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Screening Auschwitz

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Introduction

This study, about the early screen representation of Auschwitz—the “capital of the Holocaust”¹—is a continuation of my previous research that resulted in the book *Polish Film and the Holocaust: Politics and Memory*, published in 2012.² That book included a chapter on *The Last Stage* (1948, also known under the title *The Last Stop, Ostatni etap*), directed by Auschwitz survivor Wanda Jakubowska (1907–1998). The film’s cinematic, political, and ideological layers warrant a more detailed monograph.

In *The Last Stage*, Jakubowska depicted the monstrosity of *Konzentrationslager* Auschwitz-Birkenau and drew on her own camp experiences to portray the factory of death. She made her film with the significant participation of other Auschwitz survivors, including the German communist Gerda Schneider, who coscripted the film.

With its pioneering, powerful dramatization of the camp experience, *The Last Stage* established several quasi-documentary themes easily discernible in later Holocaust narratives: the dark, realistic images of the camp (the film was shot on location in Auschwitz-Birkenau); the passionate moral appeal; and the clear divisions between victims and victimizers. Jakubowska’s film shaped the future representation of Nazi German concentration camps. It also introduced the images of camp life that are now archetypal and notable in numerous films about the Holocaust and the “concentrationary universe” (*l’univers concentrationnaire*). These images include, among others, morning and evening roll calls on the *Appelplatz*; the arrival of a transport train at Auschwitz II (*Vernichtungslager* Birkenau)—a steam locomotive slowly moving, in a thick fog, through the “death gate” toward the armed SS guards with dogs; the separation of families upon their arrival at the Birkenau unloading ramp; the tracking shot over the belongings left by the gassed camp victims; shots of crowded prisoners’ barracks; and the juxtaposition of the camp orchestra playing

classical music with the selection process for the gas chambers. These and other images reinforced the depiction of Nazi German concentration camps, and their influence is discernible in subsequent American films, such as George Stevens's *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959), Alan Pakula's *Sophie's Choice* (1982), and Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993). Scenes from *The Last Stage* are also present (without acknowledgment and, interestingly, as actual documentary footage from the camp) in films such as Alain Resnais's classic essay on memory, *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et Brouillard*, 1955).

Undoubtedly, *The Last Stage* remains the “definitive film about Auschwitz,”³ a seminal work about the Holocaust, and a prototype for future Holocaust cinematic narratives. Stressing the need to record her Auschwitz experiences, Jakubowska herself wrote in 1951:

“This grinding sound needs to be recorded separately.” I remember that I said it loudly to my friend from the Pawiak prison, Danusia Markowska, when the gate at the Birkenau (Auschwitz) camp closed behind our transport. I said it without thinking, and at the same time I realized that I made a decision to make a film about Auschwitz at the very moment of arriving there.⁴

Here and in several other interviews, Jakubowska voiced her urge to record, to tell the truth about Auschwitz-Birkenau, to commemorate the dead, and to offer a warning against the repetition of this history. The need to represent the horrors of Auschwitz on film was also strongly posulated by a number of other camp survivors. Krystyna Żywulska wrote the following after the film's release:

During an epidemic of typhus in Auschwitz, one of my female friends, looking around with wild eyes at the *Revier* barrack [camp sickbay], full of moans and dying, whispered desperately: “Who is going to believe all this, who will express this and how?” Then she added with an already distant, strange voice: “Perhaps only a film, just a film.” And with some vague vision of this film, which will be a reflection of her suffering, she died in peace.⁵

While not a flawless work, *The Last Stage* nonetheless deserves pioneer status with its documentary feel and searing images, and enjoys a promi-

ment place in the history of cinema as well as in our understanding of the past. In addition to serving as a witness of war atrocities, it is also a testimony to the postwar political climate and Jakubowska's own communist biases. Similar to several other works produced immediately after World War II, this film is not predominantly centered on presenting the wartime extermination of European Jewry. Rather, it emphasizes the tragedy of nation-states subjected to Nazi German exterminatory policies, and serves as a study, and visual indictment, of the "concentrationary universe." I agree with Stuart Liebman who comments that *The Last Stage* is "an illuminating document of a period when artists' needs to render the horror were constrained by political exigencies that made such films possible yet which concertedly, if subtly, twisted the truth. Indeed, the film's projection of postwar political realities onto the facts of history does compromise somewhat the magnitude of its achievements."⁶

Jakubowska's film also reflected the status of postwar debates about Auschwitz and early attempts to memorialize the former Nazi German camp. Writing in 1974 about his own experiences, the Polish film scholar and Auschwitz survivor Bolesław Lewicki emphasized that *The Last Stage* created the method of representing "the horrors of the concentration camps—as a kind of crescendo of pathos and symbolism."⁷ The proximity of the traumatic experience, Jakubowska's own Marxist beliefs, and the policy of the new Polish communist regime trying to find its own voice within the tightly controlled Soviet eastern bloc all influenced the final shape of the film. Its historical accuracy was compromised by serving the Stalinist version of history. As a consequence, the present work is also a study about the post-World War II politics surrounding the commemoration of Auschwitz on screen.

Despite the importance of Jakubowska's film, this topic has not been the focus of a systematic book-length study. References to *The Last Stage*, however, appear in several books in English about the screen representation of the Holocaust—for instance, in Annette Insdorf's groundbreaking monograph *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*, Ilan Avisar's *Screening the Holocaust: Cinema's Images of the Unimaginable*, and Omer Bartov's *The "Jew" in Cinema: From The Golem to Don't Touch My Holocaust*.⁸ Infrequent insightful articles in English on the subject have been written by scholars such as Stuart Liebman and Hanno Loewy.⁹ Surprisingly, there is not a single book in Polish devoted to this classic film, although the first biography of Jakubowska was recently pub-

lished by Monika Talarczyk-Gubała.¹⁰ A small group of Polish scholars, including most importantly Alina Madej and Tadeusz Lubelski, have published essays about the film along with interviews with the director herself.¹¹ Although the above-mentioned works deal with *The Last Stage*, the topic has been awaiting an in-depth historical treatment.

In film criticism, *The Last Stage* is often discussed as “a model for other numerous, ideologically-oriented representations of victimhood and heroism under Nazi rule.”¹² This is—it has to be emphasized again—a pioneering work, the first narrative film to portray the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration/death camp. After seeing Jakubowska’s film, Béla Balázs proclaimed in an unpublished essay that “a new genre was born,” and he provided a brief parallel between Dante’s *Inferno* and *The Last Stage*, in which Auschwitz functions as vision of hell.¹³ Balázs’s comments were almost of a prophetic nature, given that we are now debating “the Holocaust genre.”

Apart from functioning as a metaphor for the Holocaust, Auschwitz has always served for Poles as a symbol of Polish wartime suffering. Poles were the first prisoners there—Auschwitz was established initially as a concentration camp solely for Polish political prisoners. The first transport of 728 Polish political prisoners (including a small number of Polish Jews) to Auschwitz took place on June 14, 1940. The mass deportations and exterminations of Jews began in Auschwitz II (Birkenau) in March 1942, when the camp became both a concentration and an extermination site.

It is also important to remember that in historical accounts of Polish filmmaking, *The Last Stage* marks the birth of post-1945 Polish cinema (although it was the third film released in postwar Poland), and was received as such after its much-anticipated premiere in April 1948. The triumphant titles of several reviews testify to that fact: “The New Stage of Polish Cinema,” “Cinematic Breakthrough of Polish Film,” and “The Triumph of the Polish Film Industry.”¹⁴ The film was received as a “national relic, a celluloid requiem to commemorate the murdered.”¹⁵ Apart from the critical praise, the film was also successful at the box office. With more than 7.8 million viewers, *The Last Stage* is number thirty on the list of the biggest box-office successes on Polish screens from 1945 to 2000, and it was exported to dozens of countries.¹⁶

Jakubowska’s name is almost exclusively linked with *The Last Stage*,

even though her career as a director spanned almost fifty years and included thirteen feature films. Her films made after *The Last Stage* are rarely discussed, arguably as the result of her persistent support for communist ideology and her several propagandist works. Her filmography, however, contains three other works in which she returned to her own Auschwitz ordeal, including the film she herself considered her best, *The End of Our World* (*Koniec naszego świata*, 1964).¹⁷

Since *The Last Stage* deals with the Nazi German camp built on the occupied Polish territories, an additional comment about Oświęcim is helpful. Oświęcim is a small town in southern Poland located on the Sola River, 31 miles (50 kilometers) west of the old Polish capital Kraków and 17 miles (27 kilometers) southeast of Katowice, the capital of the Upper Silesia region. The history of Oświęcim dates back to the thirteenth century.¹⁸ After the outbreak of World War II, the town was annexed in October 1939 into the Third Reich and renamed Auschwitz. During and after the war, the Polish name Oświęcim became synonymous not so much with the city as with the camp, *Konzentrationslager* Auschwitz, which was established there in May 1940. Given the strong anti-German feelings after World War II, hatred toward everything reminiscent of the occupation, and a strong local linguistic tradition of Polonizing foreign names, the Polish names Oświęcim and Brzezinka (Birkenau) were commonly used in historical accounts as well as in literature and cinema. The state museum commemorating the history of the camp, which opened on June 14, 1947 (the seventh anniversary of the first transport of Polish political prisoners), was referred to as the State Museum Oświęcim-Brzezinka. Later, in order to avoid incorrect, albeit all-too-frequent references to the Polishness of the camp (such as “the Polish camp” or “the camp in Poland”), the name of the museum was officially changed in May 1999 to Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oświęcim. In this work, I use the name “Oświęcim” when I refer to the Polish town of Oświęcim, and “Auschwitz” when I discuss the camp located in its vicinity.

Auschwitz today is in the center of Holocaust memory. Out of about 1.1 million people who were killed there, 1 million were Jewish.¹⁹ Two other concentration camps built by Nazi Germany on occupied Polish territories that also became extermination centers—Majdanek and

Stutthof—and several German extermination camps built on Polish soil (Treblinka, Belzec [Bełżec], Kulmhof [Chełmno], and Sobibor [Sobibór]) are known only to a relatively narrow circle of specialists, although they were arguably more frightening and also claimed innumerable lives. This selective memory certainly has to do with the fact that there were not many survivors to testify about these death camps (there were only two survivors of Belzec, three of Kulmhof, and between forty and fifty of Treblinka),²⁰ compared to a relatively large number of Auschwitz survivors of different nationalities (including Jewish survivors), who provided their testimonies after the war. Several accounts published by Auschwitz survivors—such as those of Primo Levi and Tadeusz Borowski—now belong to the group of classic, universally known works about the horror of Nazi German concentration and extermination camps. Apart from many survivors, published testimonies, and its international character, Auschwitz also housed a significant resistance group, an aspect that turned out to be the focus of Jakubowska’s film.

When Auschwitz became the main extermination center, the majority of Polish and Soviet Jews were already being murdered by *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing units) or killed at Treblinka and other death factories located in the occupied Polish territories, a part of Europe labeled by Timothy Snyder as the “bloodlands.”²¹ The term refers to east-central Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, western Russia, and the Baltic States, where the Nazi and Soviet totalitarian regimes murdered approximately 14 million civilians between 1933 and 1945. Snyder emphasizes that these were not casualties of war, but victims of Stalin’s and Hitler’s deliberately brutal policies.²² Snyder writes that “Auschwitz is the most familiar killing site of the bloodlands. Today Auschwitz stands for the Holocaust, and the Holocaust for the evil of a century.”²³

In *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning*, Snyder’s new, groundbreaking interpretation of the Holocaust, he convincingly argues:

Auschwitz symbolizes the intention to murder all Jews under German control, and Jews from every corner of the German empire were murdered in its gas chambers. Some Jews survived Auschwitz because it remained, to the end, a set of camps as well as a death facility, where Jews were selected for labor as they entered. Thus story of survival at Auschwitz can enter collective

memory. . . . The word “Auschwitz” has become a metonym for the Holocaust as a whole. Yet the vast majority of Jews had already been murdered, further east, by the time that Auschwitz became a major killing facility. Yet while Auschwitz has been remembered, most of the Holocaust has been largely forgotten.²⁴

The emphasis on Auschwitz as the killing center may thus have had some unwanted consequences since, as Snyder observes elsewhere, Auschwitz “is only an introduction to the Holocaust, the Holocaust only a suggestion of Hitler’s final aims.”²⁵ He continues: “Soviet repressions are identified with the Gulag, much as Nazi repressions are identified with Auschwitz . . . Yet, as Auschwitz draws attention away from the still greater horrors of Treblinka, the Gulag distracts us from the Soviet policies that killed people directly and purposefully, by starvation and bullets.”²⁶

The present book’s first chapter, “The Auschwitz-Birkenau Number 43513,” discusses Jakubowska’s life and career before *The Last Stage*, including her prewar involvement in the activities of the left-leaning START group (Society for the Promotion of Film Art), and her imprisonment at Auschwitz-Birkenau and Ravensbrück during the war. The discussion of Jakubowska’s prewar experiences and her wartime story of survival will enable us to more fully see the context of the film—its pro-communist dimensions, antifascist messages—and its limitations as well.

Chapter 2, “‘Stalin Was Moved to Tears’: The Script” discusses the prominent role that Jakubowska played in the nationalized postwar Polish cinema, which was dominated by the former START members who, thanks to their high-ranking political connections with communist authorities, tried to perpetuate their own vision of cinema. Despite her high-profile connections, however, Jakubowska (along with her coscriptwriter Gerda Schneider) faced several problems during the script stage, among them the fact that the communist authorities in Poland were reluctant to produce a film about the German concentration/extermination camp that for Polish viewers had some obvious references to the Soviet gulags.

Chapter 3, “Return to Auschwitz: The Making of the Holocaust Classic,” introduces the unusual circumstances that surrounded the production of the film, which was made on location at Auschwitz-Birkenau, with the participation of Auschwitz survivors, the local population (the

inhabitants of the town of Oświęcim), and Red Army personnel, as well as some German prisoners of war as extras. Several supporting roles were played by the camp's former inmates, and the film crew also numbered survivors of various concentration camps. These factors certainly contributed to the often-cited documentary appeal of the film.

Chapter 4, "The Film and Its Reception," introduces the film itself and summarizes critical debates surrounding its release and the praise Jakubowska received in Poland and in the communist bloc for its social usefulness and adherence to the communist ideology, as well as the sometimes harsh criticism voiced mostly by former Auschwitz inmates who saw history being distorted by the heroic version of the camp. The release of *The Last Stage* also coincided with the intense debate regarding the future of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. This debate ranged from proposals to close the grounds and use the land for profitable agricultural projects, to voices—some of them belonging to ex-prisoners now part of the new political elite, such as Józef Cyrankiewicz—who were interested in cultivating the image of Auschwitz as a place of Polish martyrdom and of the struggle with fascism led by the communist camp resistance.

Chapter 5, "Fighting Auschwitz: The Heroic Account of the Camp," deals with the political context of commemorating Auschwitz in postwar Poland. The attempts by the communist authorities to internationalize the camp, and to make it a symbol of Polish suffering and a victory over fascism, are cinematically represented in *The Last Stage*. In order to represent truthfully the reality of the camp while following the tenets of the communist ideology, Jakubowska's film focuses on the heroic aspect of Auschwitz ("Fighting Auschwitz"), and highlights the communist resistance.

Chapter 6, "Representation of the Holocaust in *The Last Stage*," discusses how the efforts to internationalize Auschwitz, and to make it a memorial to those who fought against fascism, led to the marginalization of the camp's largest group of victims, the Jews. This was despite the fact that the leading character in the film, Marta Weiss, is herself Jewish and based on the well-known historical figure Mala Zimetbaum. With its stress on the victims' country of origin, rather than on their respective ethnicity, *The Last Stage* mirrors the status of postwar debates about Auschwitz-Birkenau. The Soviet method of classifying those killed in

Auschwitz according to their state affiliations led to the absence of the category “Jew,” and this had an impact on subsequent Polish documentations of Auschwitz.

Chapter 7, “The Legacy of Wanda Jakubowska,” discusses the continuing influence of *The Last Stage*. The work began to serve as a semi-documentary in several films to follow, and its images were appropriated by other filmmakers for use in both documentary and fictional accounts. The discussion also takes into account Jakubowska’s three later camp films, which are less well known than *The Last Stage* and are often overlooked in discussions of the screen representation of Auschwitz and the Holocaust.

