

Obligations Above and Beyond: Remembering Harry Warner

by Betty Warner Sheinbaum

Warner Bros. was a family company. It was owned and run by four brothers—brothers totally different in temperament and attitude. My father Harry was the oldest and was considered the patriarch. He ran the family with an iron hand. He was a workaholic. From age seven he helped his father by selling newspapers, breaking in horses, as a cobbler and then as a butcher. He was self-educated and was street smart. There were twelve children born to his mother and father. He was the oldest and Jack was the youngest. The family's life took a turn when a tenant in a room over their grocery store skipped town, leaving a magic lantern behind. He and his brothers Sam and Albert were intrigued by the picture machine and decided to hire the local funeral parlor (when it wasn't being used), hanging up a sheet to show the current "film." They charged five cents admission—my aunt played the piano and my Uncle Jack was asked to sing between shows to empty out the theater for the next audience.

In the 1920s, Warner Bros. actually started making their own films in Astoria, New York so they could have material to show in the theaters they were acquiring. My father loved music, opera, theater and thought these were wonderful subjects to distribute on a mass basis. He always felt movies were supposed to educate as well as entertain.

When in 1923 he decided to come out to Los Angeles, he bought a small studio and then another larger studio, which he expected his son Lewis to run. Unfortunately, Lewis died shortly after and Jack

was designated in charge of production. Harry, it is said, knew every employee's name and those of their family. It is said he picked up nails to be used again, and turned off lights in the office to save electricity. Jack felt his writers should work 9 to 5 in an office at the studio and actors should be seen and do as they were told.

By 1927, Sam Warner and Nathan Levinson helped invent sound and had made *Don Juan* and *The Jazz Singer*. This revolutionized the film business. The studio grew to make sixty pictures a year under the guidance of twelve producers and supervisors and many fine writers.

Harry lived on a ranch surrounded by his family and animals, Jack on a Beverly Hills estate in true Hollywood style.

My father was a very serious, moral man. He was the company's conscience and driving force. It was up to him to provide the money and watch carefully what films were being made. He dealt with bankers constantly as the studio was in constant need of funds to continue productions. Harry loved being in America, away from the frequent pogroms against Jews in his native Poland. The U.S. was the "land of opportunity." He often spoke of his responsibilities as a filmmaker and insisted on making films about the Constitution and the Founding Fathers and people like Louis Pasteur, Emile Zola, the prison system, the underworld and other socially committed dramas.

◀ 4. Harry Warner

One of his responsibilities was to open film exchanges for the distribution of Warner Bros. films all over the world. He spent much time in Europe, especially Berlin, and was well aware of what was happening with the rise of Hitler, fascism and anti-Semitism. He warned those in the exchange of these political changes and offered to help the Jews working for him to leave Germany. He soon decided to close the exchange down so as not to do business with Hitler. His was the first company to do so and he warned other American film companies of the political situation. No one listened and other studios continued to do business until the Germans took them over in 1936, banning all American films.

When he returned to Hollywood from his trip, he expressed his concerns and encouraged Jack to make such films as *My Four Years in Germany*, *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* and *Mission to Moscow*. He gave speeches, wrote articles and sent letters to FDR about Germany. In the 1930s there was the Great Depression, social displacement, political unrest and crime. I recall the political atmosphere in the 30s was both isolationist and anti-communist. It took FDR years to bring business and the public around to acknowledging that fascism might be as dangerous as communism and as destructive to our democracy, even though they saw Germany using Spain as a weapon-testing ground, killing thousands of civilians. In the U.S., premature anti-fascism was treated as pro-communism and unpatriotic, but Harry and Jack embarked on a crusade to alert Americans about the growing menace of Nazism.

He was the first producer to make a definite declaration on the course the industry should take during the war, in spite of pressure to produce escapist films. I love this article and am proud of my father's words written in March 1939. There are many appropriate ideas still to be heeded today:

The men and women who make a nation's entertainment have obligations above and beyond their primary commercial objective, which is the box office. In the long run Hollywood, collectively, and producing companies individually, will succeed or fail, in my opinion, exactly in the proportion in which they recognize these obligations.

The problems of production, distribution and exhibition of motion pictures are many and varied. But with the mechanism of our industry fairly well established, we can give earnest consideration to

our implied duties to ethics, patriotism and the fundamental rights of individuals.

The motion picture producer shares this obligation with the schools, the churches, the service organizations of all kinds, which stand for tolerance, for decent thinking and fair relations with the rest of mankind. I do not mean that we should attempt, in the theater, to teach all the lessons, preach all the sermons or solve all the political problems of the world.

We cannot do this but we can and should give a helping hand to the causes of good government and of fair play. The motion picture can be a great power for peace and good will or, if we shirk our obvious duty, it can stand idly by and let the world go to pot. I think we are making an honest effort to use the screen's influence for the greatest general good of humanity. I am proud that my own company has had some part in this.

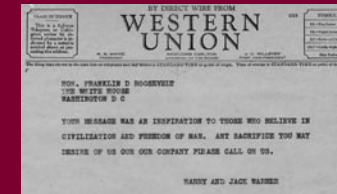
All producers feel that they have a duty, to the nation as well as to the industry, to help keep uppermost in the public's mind the advantages we all enjoy in this country. All of us recognize certain subtle dangers to our institutions and our principles of government in influences originating in the outside world.

Hollywood believes in America as firmly as any community or any business believes in it, and we possess the added advantage of being able to express our faith in the common language of the screen.

A motion picture involves a large sum of money and a great amount of effort on the part of many people. Several thousand artists, artisans, laborers and specialists have a hand in every production and each and every one of them tries his best to make a good picture.

I feel that America is putting its best foot forward in the world of nations because the Hollywood-made motion picture has given other peoples all over the world a reasonably true picture of America, extolling the values of its democratic principles and the advantages of living where personal liberties have not been curtailed.

There is an ever-present duty to educate, to stimulate and demonstrate the fundamentals of free government, free speech, religious tolerance, freedom of press, freedom of assembly and the greatest possible happiness for the greatest possible number. To that end our company and, I believe, our whole industry stands pledged—now and for the future.



5. Harry and Jack regularly offered “any sacrifice” of themselves and the studio to aid the country.



6. This *Variety* headline about Harry's speech was included with employee paychecks.



7. Betty Warner Sheinbaum at the Warners' War exhibition in 2003.

Harry added:

The screen should attempt to explain the why and wherefore of the current struggle and not repeat on a formula proved profitable. There are forces in this land who would like people to live in darkness. I take issue—it's no one's assignment not to reason why, and just to do or die. It is the people who are fighting this war—and it is the people who must be given every opportunity to examine each why and wherefore.¹

In front of the Nye Committee, he said:

I am opposed to Nazism. I abhor and detest every principle and practice of the Nazi movement. To me, Nazism typifies the very opposite of the kind of life every decent man, woman and child wants to live. I believe Nazism is a world revolution whose ultimate objective is to destroy our democracy, wipe out our religion and enslave our people—just as Germany has destroyed and enslaved Poland, Belgium, Holland, France and all the other countries. I am ready to give myself and all my personal resources to aid in the defeat of the Nazi menace to the American people. I have always believed that every citizen has the right to express his views. I have done so both among my friends and associates and publicly to the press. I stand on my public record of the last eight years.

But for the record of the hearing and to avoid misrepresentation, I should like to summarize my convictions. They are not newly-found convictions. They are deep-rooted. While I am opposed to Nazism, I deny that the pictures produced by my company are “propaganda” as has been alleged. Senator Nye has said that our

picture, *Sergeant York*, is designed to create war hysteria. Senator Clark has added *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* to the isolationist blacklist. John T. Flynn, in turn, has added *Underground*. These witnesses have not seen these pictures, so I cannot imagine how they can judge them. Apparently our accusers desire that we change our policy of picturing accurately world affairs and the national defense program. This, Warner Bros. will never do. This, I am sure the Congress would not want us to do. This, I am certain the public would not tolerate.

Warner Bros. has been producing pictures on current affairs for over twenty years and our present policies are not different than before there was a Hitler menace. We receive no orders, no suggestions—direct or indirect—from the Administration. It is true that Warner Bros. has tried to cooperate with the national defense program. It is true that Warner Bros., over a period of eight years, has made feature pictures concerning our Army, Navy and Air Force. It is true that we have made a series of shorts portraying the lives of American heroes. To do this, we needed no urging from the government and we would be ashamed if the government would have to make such a request of us. We have produced these pictures voluntarily and proudly.²

NOTES

1. *Christian Science Monitor* (March 16, 1939).
2. Hearing Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Interstate Commerce, United States Senate. Moving Picture and Radio Propaganda. September 25, 1941. USC Warner Bros. Archives, Box 2947,812-815.