

# PROSECUTING EVIL: THE EXTRAORDINARY WORLD OF BEN FERENCZ

(dir. Barry Avrich, 2018 – 83 mins)

It would be easy to say there are two types of people in the world: those who think it's good, and the ones who believe it's evil. But within those two antipodes exists an endless number of variations: people who obey corruption, believing it's fair; those who overlook suffering, in a bid to self-congratulate their own stagnant integrity; the folk who don't know what to make of any of it and drive themselves insane with confusion.

Hungarian-born Jewish lawyer Ben Ferencz doesn't subscribe to an arbitrary school of thought that sides with one judgement over another. Throughout his tireless career, from his Harvard days and his time served in the War to his pivotal role in the Nuremberg trials and the formation of the International Criminal Court, Ferencz has always dealt in facts: He was one of the first people to name a crime against humanity as such, and has been putting words into action to bring justice to the world ever since. With Ferencz, the only worthy tool to end wars is the law.

The documentary about Ferencz, *Prosecuting Evil: The Extraordinary World of Ben Ferencz*, offers a comprehensive review of the man's concrete impact on society. It's as much an understanding of his character as it is a lucid retelling of the things he saw and the changes he made. In just under 90 minutes, filmmaker Barry Avrich covers an expanse of critical moments in history with incisive clarity. Perhaps the film wouldn't transmit such an effective sense of urgency without such a firecracker of a subject, who, thrillingly, provides the backbone of the documentary with an interwoven testimony in his own words. Aged 98, Ben Ferencz directly addresses a 2010s audience with unambiguous intelligence and charm that has travelled over so many years of hatred, without ever giving up on the possibilities of peace.

On the heels of the Oscar-nominated portrait of Associate Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, *RBC*, it's clear that the appetite for a cinematic political education, out of the mouths of the stalwarts of the last century, is still wide. Let's ignore the contemporary cultural sphere in which the influence of a trailblazing activist is retouched to fit the vision of lifeless memes and memorabilia (RBC-branded t-shirts are currently going for £14.99 on Amazon) – it's through a sober explanation of the progress achieved thus far that a new generation can be galvanised to do better.

The story of Ferencz and his boundless chutzpah borderlines magical, as his rags-to-riches story still hasn't seen a happy ending – simply because it's still ongoing. His scholarship to study Criminal Law at Harvard quickly suggested greatness, and his appointment as the Chief Prosecutor in the Einsatzgruppen Case during the Nuremberg Trials still stands as one of the most revolutionary achievements he is remembered by. But as another interviewee explains in the film, what's most astonishing is that Ferencz's early achievements only marked the beginning of his determination.

Ben Ferencz is no one-trick pony. His mission is one that echoes around the globe, forcing the faces of good and evil to confront each other before it's too late. There's nothing hyperbolic about the seriousness of appropriate punishment, when however many thousands of witnesses can't come to the stand because they've had to die. Ferencz is a good man, a tireless one who has seen enough evil to know that accountability matters if we ever want these wars to end. Towards the end of the film, there's a sense that Avrich has asked his subject something about an instruction to give his audience. Ferencz's smile waivers, and his voice hardens. He sighs, "The time has come, guys, to stop this killing".