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Screening Auschwitz

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CHAPTER 2

“Stalin Was Moved to Tears”

The Script

Wanda Jakubowska decided to make a film about Auschwitz-Birkenau as soon as she crossed the camp's gate.¹ On several occasions Jakubowska stated that she was actively thinking about making a film to document her Auschwitz ordeal while still a prisoner. In a letter sent to Film Polski on January 5, 1946, she wrote: “I started to work on the script right from the day of my arrival at Birkenau and continued throughout the duration of my stay there. Some fellow comrades helped me by telling their own stories of survival as well as those they witnessed. I promised over three hundred women working in the same work detail that if I get out of the camp, the film will be made.”²

Producing a film about Auschwitz was a personal duty for Jakubowska, both as a camp survivor and as a filmmaker who wanted to bear witness to history and register the enormity of evil.³ In addition, the making of this film became an almost therapeutic endeavor on Jakubowska's part, as was revealed in the very title of an interview with her that was published after the film's premiere: “I remained in the camp until 1948.”⁴

With her fellow Auschwitz survivor, Gerda Schneider, Jakubowska began working on the script in June 1945 in Berlin and finished a first draft titled *Oświęcim* (*Auschwitz*), approximately 500 pages long, in early December 1945.⁵ Alina Madej argues (and I share this view) that it was Schneider who wrote the first version of the script in German. Considering the postwar political sensitivities, Madej appropriately remarks that

penning the first version of the script in the language reminiscent of the occupation almost bordered on provocation.⁶

In addition, during the same time Jakubowska participated with Gerda Schneider in the unmasking of several SS men who, according to her, were getting tattoos with fake concentration camp numbers and pretending to be former camp inmates. As Jakubowska recalled, the hiding SS men were also denouncing some German communists—former prisoners—as alleged members of the SS.⁷

In all likelihood, although it is impossible today to verify it in light of the remaining documents, Jakubowska and Schneider were considering producing their film about Auschwitz outside of Poland, possibly in the Soviet Occupation Zone of Germany. A certificate issued on December 4, 1945, by the Berlin district of the German Communist Party (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*, KPD) and approved by the Red Army headquarters three days later permitted Jakubowska—who, as the letter indicates, became an active member of the KPD (“*unserer Genossin und Partei-Funktionärin*”)—to travel to Warsaw for four weeks. The letter specified that Jakubowska was not returning to Poland after her war ordeal, but instead going to Warsaw to pick up her son Andrzej (then eleven), who survived the war in Poland. She was supposed to return with him to Berlin before the end of December 1945.⁸

On December 31, 1945, Jakubowska submitted in the city of Łódź a shorter version of her script to Jerzy Bossak, one of the top officials of Film Polski. Several days later, she wrote a two-page letter to Aleksander Ford, the head of Film Polski, emphasizing her determination to direct the film. She stressed that her work on the manuscript had begun in June 1945 in Berlin in collaboration with her female comrade who arrived at Auschwitz with one of the first transports and learned “all possible vicissitudes of fate from being a prisoner functionary in the *lager* to the penal *kommando* and the dungeons of the Auschwitz Gestapo. She knows the camp as nobody else.”⁹ Perhaps for political reasons Gerda Schneider’s name and nationality were not revealed in the letter. Jakubowska’s letter to Ford also emphasized that her film project—focusing on seven representatives of six nationalities who became united by their shared ideology and political objectives—introduced characters whose biographies, although not reflecting any specific historical figures, were conglomerates of real characters, situations, and events. The letter to Ford also

specified that in order to finish the shooting script, Jakubowska had to go to Berlin, Paris, several Polish cities, and Czechoslovakia. Her stated goal concerning the research in Berlin was to study the biographical details regarding the Auschwitz SS guards.

Jakubowska's project about Auschwitz-Birkenau was approved by the authorities of Film Polski on January 8, 1946. She received the money to cover her preliminary expenses, including her research trip to Berlin.¹⁰ On January 17, 1946, almost one year after the liberation of Auschwitz, Jakubowska wrote an official letter to Gerda Schneider, who was still in Berlin at that time, to tell her that Film Polski had agreed to produce the film based on their script and that she was seeking permission for Schneider to work in Poland.¹¹ Schneider's visit was approved by the highest echelon of communist authorities; obtaining the approval apparently was not a problem for Jakubowska. "I was on friendly terms with [Bolesław] Bierut and [Władysław] Gomułka," she recalled, "thus I arranged it during one visit to the party's Central Committee."¹² One possible reason for Jakubowska's close collaboration with Schneider and her extensive postwar research may be that she spent "only several weeks" in Birkenau before being moved to the Rajsko subcamp of Auschwitz, which was a relatively privileged experimental agricultural branch.

Jakubowska's goal was to produce a "proper" and "politicized" picture of Auschwitz that was, according to her, "justified by the world postwar political situation."¹³ Not relying exclusively on her camp memories, she was eager to do additional wide-ranging research. She collected testimonies and conducted interviews with both Auschwitz inmates and guards to prove the film's thesis: "the extermination camps are the most cynical rendering of fascism, its inevitable consequence."¹⁴ She was convinced that her version of Auschwitz history, although not representative of the fabric of the camp, would reflect its true nature.

Jerzy Bossak, who was then heading the Artistic Programming Department within Film Polski, issued a memo on February 1, 1946, to the authorities in Poland and the occupied German territories, urging them to help Jakubowska with her research on the film project, which was then titled (in a somewhat military fashion) *The Birkenau Front Reports* (*Front Birkenau melduje*).¹⁵ Following this, Jakubowska left for Germany where, accompanied by Gerda Schneider, she conducted interviews with some SS personnel from Auschwitz. Another reasoning behind this

extensive preparatory work, as Jakubowska explained in an interview with Alina Madej, was to have psychological portraits—flesh-and-blood characters—unlike the one-dimensional caricatures of Soviet films.¹⁶

Jakubowska forcefully pursued her project despite numerous obstacles. On March 3, 1946, she asked Film Polski to begin the production stage. Even though the film authorities praised the project, they were convinced this was not a film for Jakubowska to direct. She often stressed that the powerful head of Film Polski, Aleksander Ford—who was privately on friendly terms with her as they lived in the same apartment building in Łódź—proved to be a major obstacle for her project. She labeled him *Tematenfresser* (meaning perhaps *thema fresser*), a person stealing other people's ideas for his own films.¹⁷ This was confirmed by the Polish film historian and former film producer Edward Zajiček, who knew the postwar film industry firsthand: Ford used his privileged position in the Polish film industry to reserve interesting projects for himself. As a result of his policy, several scripts were abandoned or postponed for years before going into production.¹⁸

Unlike Jakubowska, Ford—and several other filmmakers associated with prewar leftist groups—survived the war in the Soviet Union. In 1943, they created the Polish Army Film Unit Czołówka (Czołówka Filmowa Wojska Polskiego) within the Polish Tadeusz Kościuszko First Division and documented struggles of Polish soldiers fighting alongside the Red Army. Headed by Ford, the Czołówka (Vanguard) members, including Bossak, Stanisław Wohl, and Ludwik Perski (all of them assimilated Polish Jews), returned with the Red Army as officers in the First Polish Army. The former START members immediately seized power, imposed their vision of cinema—which was much in line with that of the communist authorities—and practically controlled the nationalized post-1945 Polish film industry, both as decision makers and filmmakers. From 1945 to 1947, Ford was the head of Film Polski, which operated within the notorious Ministry of Information and Propaganda. He accumulated power and, thanks to his high-ranking political and military connections with the communist leaders, ran the board in an almost dictatorial manner. Jakubowska, the only Polish female filmmaker during the postwar period, commented unflatteringly that Ford's position of power, connections in high places, medals, and cars spoiled her former friend from the START group.¹⁹

Mounting Problems

The Last Stage encountered several problems at the script stage despite Jakubowska's loyalty—which sometimes bordered on devotion—to the communist cause, and despite the theme of international solidarity, antifascist and pacifist messages, and an emphasis on the communist resistance in the camp. One has to stress, however, that although several prominent Polish writers were directly or indirectly involved in working for Film Polski, it was extremely difficult to produce a politically acceptable script. The Polish writers included Czesław Miłosz, Maria Dąbrowska, Adolf Rudnicki, and Seweryna Szmaglewska. Szmaglewska was the author of *Smoke over Birkenau*, published in 1945,²⁰ and at the early stages of Jakubowska's project was also considered a scriptwriter. Alina Madej quotes an annual report from 1946 submitted by Film Polski to the Ministry of Information and Propaganda stating that they had considered 170 projects, rejected 81, and asked for further work on 20 of them.²¹ Many scripts were subjected to harsh criticism on political grounds and never-ending rewrites, causing them to be postponed for many decades. Among these scripts are some of the most prestigious projects in Polish postwar cinema: Władysław Szpilman's story of survival and Janusz Korczak's (Henryk Goldszmit's) biography. Both were proposed in 1945. The former was discussed in June 1945 at the meeting of the Committee for Evaluating Film Scripts, and the latter was submitted by Ludwik Starski in September 1945. Both projects were rejected because of the passivity of the main characters, their apolitical stand, and their Jewishness. Szpilman's story was filmed by Roman Polański fifty-seven years later (*The Pianist*, 2002), and the film about Korczak was made by Andrzej Wajda in 1990 (*Korczak*).

Very few feature films were made in Poland after the war. No full-length fictional film was released between 1945 and 1946, largely due to censorship and the impossibility of dealing with several sensitive, politically incorrect issues, including the 1944 Warsaw Uprising (*Powstanie Warszawskie*, August 1–October 2, 1944) and the plight of the underground nationalist Home Army (AK) that had fought, along with others, to liberate Warsaw from the Nazi German occupation before the advancing Red Army. After 1945, the Home Army fighters, who also opposed the postwar Soviet occupation of Poland, were harshly persecuted.²² It has to

be stressed that the first memorial commemorating the 1944 uprising was built as late as 1989, after the fall of communism. Made in 1957, Andrzej Wajda's breakthrough *Kanal* (*Kanal*) became the first narrative film to portray the legendary event. Set during the final stages of the uprising, it narrated the story of a Home Army unit that tried to escape the German encirclement via the only route left—the city sewers, in which the majority of the fighters met their deaths. The release of *Kanal* sparked emotional debates in Poland; Wajda neither glorified the uprising, as was expected by the majority of his countrymen in 1957, nor did he criticize the official communist stand on the 1945 “liberation” of Warsaw by the Soviet troops. Instead, he stressed the patriotism of the Home Army soldiers, their sense of duty, and their heroic yet futile efforts.²³

The graphic nature of *The Last Stage* is also often cited as a major obstacle for Jakubowska's project. Film Polski was convinced that, given the postwar climate and the proximity of the war, nobody was going to want to see such a gloomy film. Contrary to popular wisdom that the postwar Polish viewers yearned for lighthearted entertainment films, however, the opposite proved true: Postwar audiences were eager to see their wartime experiences on screen. According to the poll conducted in mid-November 1946 by the Polish biweekly *Film*, 36 percent of 10,000 responders opted for broadly understood war movies, some dealing with topics silenced by the communist authorities after the war, such as the Warsaw Uprising and the participation of the Polish Armed Forces in the West in the 1944 Battle of Monte Cassino.²⁴

It is sometimes suggested that one of the biggest obstacles to the film being made was that the communist authorities in Poland were afraid of similarities between the Soviet gulags and German concentration camps, and preferred not to touch on this sensitive topic.²⁵ Plausibly, Ford and other Film Polski decision makers who survived the war in the Soviet Union (where some of them were involved in communist propaganda) knew firsthand the dangers of dealing with forbidden or ideologically murky themes and were reluctant to proceed with Jakubowska's project without an explicit Soviet blessing. However, as Timothy Snyder argues in “The Auschwitz Paradox,” a chapter in his *Black Earth*:

Auschwitz was a convenient symbol in the postwar Soviet Union and today in post-communist Russia. If the Holocaust is reduced

to Auschwitz, then it can easily be forgotten that the German mass killing of Jews began in places that the Soviet Union had just conquered. Everyone in the western Soviet Union knew about the mass murder of the Jews, for the same reason that the Germans did. In the East the method of mass murder required tens of thousands of people. The Germans left, but their death pits remained. If the Holocaust is identified only with Auschwitz, this experience, too, can be excluded from history and commemoration.²⁶

Even though, as Snyder argues, Auschwitz became a “convenient symbol in the postwar Soviet Union,” it has to be noted that at the beginning of 1945 the Soviet authorities did not pay an expected attention to Auschwitz, although six months earlier they had focused extensively on the first liberated camp at Majdanek. Jeremy Hicks attributes this shift to the Soviets’ uneasiness regarding the politically correct representation of Auschwitz, more specifically to the issue of dealing with the representation of war atrocities (Jewish, and not Soviet, suffering being in the center).²⁷ Similarly, David Stone writes that after liberating Auschwitz and documenting its liberation on film, the camp that is now synonymous with the Holocaust “disappeared from the Soviet press and official reports and the genocide of the Jews became a subject best avoided.”²⁸

As mentioned earlier, Jakubowska and Schneider tried to produce the script in an environment of strong, politically well-connected men who ruled the Polish film industry. Despite their shared prewar history with the START group and, essentially, the same limited filmmaking experience (with the exception of Ford), the men did not trust Jakubowska’s directorial skills. They delayed the project and discouraged Jakubowska by multiplying requirements. During the meeting of the Artistic Council (Rada Artystyczna) of Film Polski, production director Juliusz Turbowicz suggested that the German scriptwriter Georg C. Klaren (“the Hitlerite scriptwriter,” according to Jakubowska) should be involved in writing the script to achieve its desired artistic level.²⁹ Jakubowska stressed that although Jerzy Bossak—another well-connected friend of hers—liked her script, he considered it to be more appropriate for the giants of cinema, such as Fritz Lang, Wilhelm Pabst, or John Ford.³⁰ Facing continuous

resistance, Jakubowska listened to practical advice given by Stanisław Wohl—whom she wanted at first to hire as a camera operator on *The Last Stage*—who suggested going directly to Moscow to secure Soviet cooperation and provision of actresses and a cinematographer.³¹

In late 1946, Jakubowska went to Moscow with a forty-page filmic novella translated into Russian and retyped on a Russian typewriter using the Cyrillic alphabet at the Polish embassy in Moscow, with the help of the Polish cultural attaché, musicologist, and political activist Zofia Lissa. A report sent from Moscow on December 17, 1946, by the Polish press agency PAP states:

After several weeks of staying in Moscow, Wanda Jakubowska—the Polish film director and the author of the film script about the Auschwitz extermination camp—returns to the country. In an interview with the PAP correspondent, Jakubowska said: “I came to Moscow to receive help from the Soviet film industry for the production of a film about Auschwitz. The deputy minister of cinematography in the Soviet Union—Mr. Kalatozov, Mr. Marianov from the ministry of cinematography, and an excellent Soviet director Mikhail Romm expressed their deep interest in the Polish film project about Auschwitz. After learning about the script, the Soviet cinema officials stated that they consider the matter of making this film important not only for Polish cinema, but also for all democratic states.”³²

Jakubowska met in Moscow with Mikhail Kalatozov (“an absolutely gorgeous Georgian”³³) who was responsible for Soviet cinema as the deputy minister of cinematography between 1945 and 1948. Several years later at the Moscow Film Festival, she learned from Kalatozov that he had wept while reading her text. Afraid, however, to support her—since this was the first film script to deal with the camps (and therefore nobody knew how to tackle the subject)—Kalatozov sent the script to Andrei Zhdanov, who earlier, in 1934, had formulated the principles of Socialist Realist art. He was also deeply affected by the text and passed it on to Stalin. Allegedly, Stalin himself was also moved to tears. His personal approval made it possible for Jakubowska to pursue her project. In several interviews, she hypothesized that Stalin was probably touched by the

scenes in her script “showing that Soviet female prisoners in the camp were almost praying to Stalin. . . . As a result, he realized that the topic was timely.”³⁴ In the documentary *Kino, kino, kino*, Jakubowska stated emphatically: “After Stalin saw this scene, he fell in love with me.”

Jakubowska described her triumphant return to Warsaw from Moscow and meeting with Aleksander Ford in the following way: “Exhilarated, I came to Ford and here follows a scene from a gangster film, or rather a parody of a gangster film. I said that I have the blessing from the Russians. Ford listened to everything poker-faced and asked dryly: ‘Do you have any letter about it? Because, you know, they can talk a lot.’ At this moment the postman comes and brings the message from Moscow. . . . Ford turned green with envy.”³⁵

Despite the Soviet approval, however, Jakubowska’s script had been revised several times, and the Artistic Council of Film Polski also sought opinions from outsiders, including political activists and former Auschwitz prisoners. They also contacted prominent writers, including Adam Ważyk, then the chief ideologue of Film Polski; Tadeusz Hołuj, an Auschwitz survivor who was active in the camp’s resistance group; and Zofia Nałkowska, the author of a classic collection of Holocaust short stories, *Medallions* (1946), and also a member of the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes.³⁶ Although the initial shooting on location had been scheduled for April 1, 1947, the Film Polski authorities made it difficult for Jakubowska to progress with her project.³⁷

Facing endless obstacles created by her male colleagues who controlled the postwar Polish film industry, Jakubowska chose a risky but eventually efficient way of solving the problem and complained directly to the highest political authorities—the Central Committee of the Polish Workers’ Party (PPR). In a letter of March 3, 1947, she asked for their assistance and protested that her script had never been the subject of “constructive criticism,” but instead had been attacked by the Film Polski managers in a “general and destructive way.”³⁸ Fighting for her film, she also complained to Bolesław Bierut, president of the Republic of Poland, whom she knew personally: “I knew Bierut from before the war. Some people say that he was an evil man, but that was not true. He had a heart of gold. But he didn’t like his political opponents and I did not like them either.”³⁹

The atmosphere surrounding Jakubowska’s project changed after

March 1947 when Aleksander Ford, accused of mismanagement and rapidly losing his political footing, was replaced by a young apparatchik, Stanisław Albrecht, as the head of Film Polski. This institution no longer operated within the Ministry of Information and Propaganda but rather came under the supervision of the newly formed Ministry of Culture and Arts.⁴⁰ Albrecht, an ambitious engineer and architect by training and an outsider in the film business, was aptly labeled by Alina Madej a “super-bureaucrat” who faithfully served the communist regime and created the foundations for the Socialist Realist cinema demanded by the communist regime.⁴¹ Addressing the communist Politburo in September 1947, Albrecht stated: “Polish films should be made in the style of socialist realism. We have to separate ourselves from naturalism as well as from the formalist ‘exercises’ and pseudo-psychological inquiries that are fashionable in the West.”⁴²

In April 1947, Albrecht appointed the new Artistic Council that was more appreciative of Jakubowska’s project. Following the council’s advice on April 24, 1947, Jakubowska stated that the production of her film would start on June 1, 1947. She agreed to introduce several changes, including moving the film’s opening to the camp, as well as placing more emphasis on the role of the Auschwitz resistance and the dignified Russian doctor-prisoner Eugenia.⁴³ Her project evolved gradually from a realistic depiction of Auschwitz-Birkenau to an almost Socialist Realist representation of the camp, as expected by the authorities and also in line with her own communist convictions. In a letter sent to Paris, where the film’s composer Roman Palester resided at that time, Jakubowska wrote: “We have a new chief executive who is very to the point. Relations have changed and are changing constantly for the better. There is hope that films will be made and that it will be possible to work.”⁴⁴

Jakubowska worked on numerous revisions of the script with Gerda Schneider. Later, after the refusal by Film Polski to employ German actors and POWs for German-speaking parts, Schneider also worked with actors, especially concerning dialogue in German. Asked if Schneider felt comfortable working in an environment marked by anti-German sentiment, Jakubowska stated: “Gerda Schneider had not suffered the slightest unpleasantness in Poland. She was an extraordinary personality, and everybody really liked her. Straightaway, she won over the entire film crew.”⁴⁵

Jakubowska and Schneider's research resulted in several hundred pages that focused mostly on biographies of both Auschwitz-Birkenau inmates and perpetrators. Jakubowska often stated that with the exception of one negative character—the pseudo-doctor Lalunia—other protagonists were composites of several real characters.⁴⁶ Her commentary on the scriptwriting process is worth quoting at length:

Biographies of about fifty film characters were written during the next stage of our work. The biographies were quite accurate, and not only from the period of their stay in the camp, but from birth to death. Some profiles fared handsomely—with the characteristics of the background, preferences, and talents—some superficially. . . . Some characters who did not make it to the screen lent certain aspects of their features to other characters. For example, in a slightly modified form, the death of Hanka Cegiełka was transferred to Dessa, who in the first version did not have to die. Some protagonists came out badly because they were built from two characters. For example, Helena, who was made up of the two characters, Helena and Zofia, remained incomplete and undefined throughout. Helena was a worker from Wola [the Warsaw neighborhood] and took an active part in the resistance movement. Zofia was a middle-class woman and had a child. In conjunction, Helena lost too much of herself and took too much from the passive Zofia.⁴⁷

The immensity of the project, the multitude of developed characters, and the need to match their biographies with the chronology of the camp—as well as the desire to present a truthful, documentary-like picture of Auschwitz—proved an immense challenge for Jakubowska. In the essay quoted above, she mentioned several characters and subplots that did not make it to the final draft or were marginalized in a desperate attempt to keep the length of the film under two hours. She commented frankly that the whole subplot dealing with children in Auschwitz was reduced to just three brief scenes: the girl with a ball, the children's transport going to the gas, and the image of the girl's toy among other belongings left by the victims. Already at the script stage Jakubowska was shortening or eliminating dialogue, and she was forced to make additional cuts later, during



Publicity still. A scene from Birkenau's *Revier*. Barbara Fijewska as Anielka (*second from the right*) taking care of her sick sister, Urszula (Maria Redlichówna). Author's collection.

the shooting and editing process. For example, in the scene showing the brutal interrogation of the Russian doctor Eugenia, she reduced the dialogue and replaced it with music. Occasionally, scenes planned at the script stage, such as the final scene of the liberation of Auschwitz (and some of the film's protagonists), were abandoned during the shooting. The liberation scene was replaced with a hastily edited—and therefore confusing—ending that is featured in the released version of the film. Interestingly, the script published in 1955 with Jakubowska's introduction also contains scenes and dialogue not present in the released version of the film.⁴⁸

The Birkenau Front Reports

Press reports and the correspondence between Film Polski and Wanda Jakubowska indicate that several differently titled scripts and, later, shooting scripts were developed.⁴⁹ The National Film Archive in Warsaw (Filmoteka Narodowa) is in possession of two early versions of the

script that are not dated and not signed.⁵⁰ Unlike the linear narrative of the released film, the two versions of the script rely on the flashback structure and are also more graphic. The setting of the action (as in the film) is mostly limited to the *Revier* (camp “infirmery”)—the place that, according to Jakubowska, enabled her to “show as many facts as possible.”⁵¹ It was also the place known to Schneider and Jakubowska firsthand. Schneider worked, among other positions, as a *Blockälteste* in the Birkenau *Revier* and Jakubowska briefly as a nurse in Auschwitz I; both also experienced the *Revier* as patients.⁵²

The first, 165-page-long version of the script is titled *The Birkenau Front Reports (Odcinek Birkenau melduje)*. Its first page lists the names of the protagonists—political prisoners, among them the names that the viewer will find later in the film: Anna, Anielka, Helena, Eugenia, Nadia, Dessa, and Edek. The opening page also provides the actual names of the German perpetrators, the personnel of Auschwitz-Birkenau. The script begins with the scene of a war crime trial in an unnamed German town. Eleven German functionaries from Auschwitz are indicted for war crimes and stand trial, among them characters that will appear later in the released version of the film, including Maria Mandel (who was from October 1942 to November 1944 the *SS-Lagerführerin*, or superintendent of the women’s camp) and Margot Drechsler (*SS-Rapportführerin*, or reporting officer; in historical accounts also spelled Drexler). The Auschwitz female survivor Anielka begins her testimony.⁵³

Jakubowska and Schneider employ in the script the original testimony of Dr. Ada (Hadassah) Bimko from a trial in the German town of Lüneburg (September 17–November 17, 1945). Dr. Bimko, a Jewish-Polish woman from the town of Sosnowiec in southern Poland, was sent to Auschwitz on August 4, 1943. She spent fifteen months in Auschwitz and five months in Belsen. After the war, she served as one of the principal witnesses for the prosecution at the trial of Nazi German war criminals held by the British Military Tribunal in Lüneburg. This was the so-called “Belsen Trial,” or “The Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-Four Others.” Since many of the captured SS staff of Bergen-Belsen had worked in Auschwitz-Birkenau (Kramer was the *Lagerführer* of Birkenau from May to November 1944) before their transfer to Bergen-Belsen, the trial also dealt with the extermination methods at Auschwitz. During their research before making the film, Jakubowska and Schneider interviewed

several former SS guards, including Maria Mandel, and studied the documents related to the Nuremberg and Lüneburg trials and the trial of Rudolf Höss in Poland.⁵⁴

In the script, an attorney for one of the defendants questions Anielka's testimony, which triggers her flashback into the past. The bulk of the remaining script consists of Anielka's story and her return to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The flashback opens with a group of female prisoners entering Birkenau, awaited by the camp commandant Müller, who is accompanied by the senior female overseer Drechsler and the SS guards. Their faces are described in the script as "fat, obstinate, and repulsive" (p. 2). Another scene introduces an image that later appears in the film: a roll call in front of the barracks featuring a terrified multinational crowd of prisoners. As in the final version of the film, some Polish female prisoners are portrayed as negative characters who are not compassionate when another Polish woman, Helena, is giving birth. Only the narrator, Anielka, is ready to help her.

The script also introduces images of a graphic nature, arguably too challenging to be accepted by the Polish authorities or by postwar audiences. These include explicit images of hunger in the camp and depictions that illustrate how Helena's child died at night, killed by rats. This particular situation is described in several historical accounts. For example, Irena Strzelecka in her study about Auschwitz hospitals writes that "hospital rooms were infested with fleas and lice. In Birkenau, the hospitals swarmed with rats. At night they gnawed at the bodies of dead prisoners, even attacking the unconscious and weakest patients."⁵⁵ In *Testimony from the Nazi Camps: French Women's Voices*, Margaret-Anne Hutton tells of a French woman who gave birth to a child who "was hidden from sight but killed by a rat soon after birth, precipitating the suicide of its mother."⁵⁶

The script, however, not only depicts the inhuman conditions at Auschwitz but also (as in the released film) stresses the importance of prisoners' solidarity and the role of the communist resistance in Auschwitz. The prisoners help Helena, who is transferred to the *Revier*. One of the heroic characters, the political prisoner Kostek, helps the prisoners with medications and cigarettes, and he also "summarizes the political news" (pp. 12–13). Another member of the antifascist resistance at Auschwitz, German communist prisoner Anna Koch, distinguishes

herself as a courageous and dignified person whose face and whole demeanor make her unique.

Even though Alina Madej argues that Anna's prototype was communist prisoner Anna Blumauer (killed in December 1943), her camp number 586 indicates clearly that she was modeled on Gerda Schneider. Anna is the camp *Lagerälteste* (senior prisoner in charge of daily operations, implementing the commandant's orders), who defends Polish women tormented by other German female prisoner-functionaries. She is a devoted and fearless communist who is not afraid to ask commandant Müller to improve cleanliness and sanitary conditions in the camp because "the epidemic doesn't ask if one is German and what uniform one is wearing" (p. 21). Asked by Müller why she is in the camp, she proudly answers that she is a communist and has been a prisoner for eight years, which matches Schneider's own biography as well. The Germans treat Anna in a respectful manner; fellow prisoners are fearful of her but they respect her. "I cannot take it anymore. I've been suffering for the whole eight years," says Anna to another prisoner, Steffi (p. 25). Anna is also full of indescribable contempt for Lalunia, a negative Polish character who pretends to be a doctor and is put in charge of the infirmary, thus endangering the lives of fellow prisoners. Because of Lalunia's denunciation, Anna is later arrested and brutally interrogated. Lalunia herself faces camp justice later when she is killed by two German *Kapos* "with faces typical for criminal types" (p. 142).

The character of Jewish-Polish Marta appears late in the script, on page 29. Unlike in the film, in the script she does not translate after the arrival of her transport since the commanding German officer delivers a speech in perfect Polish to the arriving group. She is sent to the "group of life" by the SS guard, whom she addresses in German. Later she learns that her entire family was killed. As in the film, Marta's execution features prominently in the script, although not as the final scene (pp. 159–61). Standing on the gallows, Marta shouts to her fellow prisoners: "Female comrades! Don't fear! They cannot do anything to you. Their rule is nearing the end. Keep going! Don't fear!" She cuts her veins and hits the *Lagerkommandant* in the face. Her heroic last moments are juxtaposed with her dying vision of the incoming planes, the bombing of the camp, and the images of advancing tanks (perhaps the vision of the Soviet offensive?).

Throughout the script there are several references to the Jewish plight: images of selections to the gas (pp. 35, 51–52); the presence of heavy smoke over the crematoria (p. 106); a transport of Jewish children walking toward the crematoria (p. 106); the flames from the chimneys that “lit the whole area” (p. 140). This early version of the script also describes the inhumane conditions in the camp controlled by drunken SS guards, including “the mud that freezes around the legs” (p. 50), and the idea that “the whole camp makes an impression of a madhouse” (p. 48).

The script features many situations and characters present in the film; it includes the heroic ordeal of Dessa and other Yugoslav female partisans (p. 108) but, unlike the film, also depicts Helena’s death as she runs in despair toward the gate and is shot by the guard. The last scene of the script shows the evacuation of prisoners from Auschwitz—the so-called death march—with Anielka in the center. After Anielka’s extended flashback, the script ends with the return to the trial scene. Anielka looks at the accused SS functionaries and addresses the judge: “This is only a fragment of the truth about the women’s concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau” (p. 165), in a way offering Jakubowska and Schneider’s own explanation for making the film, which appears in the film’s opening credits.

Auschwitz-Birkenau

The second preserved version of the script, titled *Auschwitz-Birkenau* (Oświęcim-Brzezinka), is shorter (113 pages) and more compact. The credits feature a multinational aspect of Auschwitz. Listed among the characters are, among others, Marta Weiss who is described as Slovakian-Jewish, another brave German communist Anna (this time Anna Schmidt), a group of Russian prisoners including Eugenia, Nadia, and Marusia, a Czech, Steffi Kudowa, a Yugoslav partisan, Dessa, the Poles Kostek and Edek, and a French woman Mimi.

The story opens with a scene of the evacuation of Auschwitz—a march of female prisoners from the camp. The initial dialogue effectively captures the intentions of Jakubowska and Schneider, and shows how the script evolved and incorporated the politics of the day (pp. 2–3). One of the prisoners says that Birkenau was reportedly liberated this morning and adds: “The SS defend themselves in **our** Auschwitz” (emphasis



The *Revier*. Russian prisoner-doctor Eugenia (Tatiana Górecka), German prisoner Anna (Antonina Górecka), and the SS doctor or *Lagerarzt* (Edward Dziewoński). Author's collection.

added).⁵⁷ A Polish prisoner, Anielka, responds: “Who is going to believe that Auschwitz did exist, since for us, today, it seems to be a nightmarish dream?” The Russian nurse Marusia agrees: “Yes, exactly, who’s going to believe; who’ll be able to listen to us? They will call us crazy.” An anonymous voice from the crowd utters: “But Auschwitz is a fact!” Another Polish woman, Helena, comments: “Auschwitz should teach the world a lesson, because Auschwitz is the most essential truth about fascism. About fascism as it essentially is, plain and without a mask. We already know how to detect Hitler’s helpers not only in the SS uniforms, but also among us” (p. 3). The last comment perhaps is a chilling reminder of the time of show trials within the communist bloc and the search for fascists, imperialist spies, and saboteurs not only among the general population, but also within the communist ranks.

Also on page 3, one of the prisoners asks: “Tell me what shall be done to make them believe?” Marusia’s answer, in a way resembling Jakubowska’s own conviction, is: “First of all one has to make films.” The French woman Mimi and others tell their stories. Anna Schmidt narrates Gerda Schneider’s story about the nine years of incarceration in different prisons and camps: “Barbed wire and iron bars, iron bars and barbed wire until the barbed wire and the gate of Birkenau” (p. 4). Anna has Schneider’s camp number 586 and also came to Birkenau in 1942. With the Russian prisoner-doctor Eugenia she is at the center of the Auschwitz

resistance: heroic, full of disgust for the “Hitlerites,” and not afraid of the *Kommandant*. This is Anna, not Eugenia as is later presented in the film, who is persecuted and suffers in the “bunker”—the punishment cell in Block 11, known as “the death block” (p. 106).

The script once more relies on the flashback structure. It introduces female prisoners of several nationalities, among them the pregnant Helena Ostrowska, a female worker from Warsaw who gives birth to a child in the camp, but loses it during a night battle with rats (p. 8). There is also the Czech, Steffi, a *Blockowa* active in the underground, and Anielka Ciechowska from the Warsaw transport who is assigned 24123 as a number, the first number of the actual November train transport from Warsaw. Once again the Jewish-Polish Marta is introduced later, on page 24, when after being transported to Auschwitz, she is separated by the SS from her family. She also dies tragically. During her execution, she repeats the same words from the first version of the script (p. 108) and has a dying vision of the liberation: the incoming planes and the advancing tanks (p. 109).

The script also offers several comments on different nationalities, some bordering on stereotyping (interestingly, the words “Jews” [Żydzi] or “Jewish women” [Żydówki] are not capitalized, which is the standard practice in Polish language). For example, there is the following comment about French and Russian prisoners: “The French women were physically weak. They were freezing terribly, the marches tired them. But they had developed an instinct and a will to fight. The Russian women were stronger and more resilient, but confused, not understanding the reality” (p. 44).

The last scene of the script returns to the framing story and focuses on female prisoners during the evacuation of the camp—the death march. Anielka, Dessa, Marusia, and other inmates encounter the advancing Soviet tanks, and their wartime nightmare is over (p. 113).

As stated earlier, in light of the remaining documents it is difficult to argue when the two versions of the script were written and, therefore, exactly how the scriptwriting process evolved. Jakubowska submitted two copies of the shooting script to the Production Department of Film Polski on January 13, 1947, and this version had been subjected to numerous revisions as well.⁵⁸