



PROJECT MUSE®

Screening Auschwitz

Haltof, Marek

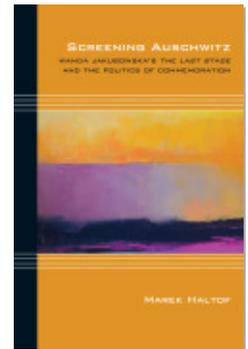
Published by Northwestern University Press

Haltof, Marek.

Screening Auschwitz: Wanda Jakubowska's *The Last Stage* and the Politics of Commemoration.

Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/56984>

CHAPTER 1

The Auschwitz-Birkenau Number 43513

“I was always in the epicenter of whatever was going on.”

—WANDA JAKUBOWSKA

Wanda Jakubowska was born November 10, 1907, to a prosperous upper-middle-class family in Warsaw, then part of the Russian empire.¹ With the outbreak of the Great War, her father Waclaw Jakubowski, an accomplished engineer, began his service in the tsarist army and moved the family to Moscow. As both her parents were film buffs who often took her to movies, Wanda spent her childhood and early teenage years attending the theaters as well as the schools of Moscow, where in 1917 she witnessed the turbulent period of the Bolshevik Revolution. Her father, although not a communist, remained in the Soviet Union after the revolution and took up a managerial position in a factory.

The START Years

In 1922, Jakubowska returned to independent Poland with her father alone; her mother Zofia had died in 1917. She completed her high school education in 1928 and attended the University of Warsaw, graduating with a degree in art history in 1931. During her university years, she became involved in film activities through a friend, Eugeniusz Cękaliski, a filmmaker and ardent promoter of art cinema.² In 1930, Jakubowska



Wanda Jakubowska with her parents.
Courtesy Katarzyna Rudomino.

and Cękałski cofounded the Society for the Promotion of Film Art (Stowarzyszenie Miłośników Filmu Artystycznego, or START), which played a pivotal role in the Polish critical and filmmaking scene.³ Its members came mostly from upper-middle-class families with left-wing sympathies; they included Jerzy Toeplitz, who later became a famous film historian and teacher at the Łódź Film School, and future filmmakers Jerzy Zarzycki and Stanisław Wohl. Later, other filmmakers and cinematographers joined the START group, including Aleksander Ford, Jerzy Bossak, Ludwik Perski, and Adolf Forbert.

START was a dynamic cine-club that promoted ambitious art cinema through screenings, lectures, and seminars, as well as through a series of articles published in almost all major Polish periodicals. Jakubowska and

other young members of the START group were primarily cultural educators who were interested in changing the landscape of film production in Poland. In an article published in Warsaw in 1932, the society's board explicitly pointed out that the main task of the group was to "popularize and propagate a few valuable films, to discredit and boycott worthless cultural productions, and to awaken interest in film as a first-class educational component."⁴

For Jakubowska and other START members, cinema was more than just entertainment. They were united by "the struggle for films for the public good," which was the START slogan from 1932. Under the influence of Soviet filmmakers (chiefly Sergei Eisenstein and Vsevolod Pudovkin), the START activists considered film to be a socially useful art. In an extensive press campaign, they addressed several fundamental problems concerning Polish cinema and also provided some suggestions for improving the situation. They believed that the only chance to have an artistic cinema was to have an enlightened audience. By educating the public, they hoped to limit the production of mediocre films and to create audiences ready to accept truly creative, even experimental, cinematic works.

The only member of START with some filmmaking experience was Aleksander Ford (1908–1980), who, as a communist, was hailed by the leftist press in particular as the most promising Polish director. After the war—which he survived in the Soviet Union—Ford returned to Poland as an officer in the Polish division fighting alongside the Red Army. He became the most important figure in the Polish film industry—the head of Film Polski (the National Board of Polish Film), the sole body producing, distributing, and exhibiting films in Poland.

In addition to her educational activities, between 1932 and 1934 Jakubowska was also involved in the production of three short documentary films (or "social reportages") made together with other members of START. In 1934, she was credited as artistic director on Aleksander Ford and Jan Nowina-Przybylski's film *Awakening* (*Przebudzenie*, aka *Miłość maturzystki*), which was lost during the war. In 1937, she produced her first independent short, *Edison's Street* (*Ulica Edisona*).⁵

Although *The Last Stage* is usually listed as Jakubowska's first theatrically released work, she actually was able to produce one full-length film before the outbreak of World War II. Her much-anticipated prewar adap-

tation of Eliza Orzeszkowa's canonical novel *On the Niemen River* (aka *On the Banks of the Niemen; Nad Niemnem*, 1939) was finished shortly before the war, but never had its premiere, which had been scheduled for September 5, 1939, in the Colosseum, the biggest cinema theater in Warsaw. The film was produced by the leading prewar Polish studio, Falanga, coscripted by Jakubowska and Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz (a prominent postwar writer), and codirected by Jakubowska and Karol Szołowski. Interestingly, given the context of *The Last Stage*, Jakubowska's *On the Niemen River* was also shot on location in a place called Bohatyrowicze, the authentic setting described in Orzeszkowa's novel. The actors—among them stars of Polish prewar cinema such as Elżbieta Barszczewska, Stanisława Wysocka, Jerzy Pichelski, Mieczysława Ćwiklińska, and Wiktor Biegański—wore authentic period dress.

Jakubowska explained in several interviews that, during the occupation, she learned from Stefan Dękierowski—one of the cofounders of Falanga in 1923 who was still in charge of its laboratory during the war and also active in the Polish underground resistance—that the Germans had decided to reedit the film as a picture about German settlers in the East who were persecuted by their Polish neighbors. Afraid that their film might be used for propaganda purposes, Jakubowska and Szołowski decided to hide the film's negative. The prints of *On the Niemen River* were removed by their friends from the Falanga laboratory and hidden in two different locations. To minimize the danger in case of being interrogated, the filmmakers were not informed of the hiding places. Unfortunately, the friends of Szołowski and Jakubowska perished without a trace during the war; the copies of the film never resurfaced and most likely were destroyed.⁶

Imprisonment at Pawiak

After the September campaign of 1939 and the occupation of Poland by Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, Jakubowska became an activist in the Warsaw section of the Workers' Party of Polish Socialists (RPPS, Robotnicza Partia Polskich Socjalistów). She was arrested by the Gestapo on October 30, 1942, and detained in the infamous Pawiak prison in Warsaw. According to Jakubowska, the Germans did not know of her role in the Polish underground and only learned about it later, during her time

at Pawiak. Jakubowska was arrested with a group of people, including several of her friends, because (unknown to her) someone had hidden weapons in one of the cooperative gardens where she and her circle of friends grew vegetables.

She commented that when the Germans came for her, she was ironing her eight-year-old son Andrzej's clothes and listening to Ludwig van Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. She later stated that, as she believed this piece to be one of Hitler's personal favorites, she was treated fairly well, without the customary beating.⁷ Furthermore, the Gestapo did not find some illegal materials that she hastily concealed in her apartment.

For the following six months, Jakubowska was held at Pawiak, the central Warsaw prison and for Poles one of the symbols of the horrors of the occupation. According to the Polish historians Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak, during its operation between October 2, 1939, and August 21, 1945, "about 60,000–65,000 people passed through Pawiak and other prisons of Warsaw (of whom about 32,000 were shot at public or secret executions, more than 23,000 were sent to concentration camps, and a few thousand were released)."⁸ In an interview with Stuart Liebman, Jakubowska described the personnel of Pawiak in the following way: "Most of those who served there were drunks and drug addicts. When I was brought to the Chief of the prison it was a strange meeting. He was lying with his head on a table, drunk, smashed. He was the 'flower of the German nation' — an alcoholic and drug addict!"⁹

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising started on April 19, 1943, when Jakubowska was still being held by the Gestapo at the Pawiak prison (which itself was situated inside the ghetto, and was used as an attack base for the Germans). Jakubowska recalled that period in an interview conducted shortly before her death in 1998:

The Germans were burning the Ghetto, and they kept pouring water on us. The smoldering pieces were falling through the window into our prison cell. Through the window we could see the burning flames; in the prison cell—high temperatures, terrible stench. When, after half a year of my stay at Pawiak, they were taking us to Auschwitz, I have to tell you that the very fact of leaving this inferno gave us a sense of relief, despite our knowledge of where we were going.¹⁰

Transport to Auschwitz

On April 28, 1943, Jakubowska was sent on a train transport from Warsaw to Auschwitz with a group of 400 male prisoners and 107 female prisoners. On April 29, they arrived at Auschwitz and were assigned numbers 119127–119526 (for males) and 43488–43593 (for females).¹¹ According to incomplete records displayed in the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum online database, 40 female prisoners from Jakubowska’s transport perished in the camp.¹² Jakubowska was tattooed with the camp serial number 43513.¹³ At the time of her arrival, the women’s camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau had 18,659 prisoners. Figures from April 30, 1943, show that 6,119 female prisoners were “incapable of working”; 6,968 were working (that number includes 242 prisoners subjected to sterilization experiments on Block 10, conducted by Dr. Carl Clauberg); and 5,572 had no assignments.¹⁴

Jakubowska was housed for almost six weeks in Block 9 where, like other new prisoners, she went through a period of “quarantine” (adjusting to camp life) and later worked with different *kommandos* (work details). Since the camp resistance group knew in advance about her being sent to Auschwitz, she was contacted by fellow socialist and communist prisoners in the camp, who immediately offered her assistance; one of them, Kazimierz Szewberg, stated that he knew about Jakubowska’s imminent arrival before she was even transported to Auschwitz. Konstanty (Kostek) Jagiełło—a prominent member of the Polish Socialist Party (*Polska Partia Socjalistyczna*, PPS) and resistance leader of the camp¹⁵—asked Szewberg to take care of Jakubowska by providing her with necessary clothing and food.¹⁶ Following the advice provided by her political friends inside the camp, Jakubowska registered herself as a photographer.¹⁷ On June 12, 1943, she was transferred permanently to work at an auxiliary camp at Rajsko (aka Raisko), the agricultural section of the Auschwitz camp located in a village 2 miles from Birkenau.¹⁸

Rajsko—The Green Garden of Auschwitz

Beginning in the summer of 1940, the Polish inhabitants of the village of Rajsko, totaling 1,500 people, were forcibly evicted along with the residents of other villages in the vicinity of the Auschwitz camp.¹⁹ The

Rajsko subcamp was created under the management of SS *Obersturmbannführer* (Lieutenant Colonel) Dr. Joachim Caesar. An agronomist by training, Caesar was in charge of the research unit at Auschwitz. After his appointment, he began recruiting female prisoners with appropriate scientific degrees (chiefly in chemistry, agriculture, and botany) to work for him.

Due to its proximity to the main camp and its good soil, Rajsko became the green garden of Auschwitz, known for its cultivation of vegetables and flowers. Thanks to its constantly expanding greenhouses and slave work by female prisoners, “the flowers from Rajsko were known across the Reich,” writes Anna Zięba, the author of the first study on Rajsko.²⁰ In his memoirs, Caesar also emphasized that “chrysanthemums and cyclamens were the species most commonly known. Sales of cut flowers and wreaths were a ‘major source of income.’”²¹

At Rajsko, Jakubowska was in charge of the small photographic laboratory and worked together with another prisoner, a German Jew named Inge Schlesinger. The task of this photography unit was to document different stages of the cultivation of *Taraxacum kok-saghyz* (rubber root), a perennial plant belonging to the family of dandelions that was planned for the production of rubber. Since 1931, the plant had been used by the Soviet Union to produce rubber, and during the war it was seriously considered by the Nazi German war machine as an emergency supply source for military purposes. The few preserved photographs from Rajsko (featuring kok-saghyz) were taken by Jakubowska.²²

There were two work squads at Rajsko. The first one, the *Gaertnerei* (the gardening unit), which mostly employed Polish, Russian, and (later) Yugoslav women, grew vegetables and flowers for the SS personnel. The second unit, the *Pflanzenzucht* (the plant breeding unit), cultivated the kok-saghyz. In addition to female prisoners, the latter unit also employed German civilian workers as well as Russians who collaborated with the Nazi German regime.

The prisoners from both *kommandos* lived together. Initially, each unit had 150 prisoners who represented many nationalities, though most were Polish, French, and German. A significant number of the Rajsko prisoners were highly trained scientists and researchers, experts in their fields.²³ Interestingly, in both units at Rajsko the communists were visibly overrepresented. Anna Zięba writes that Caesar asked the prisoners

to find him more inmates in Birkenau who had professional experience needed for his research:

Caesar gave authorization to recruit these inmates to prisoner Wanda Dutczyńska, who in turn approached another prisoner, Hanna Laskowa. With the help of her friends working in Birkenau's *Politische Abteilung* (political department) and *Arbeitseinsatz* (labor section), Laskowa employed and sent to Pflanzenzucht those prisoners who, in the eyes of the Gestapo, were heavily incriminated and regarded as dangerous for the German state. In Rajsko they had a better chance of surviving the camp, and by moving out of the view of the Birkenau camp authorities, they partly protected themselves against the ever-present danger.²⁴

Despite her work at Rajsko, Jakubowska was still housed in Block 7 at Birkenau, where the infamous *Kapo* Stenia (Stanisława/Stefania Starostka)—a woman known for her brutality toward fellow prisoners—was in charge. She was later described by Jakubowska as “the most horrifying creature among all of the Birkenau torturers.”²⁵ Starostka was a Polish underground fighter who had been captured by the Gestapo and sent to Auschwitz in April 1942 (camp number 6865). Due to her knowledge of German, she was made the *Blockälteste* (block/barrack leader) and later, in August 1943, she was appointed the only Polish *Lagerälteste* (camp senior). After the evacuation of Auschwitz in January 1945, she was sent to Bergen-Belsen.

Starostka was arrested by the British Army in April 1945 and sentenced to ten years in prison in the “Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty Four Others” (the Belsen Trial, September 17–November 17, 1945). During the trial, several fellow prisoners defended her, claiming that she had behaved well in the camp and that she had saved a group of women from the gas chamber.²⁶

Jakubowska and other prisoners working for Dr. Caesar walked daily to the Rajsko subcamp and returned to their quarters for the night—a difficult trek for several prisoners who were recovering from typhus. In June 1943, they were moved to Rajsko, mostly to avoid the danger of another typhus epidemic (the most terrifying outbreak occurred at Birkenau in



Birkenau on screen. Work details leaving the camp. Author's collection

April and May of 1943, with *Kapo* Stenia among those struck down by the disease). A French inmate at Rajsko, Charlotte Delbo, provided the following account:

On the first of July 1943, Dr. Caesar's entire team moved into a new, clean, wooden barracks where there were showers, straw mattresses on individual beds, and toilets. Not to have to smell the stench from the crematoria was a deliverance. We saw the smoke that formed a thick cloud above the fourteen chimneys across one side of the horizon. We sometimes got hold of the *Volkischer Beobachter*. Reading this communiqué raised our spirits and our courage. The women at Rajsko could also write and receive parcels.²⁷

The SS *Kommandant* of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höss, wrote in his memoirs that because Caesar was goodhearted, he "overlooked a lot concerning the prisoners and let them do what they wanted, especially the women prisoners . . . Among these prisoners there were many women, mostly French Jewesses, who were academically trained. He treated them almost as colleagues. As a natural consequence, this led to the worst cases

of lack of discipline. When the necessary punishments were carried out, Caesar took it very personally.”²⁸

The living conditions at Rajsko were better than those at other Auschwitz subcamps, due to the importance of the kok-saghyz research for the Nazi German war effort. After Dr. Caesar’s first wife died in August 1942, during the typhus epidemic that also nearly killed him, he tried to improve the hygiene conditions at Rajsko. By doing so, he also wanted to reduce the danger of infection for the SS guards and the German scientists. In addition, since Rajsko gradually became a place often visited by scientists and military personnel, he “asked that the women working in Rajsko be supplied with clothing that belonged to Hungarian Jews who had been deported to Auschwitz and murdered there.”²⁹

The prisoners were allowed to change clothes and to have showers. There was also a small, ten-bed camp hospital. Jakubowska recalled in an interview with Stuart Liebman: “On the plantations the living conditions were better—there were even some prominent French Jewish scientists working there! There were barracks with windows, beds, and pillows, and the risk of typhus that was killing everybody in the camps was less. Not thirteen on each level; everyone had their own bed. There were showers and the place was disinfected.”³⁰

The Rajsko historian Anna Zięba emphasized that prisoners were able not only to maintain contacts with inmates from other parts of Auschwitz-Birkenau, but also to have some “rudimentary cultural events” (discussions, readings, performances) to commemorate different holidays.³¹ Testifying to the prominence of communists at Rajsko, prisoner Eva Tichauer, who was deported in 1942 from France and joined the Communist Party in the camp, recalled that at the beginning of 1944 there was even a ceremony commemorating the anniversary of Lenin’s death.³²

Another prisoner at Rajsko who was active in the underground, Jewish-French Marie-Elisa Cohen, testified that male prisoners smuggled papers and provided information to Rajsko: “These men brought us the *Voelkischer Beobachter* and the *Oberschlesische Zeitung* which they hid in a predetermined place, from where we fetched them at propitious moments. One of us translated the news into French and we followed the Nazi defeat at the Eastern front and later the progress of the Allies after the invasion of Normandy on a small atlas, which these same comrades had given to us.”³³

Several testimonial accounts emphasize Jakubowska's involvement in the camp's resistance as a member of the *Kampfgruppe Auschwitz* (the Auschwitz Combat Group; *Grupa Bojowa Oświęcim*). The Auschwitz prisoner Zygmunt Gaudasiński testified that Jakubowska was responsible for maintaining contacts with the outside world; likewise, Józef Garliński, in his book *Fighting Auschwitz*, stated that Jakubowska was “the liaison officer between women and the men's underground movement in the central camp.”³⁴ The Russian prisoner Nina Gusiewa, who was active in the Auschwitz resistance, wrote that Jakubowska was getting information about the progress of the Red Army directly from the Soviets.³⁵ Another former Auschwitz inmate, Natalia Tołłoczko (who had met Jakubowska at the Pawiak prison and was later transported with her to Auschwitz), testified that Jakubowska maintained close contacts with members of several nationalities—Russian, French (she spoke Russian and French fluently), Czech, and German—who were close to her intellectually and ideologically.³⁶

Interestingly, given the portrayal of Poles in *The Last Stage*, Jakubowska did not mingle much with the Polish inmates. They by and large did not appreciate her close contacts with foreigners, in particular the German communist (and the coscriptwriter of *The Last Stage*) Gerda Schneider, who, as Natalia Tołłoczko stated, was “hostile toward Poles.”³⁷ Similar sentiments were expressed after the war by other former Polish prisoners at Rajsko, who were unhappy with Jakubowska's friendship with the former *Blockälteste* Schneider.

Nina Wegierska, however, praised Jakubowska in her testimony as an “internationalist communist.” Another prisoner, Jadwiga Łampisz, emphasized that Jakubowska was a communist at heart who befriended inmates who were close to her ideological worldview, mostly foreign communists such as Schneider.³⁸ This was anathema, given the anti-communist attitude of the majority of Poles before and during the war.

Gerda Schneider

An extended comment on Gerda (Gertrud, Gertrude) Schneider is now in order. Born March 27, 1900, Schneider was imprisoned by the Nazi German regime beginning in 1933. From 1937 to 1939, she was a political prisoner at the Lichtenburg concentration camp—the training

ground for several future *Aufseherinnen* (female overseers) in Ravensbrück and Auschwitz, including Johanna Langefeld and Maria Mandel. On May 26, 1939, she was among 900 women transported from Lichtenburg to Ravensbrück.³⁹ Schneider was then transferred to Auschwitz on March 26, 1942, with the first transport of female prisoners from the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Danuta Czech included the following comment in her indispensable book, *Auschwitz Chronicle, 1939–1945*: “In the transport are 999 German women classified as asocial, criminal, and a few as political prisoners. They receive Nos. 1–999 and are lodged in the part of the main camp separated by the wall along Block 1 to 10. German criminal and asocial female prisoners, the founders of the camp as it were, are to take over the functions of Block Seniors and capos.”⁴⁰

Schneider received the camp number 586 and became a *Blockälteste*.⁴¹ The information about her imprisonment held at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum is brief and fragmentary. Prisoners’ testimonies stress her role as an active member of the resistance and her work as *Blockälteste* in the camp “infirmary” (*Revier*, abbreviation for *Krankenrevier*—quarters for the sick). In a conversation with Liebman, Jakubowska stated that although Schneider was sent to Auschwitz to “organize a camp for women,” she was nevertheless “still a decent person. She organized what was best for women.”⁴² Many former inmates supported this claim and gave evidence that Schneider used her position courageously to help fellow sufferers. For example, Genowefa Ulan testified that she owed her life to a brave action of Schneider, who defended her before an SS doctor when she was ill and was accused of simulating illness by a Polish prisoner in charge (later depicted in the film as Lalunia).⁴³

Anna Palarczyk, who knew Schneider very well, confirmed this, but added the following: “She had been imprisoned since 1933 and was no longer normal, for she beat people.”⁴⁴ A number of other former prisoners also commented that Schneider was beating fellow inmates. In her memoirs, titled “Life, Death, and Struggle,” Antonina (“Tośka”) Piątkowska praised German female political prisoners working in the *Revier*, but had the following to say about Schneider:

I remember one political prisoner, German Gerda Schneider.
I came into contact with her in person several times, and each



Gerda Schneider: postwar portrait. Wanda Jakubowska archive. Courtesy Katarzyna Rudomino.

time I was beaten by her. She beat healthy prisoners for trying to get to the Revier in order to bring patients there some rags to cover themselves (the sick in the *Revier* lay down naked, without underthings if someone from the outside did not provide any clothing), or medicinal herbs to drink, the most desired by fevered women. What hurt even more than Gerda's beating was that her greatest satisfaction was pouring out the herbs so hard-won for the sick, the ones that they so desperately needed.⁴⁵

Another inmate, Józefa Kiwalowa, commented about block elders at Rajsko: "In 1943 came Gerda Schneider, who liked to hit everybody in the face. In 1944 she was sent to Birkenau for punishment."⁴⁶

Understandably, unlike some of the other prisoners, Jakubowska preserved different camp images of Gerda Schneider: "We became friends. I learned German from her because she never knew any other language. When I left the camp, I therefore spoke German. We left the camp together and she remained in Poland for a while. We had to write a script. She knew much more than I did."⁴⁷

Birkenau, Auschwitz, and Ravensbrück

In October 1944, suspected of political activities, Jakubowska was moved by the camp authorities from Rajsko to Birkenau and housed in Block 27, where she awaited transfer to Ravensbrück.⁴⁸ After four weeks, however, thanks to the network of the Auschwitz Combat Group, she managed to move and hide in the women's camp of Auschwitz I (*Stamm-lager*), and thus avoided the transport. The former prisoner Stanisław Kłodziński (camp number 20019) wrote that Jakubowska was helped by a prisoner-doctor at Auschwitz, Dr. Dorota Lorska (Sława Klein in the camp, number 52325), a Polish-Jewish communist woman who distinguished herself in the French Resistance and as a physician in the camp where she had been interned since August 1943.⁴⁹ Kłodziński writes:

Among the many colleagues in the camp who owe their lives to Lorska was also Wanda Jakubowska. She was transferred from the *Gärtnerei* to the punishment company (*Strafkompanie*) in Birkenau. Passing through the camp at Auschwitz, Jakubowska pretended that she had sprained her leg. Lorska bravely pulled her out of the row of prisoners, bandaged her “sick” leg, and reported to the guard that Jakubowska needed to be transferred to the camp hospital. It was done at the behest of Józef Cyran-kiewicz, who also initiated the plan to save this camp resistance activist from impending death.⁵⁰

In the women's camp in Auschwitz I, Jakubowska was assigned to different work details and also worked briefly in the camp infirmary as a nurse until January 18, 1945.⁵¹ Between January 17 and 21, with the Red Army advancing toward the Vistula River, approximately 56,000 prisoners were forcibly evacuated in a “death march,” during which almost 15,000 prisoners died of cold and exhaustion or were shot by the SS guards.⁵² Jakubowska marched with 25,000 other prisoners to the city of Wodzisław Śląski, 35 miles to the west, which they reached three days later. At the destination they were put on freight trains—open cars heading for different concentration camps located inside Germany. Jakubowska was transported to Ravensbrück.⁵³

Jakubowska always emphasized the importance of solidarity among prisoners in the camp, which helped them to survive. In bitter cold,

Jakubowska remembered, “we held each other in our arms and successively slept during the long march.”⁵⁴ In the same interview, conducted by Barbara Mruklik in 1985, Jakubowska stated: “Almost certainly we could have frozen to death if not for the fact that somewhere along the way we passed a standing German army train heading for the front. Seeing what was going on, the Wehrmacht soldiers began to toss straw into our wagons. This helped us. I wanted to introduce this scene in my new film, but it turned out that it would be too expensive.”⁵⁵ Jakubowska arrived at Ravensbrück most probably on January 23, 1945, with the first transport from Auschwitz. She was imprisoned in Ravensbrück for the remaining months of the war.

On January 28, 1945, ten days after Jakubowska and other Auschwitz prisoners were evacuated by the SS, the first Soviet detachment appeared on the grounds of Auschwitz-Birkenau, part of the 59th Army of the 1st Ukrainian Front led by Colonel Winogradow. The Soviet soldiers encountered the remaining sick and starving prisoners, approximately 1,200 at Auschwitz, 5,800 at Birkenau, and 600 at another subcamp, Monowitz. Despite medical assistance, many of them did not survive.⁵⁶

Adolf Forbert, who photographed Auschwitz-Birkenau after it was captured by the Red Army, described what he saw after entering the liberated infirmary of Birkenau, the eventual setting of Jakubowska’s film:

Long rows of lifeless barracks; sticking from the piles of snow are limbs of corpses. Dead silence around us. An emaciated female prisoner grabs me by the hand, says something unintelligible to me, and pulls me in the direction of the nearest large barrack. Now I can see the smoke coming out of the chimneys from some of them. I follow my guide and enter the barrack. The monstrous sensation chokes my throat. Seriously ill women lie on two-story bunks, two or three on each bunk. Stuffiness. The commotion begins; the sick wave to me with their hands, some of them get up from a long brick oven that is running along in the middle of the barrack. . . . Between shouts of joy at the sight of the first Polish uniform, information: I am at one of the wards of the women’s hospital in Birkenau.⁵⁷

In Ravensbrück, Jakubowska experienced another “death march” before this camp was liberated by the Red Army detachments on April 30,

1945. She was evacuated with 20,000 other healthy prisoners, leaving behind about 2,000 ailing inmates in the camp. Following Himmler's orders, several columns of prisoners marched westward, guarded by the SS men with their dogs. In a documentary produced by Andrzej Czekalski, Jakubowska recalled her first day of freedom on April 28, 1945, when she and her fellow inmates were liberated by the Soviet soldiers. She was in a column of 500 prisoners guarded by the remaining SS men. One night, when they slept in a barn, she put her head on somebody else's belly and fell asleep. In the morning she realized that she had slept on the SS guard. Realizing what had happened, they both rushed in different directions, and the guard left his gun behind. She took the gun and wandered around the place in search of food—armed, but still wearing a striped prisoner's uniform.⁵⁸

After the liberation, Jakubowska and Schneider spent several months in the Soviet Zone in Berlin (“this city seemed then fascinating to me,” she recalled in 1998),⁵⁹ where they looked for materials related to their film project and also helped the Soviets with Russian-German translations. Jakubowska returned to Warsaw in December 1945 with the first draft of her script and immediately contacted the communist party, Polish Workers' Party (Polska Partia Robotnicza, PPR), “my beloved party,” as she put it in the 1998 interview with Alina Madej.⁶⁰ Following the film-making community in postwar Poland, she then moved to the city of Łódź, relatively undamaged during the war, where many government institutions, including Film Polski, had established their centers.