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CABARET AND THE HOLOCAUST

It is post-World War I Berlin, 1929-30, and the Nazis are on the rise. It is a time of great political instability in Germany, with Nazi and Communist factions fighting to take control of the newly formed Weimar government. Inflation is out of control; bread lines stretch for blocks, unemployment and crime rates are high, and poverty is widespread.

Weimar Berlin is a city in chaos where the old rules no longer apply. Prostitution is rife, and drugs are freely available. New ideas about art, money, gender, and sexuality are pushing the accepted limits and are brought to life on cabaret stages. *Willkommen* to the world of *Cabaret*.

The play foreshadows the ominous political developments of the Nazi regime. When a young waiter starts to sing "Tomorrow Belongs to Me," we are haunted by the Nazi vision for the future – a *Judenrein* ("Jewish-free") future – ethnically cleansed.

Yet Herr Schultz, the Jewish grocer, remains steadfastly confident that the bad times will soon pass. After all, he is German too. Most Jews made the best of the new situation – a choice that ultimately proved fatal.

As the play progresses and the horrors gain momentum, many characters stay locked in denial or self-interest. "Politics? But what has that to do with us?" Sally says, when Cliff practically begs her to pay attention to the rise of Nazism. Cliff responds, "If you're not against all this, you're for it. Or you might as well be."

Even Frau Schneider folds to societal pressures when she chooses not to marry Herr Schultz because he is Jewish, even though this might be her last chance at marital happiness.

When the Nazis ultimately took power in 1933, they cracked down on "decadent" art. Cabaret writers and performers were among their first victims, and many spent the Nazi era in exile or in concentration camps.

At its core, *Cabaret* is a devastating critique of apathy. It can serve as a mirror for us all. So listen, be entertained, and then ask the hard questions: How could this have happened in a civilized society? What would I have done in this situation? How can I help ensure it never happens again?

It didn't just happen; it was a gradual slope. And this is the danger. The slope is so gradual and insidious, that it can happen anywhere. And unless it's happening to you, the others [who are sitting and keeping quiet] don't even notice it. This is why when you see something, you have to speak up.

-Robert May, Holocaust Survivor, Birmingham