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# The Prodigal Son (1934)

**The Prodigal Son** is a 1934 emigrant drama directed by Luis Trenker , set in the mountains, the Alps , and the big city, New York . It was filmed in the Dolomites , on the Arlberg <sup>[2]</sup> and in the streets of New York.

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## Storyline

Tonio Feuersinger, the daring son of an old farming family, lives a life that is not very varied in his South Tyrolean homeland. At the party after a ski race, which he and two friends from his village won, he meets Lilian, the American millionaire's daughter, and her father, who donated the main prize. Her father sees the ancient sun mask of the Rauhnahtskönig at a wood carver and wants to buy it. Because it is not for sale, he orders a copy of it. Lilian hires Tonio and his friend Jörg for a summit climb. When climbing up a steep ridge, the snow suddenly gives way. Tonio falls on one side, Lilian and Jörg on the other. Under the most difficult high alpine conditions, Tonio manages to get Lilian and Jörg up. Tonio and Lilian escape unscathed, while Jörg dies. Because of this misfortune, Lilian and her father leave early. Now that he has got to know the "big wide world" in Lilian's person, Tonio wants more out of life and out of the supposed confines of mountain isolation.

### Movie

original title The lost Son



production Germany

country

original language German

Publishing year 1934

length 80 minutes

age rating FSK 12 <sup>[1]</sup>

Rod

directing Luis Trenker

script Luis Trenker, Arnold Ulitz , Reinhart Steinbicker

production Paul Kohner

music Giuseppe Becce

camera Albert Benitz Reimar Kuntze

cut Waldemar Gaede Andrew Marton

occupation

- Luis Trenker : Tonio Feuersinger
- Maria Andergast : Barbl Gudauner
- Marian Marsh : Lilian Williams
- Eduard Köck : Tonio's father

He quickly disregards all the villagers' warnings and a few weeks later leaves his familiar home and his girlfriend Barbl.

After arriving in New York, he goes to the address of the millionaire. The butler sees the simply dressed man and disowns the family. In the metropolis all his high-flying dreams have evaporated in no time. Tonio is initially unable to find work, no matter how hard he tries. Because he has no more money, he is thrown out of his attic room. Finally, through another homeless man, he finds work on a skyscraper construction site. His experience in mountaineering and his head for heights are an advantage when he has to work at great heights on the steel girders. After losing this job, he begins to neglect. He sneaks through the streets in torn clothes and sees a lot of misery in the streets and tenements. Hunger is his constant companion. To breastfeed him one day he steals a loaf of bread at a market. A policeman chasing him sees the emaciated figure greedily devour the bread and walks away. At the charitable food distribution, in front of which a long line has formed, she sings Salvation Army .

- Paul Henckels : teacher
- Bertl Schultes : Barbl's father
- Melanie Horeschowsky : Rosina
- FW Schröder-Schrom : Lilian's father
- Lore Schützendorf : a rough night girl
- Jimmie Fox : Tonio's American friend
- Emmerich Albert : first lumberjack
- Hans Jamnig : second lumberjack
- Luis Gerold : third lumberjack

Eventually he finds a job at Madison Square Garden. In a boxing match, he is a boxer's helper in a corner of the ring. When his opponent boxed unfairly and also knocked out the referee, he jumped into the ring. In a short boxing match, he knocks him out to the great cheers of the huge crowd Lilian, sitting in a box with her family and friends, recognizes him immediately. He now lives a carefree life among the city's rich. Tonio is now getting to know the downside of America, seeing the rich and beautiful living in luxury at sumptuous parties. Lilian loves him and confesses her love for him. His gaze falls on the copy of the sun mask by chance. Suddenly everything goes through his head. He realizes that this country of social contradictions and injustices cannot be his home, that the cold around him threatens to overwhelm him. he becomes aware

On December 24 he returns to his home village. He sees the old, familiar customs of his homeland, the carol singers , the masked figures for Rauhnacht and the burning piles of wood at the midsummer celebrations. His father invited the villagers to his barn for the Rauhnacht celebration. The unmarried girls walk past in a special festive robe and with carved masks in front of the Rauhnachtskönig, who chooses one of them as his bride. Barbl therefore does not want to take part in this festival. But when she finds out that Tonio is in the village, she gets her party dress from a chest and puts it on in haste. Tonio wants to pick her up and discovers the open chest. Now he knows what robe she is wearing. He borrows a wooden mask and runs to the barn. There he purposefully approaches Barbl and hugs her. After a discussion, both go to Christmas mass. The word of the old village teacher has come true: "He who never gets away, never comes home!" <sup>[3]</sup>

## Production

The film was planned under the working title *Solstice* . It was the last German production of the German branch of the Hollywood production company Universal Film and at the same time the last production activity of the Jew Paul Kohner , who was no longer well liked in the German Reich Adolf Hitler .

On November 1, 1933 <sup>[4]</sup> Trenker embarked in Cherbourg on the German passenger ship Bremen to New York, in order to record the documentary street impressions required for *The Prodigal Son* with a hidden camera in the coming weeks . In impressive scenes that captured staggering poverty and mass unemployment, he and his cameraman created images that, certainly in the spirit of the Nazi regime, documented the dramatic dark side of the USA, which was praised as the 'promised land' by numerous emigrants. <sup>[5]</sup>At the beginning and end, the director contrasts this supposedly soulless society, whose values in Trenker's film are based exclusively on dollars and cents, with dreamy, beautiful images of wintry, snowy and festively illuminated Alpine landscapes, which in turn seek to insinuate that the familiar homeland with its simple but honest people are preferable to the (humanly) cold strangers in the urban jungle.

The premiere of *The Prodigal Son* , which had already passed the censorship on June 29, 1934, did not take place until September 6, 1934 in Stuttgart . The Berlin premiere was on October 3, 1934.

In 1934, the film received the title "Artistically particularly valuable".

The 21-year-old leading actress Maria Andergast made her film debut here.

Herbert Ploberger , who made his film debut here, designed the costumes, Fritz Maurischat and Hans Minzloff the film structures. Fred Lyssa was the film's executive producer. Klaus von Rautenfeld made his debut as camera assistant on *The Prodigal Son* .

At the Venice Biennale in 1935, the film received the cup from the Italian Ministry of Popular Culture for the "ethically most important foreign film".

In 1945 the Allied military governments banned the showing of the film in Germany. The reason for this was certainly the image of American life at the time of the New Deal under Franklin D. Roosevelt , which the USA perceived as too negative , but possibly also the National Socialist blood-and-soil ideology of the blessing of the native soil.

Trenker himself commented on the idea behind *The Prodigal Son* but who in his wantlessness is greater and freer than the rich slave of millions of dollars. More and more, the line of action was internalized in the basic ideas of the faith of the mountain farmers, their love for the mountain home in general, in contrast to the stone world metropolis, whose ultimate meaning can only be chaos, the downfall..."<sup>[6]</sup>

## Criticism

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The film's large dictionary of characters called *The Prodigal Son* an "earthly homeland drama" <sup>[7]</sup> and also wrote about the film: "The story of a young man (Trenker) who leaves his alpine homeland to seek his fortune in America, in view of because of the mass unemployment there and finally returning home, to the mountains, was not well liked by the new brown rulers, mainly because of their intense religiosity." <sup>[5]</sup>

For Bucher's Encyclopedia of Film, Trenker's *The Prodigal Son* was "his best film". He succeeds there "in depicting the misery that a ski instructor who has ended up in America goes through, cruelly realistic images of the effects of the global economic crisis ... such as the American feature film consistently avoided." <sup>[8]</sup>

The website of the film magazine Cinema found: "Trenker's film symbolizes the forlornness of the individual through the contrast of the street canyons in Manhattan to the majestic Dolomite mountains" and called *The Prodigal Son* a "masterpiece by the Tyrolean author filmmaker" <sup>[9]</sup>.

"A Heimatfilm garnished with landscape shots from the Dolomites, whose convincing camera work contrasts the majestic mountains with the urban canyons of New York and makes the forlornness of the individual obvious."

– Lexicon of International Film <sup>[1]</sup>

## See also

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- List of German feature films premiered in the German Reich during the Nazi era

## Web Links

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- (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0025943/>)The *Prodigal Son* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0025943/>) at the Internet Movie Database
- *The Prodigal Son* (<https://www.filmportal.de/612240eaeaea4de6974241af987d8938>) at filmportal.de

## Einzelnachweise

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1. *Der verlorene Sohn*. (<https://www.filmdienst.de/film/details/28757>) In: *Lexikon des internationalen Films*. Filmdienst, abgerufen am 14. Oktober 2017.
2. Luis Trenker: Meine besten Geschichten, Herbig (1982), S. 297f.
3. Originalzitat aus Oskar Kalbus: Vom Werden deutscher Filmkunst. 2. Teil: Der Tonfilm. Berlin 1935, S. 115.
4. Filmarchiv Kay Weniger
5. Kay Weniger: *Das große Personenlexikon des Films. Die Schauspieler, Regisseure, Kameraleute, Produzenten, Komponisten, Drehbuchautoren, Filmarchitekten, Ausstatter, Kostümbildner, Cutter, Tontechniker, Maskenbildner und Special Effects Designer des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Band 8: T – Z. David Tomlinson – Theo Zwierski. Schwarzkopf & Schwarzkopf, Berlin 2001, ISBN 3-89602-340-3, S. 45.
6. zit. nach Kalbus: Vom Werden deutscher Filmkunst. S. 114 f.
7. Kay Weniger: *Das große Personenlexikon des Films. Die Schauspieler, Regisseure, Kameraleute, Produzenten, Komponisten, Drehbuchautoren, Filmarchitekten, Ausstatter, Kostümbildner, Cutter, Tontechniker, Maskenbildner und Special Effects Designer des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Band 1: A – C. Erik Aaes – Jack Carson. Schwarzkopf & Schwarzkopf, Berlin 2001, ISBN 3-89602-340-3, S. 94.
8. Buchers Enzyklopädie des Films, Verlag C. J. Bucher, Luzern und Frankfurt/M. 1977, S. 785.
9. *Der verlorene Sohn*. (<https://www.cinema.de/1334890>) In: *cinema*. Abgerufen am 26. Juni 2021.

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