers, and the cousins begin to find each other in memories of their tangled past, or in bed. A split family forced to sit shiva together is, of course, a metaphor for the awkward recent years of German reunification, and the film’s German audience was apparently amused by the thought that a Jewish family serves as the allegorical framework of their dilemma.

Levy shot “Zucker” for German television, in 16-mm., but, after screening it a few times for audiences, he realized he had made something that would play in theatres. The movie is raw-looking, and Levy throws the camera around as if it were a Teddy bear, but he controls the actors with calm professional skill—all the characters, beautifully developed in short scenes, are touching and slightly absurd at the same time. The family has to stay put, and poor Jaecki, forced to sit shiva during a big-money pool tournament, finally suffers a real heart attack, from frustration. “Go for Zucker,” with a Jewish operator as its hero, pushes way past political correctness—another reason, no doubt, that the movie was a hit. Jews, it seems, are capable of slyness and money-grubbing, and they may harp on old grievances. Since it’s virtually impossible to make any kind of farce without characters who lie, love money, nurse grudges, and so on, Jewish comedy, in Levy’s version, is now part of the human comedy. For the movie’s home audience, part of the excitement was the new experience of hearing Jewish jokes, and jokes about Jews, in a land that once thought it could do without either. There’s a lot to be said for the recent public politeness in Germany about Jews, but there’s a lot more to be said for comedy. Watching the antic inventions of “Go for Zucker,” I was moved by the thought that Jews have achieved a kind of Germanness again, and even more moved by the thought that Germans have achieved a kind of Jewishness again. Dani Levy’s next movie, with perfect appropriateness, is described in the press notes as a “comedy about Hitler.”