Screening Auschwitz

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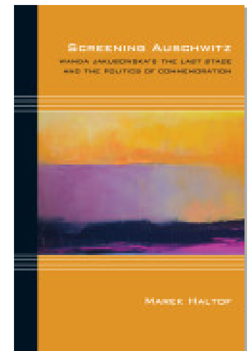

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CHAPTER 3

Return to Auschwitz

The Making of the Holocaust Classic

I wanted *The Last Stage* to show the truth about Auschwitz and to evoke a feeling of hatred toward fascism.

—WANDA JAKUBOWSKA

Poland after 1945

Jakubowska was working on her film about Auschwitz in a country that had suffered enormous human and material losses during World War II: its state borders were changed; its entire national fabric had been transformed; its whole political system had been remodeled. Poland lost more than 6 million citizens, almost 22 percent of the entire population. That number includes about 3 million Polish Jews—approximately 90 percent of Polish Jewry—who perished during the war in the ghettos and in the extermination camps built by Nazi Germany in occupied Polish territories.[1] No longer a multinational state, Poland became an almost homogeneous society ethnically: The Polish Jews had been murdered; the defeated Germans were forced to resettle behind the Oder-Neisse/Odra-Nysa Łużycka line; the Ukrainians and other nationals who populated eastern provinces were now part of the Soviet Union or were deported there; and the Poles from the East were forced to move to regained Polish western provinces. As a consequence, Poland started to become an ethnic and religious monolith, with the majority of the population being Roman Catholic. Before August 1945, approximately 800,000 Poles

returned from Germany to Soviet-liberated (and -occupied) Poland, including former concentration camp prisoners, POWs, and slave workers. That number reached 1.6 million before the end of 1947.[2]

The Polish Committee for National Liberation (Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego, PKWN), acting as the Soviet-controlled provisional Polish government, was instituted by the Polish communists in the summer of 1944 in the eastern city of Lublin. Some of its decrees were aimed both at aiding the prosecution of war criminals in Poland and at discouraging opposition to the Soviet-imposed, largely feared and hated government. Even before the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes (Główna Komisja Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich w Polsce) was established in November 1945, the PKWN prosecuted war crimes through its special penal courts—for example, in the trial of the Majdanek concentration camp guards. The Supreme National Tribunal (Najwyższy Trybunał Narodowy) was founded in January 1946 with the task of prosecuting German war criminals, which led to several high-profile trials, including the trial of Arthur Greiser, the governor of Warthegau (Polish western lands under German occupation) in June–July 1946, and that of Rudolf Höss, the Auschwitz commandant, in March 1947. Discussing the cases before the Supreme National Tribunal, Aleksander V. Prusin emphasized that its personnel had impressive professional credentials in their educational background (eighteen out of thirty-seven had doctoral degrees in law) and extensive prewar practice.[3]

The trial of Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss, which resulted in his being hanged on April 16, 1947, was followed by another highly publicized (as well as filmed) trial of forty Auschwitz personnel, including former Auschwitz commandant Arthur Liebehenschel and the *Oberaufseherin* in the women's camp at Birkenau, Maria Mandel. Before the Polish Supreme National Tribunal in Kraków, the trial began on November 24, 1947, and ended less than a month later, on December 16. The sentencing on December 20, 1947, was followed by twenty-one executions carried out on January 28, 1948, at the former Gestapo prison in Kraków. These trials received as much publicity in the Polish press as postwar political show trials of the opponents of Sovietization of Poland. Other trials of German war criminals also achieved high visibility, including the trial and sentencing of Amon Göth, the commandant of

the Płaszów concentration camp (from August to September 1946), and Ludwig Fischer, the governor of the Warsaw district (from December 1946 to February 1947).

Poles witnessed several public hangings of their war tormentors, including five former Majdanek personnel executed in Majdanek on December 3, 1944, and also in Majdanek, the execution of Paul Hoffmann, the former head of the crematorium. Other cases included the public execution in Gdańsk (former Danzig) of eleven personnel of the Stutthof concentration camp (six men and five women) on July 4, 1946. The last documented public execution was that of Arthur Greiser in Poznań on July 21, 1946.

The public executions, captured on photographs and film, were attended by thousands of people. The execution of the eleven sentenced Stutthof guards, administered by several former camp prisoners dressed in striped uniforms, was watched in Gdańsk by almost 50,000 people. In his book *Wielka trwoga* (*Great Fear: Poland 1944–1947: People's Responses to the Crisis*), historian Marcin Zaremba writes that not only were people encouraged by the authorities to attend the hanging, but also some factories even had a day off.[4] The practice of public executions ended after it was criticized by many prominent politicians and lawyers, including the minister of justice, Henryk Świątkowski (a former Auschwitz prisoner), who, in a letter of August 15, 1946, addressed to the State National Council (Krajowa Rada Narodowa, KRN)—then the legislative and executive center—argued that public executions no longer fulfilled any positive preventive functions and that they stirred unhealthy emotions among thousands of onlookers.[5]

Polish filmmakers—Jakubowska's colleagues from the prewar START group—documented the postwar trials and executions.[6] In 1944, Aleksander Ford and Jerzy Bossak produced one of the most iconic Holocaust documentaries, *Majdanek, the Cemetery of Europe* (*Majdanek—Cmentarzysko Europy*). In a detailed study of the film published in 2006, Stuart Liebman calls *Majdanek* "the first to develop visual and narrational strategies to dramatize the unprecedented story of German brutality in a camp."[7] The film featured footage taken after July 23, 1944, when the Red Army captured the southeastern Polish city of Lublin, along with Majdanek, the first Nazi German death camp located in the Polish territories, which was situated on the outskirts of this town. The

ill-equipped Czołówka camera operators—treated with suspicion by the Soviets—were unprepared for the task and had to work with heavy and unreliable cameras and with limited supplies of film stock. Camera operator Stanisław Wohl recalled his experiences in an article published in 1969: "We entered there just a couple of minutes after the Germans' escape. In the ovens of the crematoria there were partly burned corpses; the *Muselmänner* crawled on the ground, the prisoners wanted to greet us, but they had no strength to raise their hands or shout."[8]

Stanisław Wohl and the brothers Adolf and Władysław Forbert also photographed the trial of the Majdanek SS guards and *Kapos*, along with the public execution by hanging of six Majdanek personnel. This footage was later included in the 25-minute compilation documentary *Swastika and Gallows* (*Swastyka i szubienica*, 1945), produced by Kazimierz Czyński and edited by Wacław Kaźmierczak, the latter also responsible for editing some of the best known postwar Polish documentaries. Stuart Liebman writes that *Swastika and Gallows* "arguably has the distinction of being the first cinematic portrayal of a trial concerning what we would call today the Holocaust or Shoah."[9]

Adolf Forbert, Jakubowska's colleague from the START group, was among the first photographers and filmmakers at the site of another concentration camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau, on January 28, 1945, after it was captured by the Red Army. With limited resources at his disposal (only 300 meters of film stock, no lighting equipment, one Bell & Howell camera), he was nonetheless able to capture several images, which he sent to a laboratory for development and never saw again.[10] Forbert's footage of the liberated camp most probably was lost and never resurfaced, neither in *Auschwitz* (*Oświęcim*, 1945), made by the Red Army filmmakers led by Roman Karmen, nor in other, later war documentaries. Forbert's photographs from Auschwitz, however, were included in the *Polish Newsreel* (no. 7, 1945).[11]

Polish filmmakers also documented trials and executions of the SS guards at other German camps—for example, in *The Gallows in the Stutthof Concentration Camp* (*Szubienice w Sztutthofie*, 1946), the special edition of the *Polish Newsreel* directed by Aleksander Świdwiński. Images of war atrocities and public executions were often censored in Poland and sometimes treated as classified material, though not necessarily for political reasons. Photographs of the hanging of the former Auschwitz

commandant Rudolf Höss on April 16, 1947, were published for the first time in 1995 by Polish journalist Andrzej Gass.[12] Sentenced to death by the Polish Supreme National Tribunal, Höss was hanged on gallows built by German POWs on the grounds of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Although Höss's trial was widely covered by Polish newspapers, which described German brutality in graphic details, the public was spared the image of another execution. In her insightful book, *Photographing the Holocaust: Interpretations of the Evidence*, Janina Struk comments: "Following widespread revulsion at gruesome scenes filmed at the Lublin hangings in 1944 and particularly the public hanging of Arthur Greiser, Nazi governor of Warthegau, in 1946, it was decided that there should be no more public executions. Höss's case was an exception—but the authorities did limit the attendance and suppress publication of the pictures."[13]

Several segments of the *Polish Newsreel* dealt with Auschwitz-Birkenau. The focus was on the liberation of Auschwitz (7/1948), Rudolf Höss's trial (12/1947 and 15/1947), and the Kraków trial of Auschwitz personnel including Arthur Liebehenschel and Maria Mandel (50/1947), as well as several visits by Western Europeans to the former camp (such as the French visit [34/1948]).

Screening "Nazis" in Polish Postwar Cinema

The postwar period in Poland was understandably marked by strong anti-German attitudes. The hostility toward Germans (which was even expressed by writing "germans" without capitalization) is discussed in Marcin Zaremba's study of the postwar years in Poland. He writes that for Poles during the period that followed the war, "the German language and culture seemed disgusting. Some had panic attacks when they suddenly heard in the street the language of their recent occupiers. In the early postwar years, radio broadcasts of classical Russian music by Borodin, Tchaikovsky and Mussorgsky were not only an expression of cultural imperialism of the Soviet Union, but also an expression of opposition toward everything that was German in music."[14]

The forceful mass expulsion of German nationals from Poland was a consequence of the new postwar order: Between 1945 and 1950, approximately 3.5 million Germans were deported beyond the new Oder-Neisse border.[15] The Polish communist authorities, aware of their unpopularity,

often channeled vengeful emotions toward the Germans, perhaps trying to move attention away from Soviet war crimes and postwar repressions of Polish nationalists. The Polish radio started its weekly broadcasts under the title "From the History of German Barbarity in Poland" on February 26, 1945, and although not received widely by the Polish population, they strengthened the image of "the nation of murderers."[16]

Auschwitz became a symbol of "German barbarism." As Jonathan Huener explains convincingly:

> Auschwitz memory was to be a catalyst for anti-German attitudes and policy, a pillar of support for a consistent policy on the Oder-Neisse issue, and a general caution to the rest of the world. This admonitory role was an appropriate complement to the symbolic role of Auschwitz as the 'Golgotha' of the 'Christ among nations,' for a martyrological idiom that emphasized the suffering and sacrifice of the Polish nation also gave that nation a unique responsibility, or even mission, to the rest of the world.[17]

The Polish press published memoirs of former prisoners, accounts of liberation of concentration camps, poems and fragments from literary works dealing with the camps, and reports from the trials of war criminals. This was accompanied by traveling exhibitions of photographs and other materials documenting the crimes committed by the German occupiers in Poland.

Particular attention was given to the postwar trials of German war criminals, which were covered by the press, radio, and the *Polish Newsreel*. The trial reports often provided a detailed description of the physiognomy of the accused and their behaviour on the bench. Edmund Dmitrów writes that it was "accompanied by the unconcealed wish to confront the existing stereotype of a 'German bandit' with his real look." He provides a fragment from the Nuremberg War Crimes Trial report that focuses on Ernst Kaltenbrunner (charged with crimes against humanity, sentenced to death, and executed): "Murder radiates from Kaltenbrunner: he is cold, brutal, and appalling. Looking at him, it is not surprising that he was able to murder several million people."[18]

The representation of the Germans as sadists, thieves, and murderers was later juxtaposed in several reports with comments about their ordi-

nary looks and behavior in front of the judges. This forced several Polish journalists to pose questions about how it was possible to transform the nation of cultured people, known for its philosophers and artists, into "German bandits." They often emphasized that the guilty party was the criminal Nazi system, which transformed regular people into killers.[19]

With the creation of the German Democratic Republic in 1949, the notion of a "good German" entered the Polish political vocabulary. The term "Germans" started to be replaced by "fascists" and "Hitlerites," in a way resembling how the term "Nazis" replaced "Germans" in contemporary English discourse. The Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland changed its name into the Main Commission for the Investigation of Hitlerite Crimes in Poland (Główna Komisja Badania Zbrodni Hitlerowskich w Polsce). Books that had been written about German brutality were withdrawn from circulation. Similarly, limitations were placed on essays and books emphasizing the struggle with German imperialism, expansion into the eastern Slavic countries (*Drang nach Osten*), and the German policy of appropriating neighboring lands (*Lebensraum*) through Germanization or expulsion of Poles.[20]

Polish filmmakers, led by Aleksander Ford and Jerzy Bossak who returned with the Red Army from the East, quickly learned the terror of the occupation by filming the liberation of Majdanek. The *Polish Newsreel*, supervised by Bossak, contained information about German atrocities, postwar trials, and executions of war criminals beginning with its first edition in December 1944. The newsreel commentaries depicted "German barbarity" to the Polish and Western societies. For example, the *Polish Newsreel* 7/1945 (released February 1, 1945) included a segment about the liberation of Auschwitz photographed by Adolf Forbert. It provides the following commentary over the graphic images of the liberated camp, images of barracks, dead bodies, crematoria, and images of the elderly women and children emerging from a barrack:

> Auschwitz. Yet another monument of German creation in Poland. Many kilometers of barracks, the sea of ashes, bones, and corpses hidden for now in the thick snow cover. Like everywhere, the Germans tried to erase all traces of the most massive crimes. But—as elsewhere—it was impossible to hide everything . . . Railway wagons loaded with belongings of the victims. The

> loading station: Konzentrationslager Auschwitz. Destination—Germany. Germany—the country of murderers and thieves. Those who were saved by the unexpected incursion of the Red Army: elderly women and children in Auschwitz waiting for their turn to the crematorium. Take a look at these children. Their faces say: there is no mercy for the Germans. Just as there is no mercy for the jackals and hyenas. The war moved into the German territory. Justice must be served!

Several other commentaries in the *Polish Newsreel*, routinely also placed over the graphic images of liberated camps and postwar trials of war criminals, emphasized that the "Germans will never again be the phantom of Europe. The world will not allow this to happen" (50/1947) or, after listing the enormous crimes committed in Auschwitz-Birkenau: "This is what the Germans are capable of!" (12/1947).

The first postwar Polish film, released in 1947, was Leonard Buczkowski's *Forbidden Songs* (*Zakazane piosenki*), a simple narrative revolving around songs popular in Warsaw during the occupation. Upon its release, it was criticized by the communist authorities and film critics for its lack of political involvement. One of the crucial problems was the alleged misrepresentation of the Germans, "idealizing" the occupier and thus offering a stereotyped and false picture of the occupation. Critic Leon Bukowiecki's comment that the film's representation of the Germans was lacking "barbarism and bloodthirstiness" reflected the general tone of the Polish press, which was acting in unison with the political authorities.[21] As a result, the film was taken off the screens, remade, and then rereleased in 1948. The new version embraced stronger political views, stressed the role of the Red Army in the "liberation" of Warsaw, and portrayed a darker picture of the occupation by emphasizing German brutality.

Shooting in Auschwitz

Jakubowska intended her film to be based exclusively on authentic events that had been witnessed either by her or her fellow inmates (this was stressed in a commentary at the beginning of the film). To reflect the reality of the camp appropriately, she decided to produce her film—

Wanda Jakubowska shooting on location in Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1947.
Boris Monastyrski (*in the middle*). Author's collection.

initially just named *Oświęcim* (*Auschwitz*)—on location in Auschwitz.[22] She made the film with the participation of the local population (inhabitants of the town of Oświęcim), the Auschwitz survivors, the Red Army personnel, and also a small group of German prisoners of war as extras.[23]

Jakubowska did not change her decision to make her film on location in Auschwitz-Birkenau despite the fact that the former camp was changing rapidly. Dozens of its wooden barracks had already been dismantled and transported inside Germany during the last months of 1944. The crematoria and the storage complex, known in the camp as "Kanada," were destroyed several days before the Red Army entered the camp.[24]

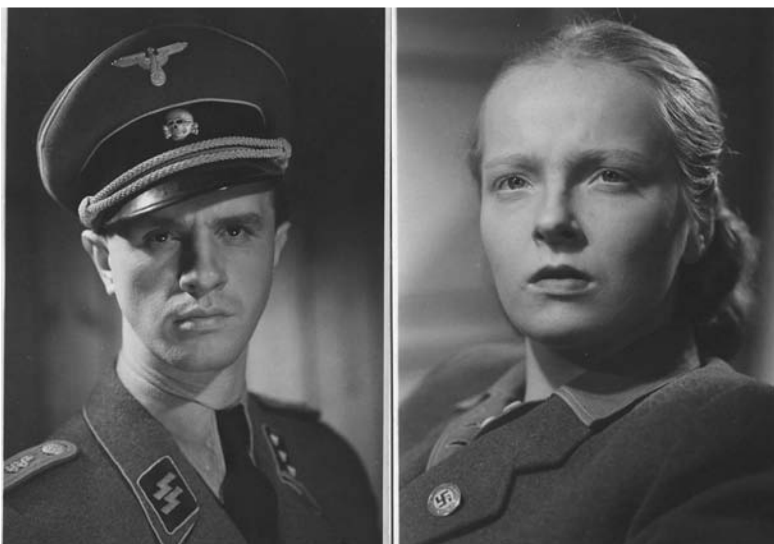
Immediately after the war, Auschwitz served as a POW camp for former German soldiers and as a detention center for ethnic Germans living in Poland (so-called *Volksdeutsche*) and for many Upper Silesians and inhabitants of the Bielsko-Biała region who, in many cases, had been pressured during the war to declare German nationality by signing a *Deutsche Volksliste*. For many of them, Auschwitz became an internment center before deportations to Soviet gulags and slave labor.[25] In his book about the postwar plight of the Germans on territories incorporated into

Poland, R. M. Douglas writes: "Many ex-Nazi concentration camps like Majdanek or Theresienstadt—and even the camp at Auschwitz—never went out of business, but were retained in operation as detention facilities for ethnic Germans for years after the war. At Oświęcim (Auschwitz), the liberation of most of the surviving Jewish inmates of the main camp (Auschwitz I) and the arrival of the first ethnic Germans was separated by less than a fortnight."[26]

When Jakubowska's film was shot on Auschwitz-Birkenau grounds, between July 7, 1947, and September 28, 1947, the camp for the POWs and the *Volksdeutsche* was still in operation; it was first run by the Soviet NKVD, and from the beginning of 1946 it was under the jurisdiction of the Polish authorities. The prisoners, among others, were employed to disassemble equipment in several factories belonging to the Auschwitz complex (equipment that was by and large transported to the Soviet Union) and to dismantle the majority of the wooden barracks in Birkenau (those were either given or sold to the population of neighboring villages and used in the process of rebuilding some Polish cities, chiefly Warsaw). They also helped to exhume corpses on the camp's ground and, interestingly, were involved in the preparation of the first exhibitions at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.[27]

Jerzy Kochanowski writes in his book about the postwar POW camps in Poland that twenty-four German POWs were employed by Film Polski, the producer of Jakubowska's film.[28] Furthermore, POWs working in several Silesian coal mines were constantly reminded about the existence of the nearby Auschwitz camp and taught about its history; later, after the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum was founded on July 2, 1947, they visited the site of the camp. After the release of Jakubowska's film, German POWs also had to watch *The Last Stage*, which formed part of the film canon that was served to German prisoners, together with *Rome, Open City* (*Roma, città aperta*, 1945) by Roberto Rossellini.[29]

Jonathan Huener rightly points out that locating the POW camp in Auschwitz-Birkenau was "a practical measure undertaken with perhaps a touch of vengeful justice" that in the long run helped to secure the site against plunderers.[30] Edward Dziewoński, the Polish actor who in Jakubowska's film plays the part of an evil SS doctor, recalls a scene during a break in shooting of the film in Birkenau, when he and Aleksandra Śląska (who plays the blond *Oberaufseherin*), wearing new SS officers'



Screening Tests. Edward Dziewoński (*left*) and Aleksandra Śląska.
Edward Dziewoński archive. Courtesy Roman Dziewoński.

uniforms, took a walk among the barracks of the camp. They noticed a group of German prisoners of war in scruffy Wehrmacht uniforms working on the camp's premises. "Although nothing had happened," Dziewoński writes, "this was the moment that I will remember forever."[31]

The postwar appearance of Auschwitz-Birkenau had little to do with the images that Wanda Jakubowska carefully preserved in her memory and wanted to portray on the screen: heavy smoke over the crematorium, ever-present mud, and shabby barracks surrounded by barbed wire. After the war, the former Nazi camp Auschwitz-Birkenau came under the supervision of the underfunded Ministry of Culture and Art, administered by a group of Polish former prisoners. The place was routinely vandalized; the rumors about hidden valuables attracted plunderers from the outside. In his important contribution to our knowledge about those early days of the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum, Jonathan Huener writes:

> To the Polish government, to former prisoners working at the site, and to the Polish public at large, Auschwitz *was* a "sacred space"; yet the size, character, and remaining "evidence" of

> what had transpired there was subject to legal, political, and, not least, financial limitations. The Birkenau barracks, for example, were not always the victims of plunder. Eighteen of them were sold to members of the local population in July 1946, with each barracks divided among five villagers. . . . The dismantling of artifacts such as these reveals the perceived, or perhaps genuine, inability of the Polish state to preserve and protect much of what was left of the Auschwitz camp complex, and also illustrates even more graphically what appear today as rather reckless, if practical, measures taken by the local population in a period of extreme material want.[32]

Conflicting ideas about the future of the camp site and the lingering lack of funding to maintain the vast grounds of the memorial site resulted in a deterioration of the camp, Birkenau (Auschwitz II) in particular. The first works of restoration took place in the main camp, Auschwitz I, since it was less damaged, with its infrastructure preserved. Another important factor was that, unlike Birkenau, this was chiefly the site of Polish martyrdom.

Given the limited resources and the inability or the unwillingness of the Polish government to act decisively, Birkenau had to wait with its dilapidated ruins, plundered and disassembled barracks. The sizeable terrain of Birkenau was poorly protected, and its scarce guards were not able to keep looters away from the camp. Polish newspapers often reported disturbing scenes of plunderers who were searching for gold among ash pits. The special correspondent of *Echo Krakowa* wrote in April 1946 a report expressively titled "The Gold Mines of Auschwitz." In this disturbing piece the anonymous writer described the "Auschwitz Eldorado" and condemned "human hyenas" whose "hideous greed and lust for gold drives them daily to the gloomy graveyard. For them there is no martyr legend of millions of defenseless victims. It was replaced by the legend of gold deposits. There is nothing sacred for them, but there will be severe and deserved punishment for this heinous sacrilege."[33] A different report from the same period stated: "The entire space of the camp is plowed, as if plowed by treasure hunters, so one walks on some potholes and bumpy roads covered with grass and chamomile with an intoxicating scent."[34]

In the spring of 1946, during her preliminary on-location research, Jakubowska was surprised to see a different aspect of the camp: “I was shocked because I saw daisies of monstrous proportions and exuberant, indescribable vegetation on the soil that was fertilized by blood and sweat.”[35] One can find similar comments in several Polish newspapers from 1946 and 1947. For example, in June 1947 the correspondent of the daily *Robotnik* had the following to say about the setting of the remaining barracks in Birkenau: “The place is overgrown with lush vegetation, hardy grass, nettles, weeds, daisies growing high and firm, as if this land, swampy here, avenging the years of infertility and trampling, when it could only be fallow under the feet of thousands of martyrs—gushed now with richer juices.”[36]

A group of former Auschwitz prisoners tried to preserve the site by exerting pressure through the Polish Union of Former Political Prisoners (Polski Związek byłych Więźniów Politycznych, PZbWP), which was then headed by Józef Cyrankiewicz (a former Auschwitz political prisoner and the future Polish prime minister), and through the influential postwar journal founded by former political prisoners, *Wolni Ludzie* (*Free People*). Several texts published in that journal stressed the necessity to preserve Birkenau. In a piece titled “The Death of Birkenau,” one of the former prisoners of the women’s camp (*Frauenkonzentrationslager*) argued that in the summer of 1947 it was difficult to see the traces of the real camp: “the former women’s camp is an utter ruin that nobody cares about.”[37] For the anonymous writer, the real camp was Birkenau, not the well-preserved site of Auschwitz I, the base camp (*Stammlager*): “The center of gravity of Auschwitz was precisely in Birkenau, in its endless rows of stables that in the summer and winter drowned in muddy swamp, where there was nothing green, and the only change that our eyes could find were the tongues of fire above the chimneys of the crematoria.”[38]

The decree issued by the Polish parliament on July 2, 1947, declared the site of the former concentration camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau to be under state control, serving as “a monument to the martyrdom and struggle of the Polish and other peoples.”[39] Jakubowska was shooting her film soon after the museum was officially founded with its emphasis on Polish martyrdom, and her project was certainly in line with the official stand. Preparatory work on the film started on April 3, 1947; construction

Production still. Birkenau 1947: re-creating the *Appelplatz*. Wanda Jakubowska's archive. Courtesy Katarzyna Rudomino.

work on location was done between July 5 and 15, 1947; and filming took place from July 7 to September 28, 1947.[40]

In addition to removing the vegetation before the shooting, Jakubowska also restored part of the women's camp at Birkenau, in particular, six wooden barracks that were rebuilt from the preserved materials.[41] The need to reconstruct part of the camp had to do with the fact that in 1946 the Birkenau barracks were appropriated by the Ministry of Reconstruction and its Warsaw State Building Enterprise (Stołeczne Przedsiębiorstwo Budowlane). This state company promptly dismantled and transported from the former camp approximately 200 barracks.[42]

The neglect of Birkenau clearly marginalized not only the Holocaust victims, but also the women who were imprisoned in the *Frauenkonzentrationslager*. This happened despite the fact that soon after the war ended, Birkenau became the site memorialized in several well-known autobiographical accounts published by its former prisoners: Severyna Szmaglewska's *Smoke over Birkenau* (1945), Krystyna Żywulska's *I Came Back* (1946), and Zofia Kossak-Szczucka's *From the Abyss: Memories from the Camp* (1946).[43] The first postwar literary account of Birkenau,

written by Szmaglewska and published toward the end of 1945, was even added as evidence by the International Tribunal in Nuremberg in February 1946. Szmaglewska, who was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1942 and escaped during its evacuation in January 1945 (camp number 22090), also testified during the Nuremberg Trial. Jakubowska undoubtedly was familiar with those renowned and much-publicized books, although given her left-wing sympathies, most probably she did not share their depoliticized—albeit accusatory—view of the camp. In addition, in conducting her research, Jakubowska was arguably also aware of the first historical study on Auschwitz-Birkenau, published by Jan Sehn in 1946.[44]

Striving for authenticity, Jakubowska insisted on hiring Auschwitz survivors to work on her film. The former prisoners and the inhabitants of the town of Oświęcim eagerly responded to the director's advertisements placed in local newspapers. In addition to serving as extras, the camp's former inmates played several episodic roles—for example, Elżbieta Łabuńska (camp number 83631, in Auschwitz from August 12, 1944)—which in a sense forced them to relive their Auschwitz experiences. According to Jerzy Kawalerowicz, an assistant director on Jakubowska's film (and later one of the leading Polish directors), these actresses "were wiser than all assistant directors; they knew everything from experience. They saw it. Those former inmates were returning to their places."[45] Kawalerowicz also had the following to say:

> It was a spectacular film, so to speak, with many extras—most of them women. Jakubowska worked with the actors; I and Jan Rybkowski [credited as art director; later an accomplished director—MH][46] with the extras. Our job was not easy because we had to control up to 400 women—former Auschwitz prisoners. They knew everything. When they entered the barracks, they started behaving as if they were still in the camp controlled by the Germans. They would run, line up, do everything automatically. It was scary to us.[47]

Moreover, the majority of the film's crew had survived the terror of the occupation in Poland. They were knowledgeable about the history of

the camps; some had even experienced incarceration in concentration camps. Apart from Jakubowska and Schneider, this was also the case of the set designer Czesław Piaskowski, actresses Elżbieta Łabuńska and Barbara Fijewska (a prisoner of Bergen-Belsen and sister of actor Tadeusz Fijewski, a prisoner of Oranienburg and Dachau). Some had been AK (Home Army) fighters during the war, including assistant director Zbigniew Niemczynowski, actors Krystyna Sznerr-Mierzejewska, Stefan Śródka, and Jerzy Rychter (who played an SS officer and had fought during the Warsaw Uprising against the Germans).

Jakubowska also consulted with and employed former prisoners for preparatory work on the film. For example, Ludwik Lawin (camp number 2003) left a testimony that he was helping to prepare the grounds of Birkenau before the shooting of *The Last Stage*.[48] During the war, Lawin was arrested and held at the Pawiak prison in Warsaw until August 13, 1940, then sent to Auschwitz in the first transport from Warsaw, mostly consisting of people who had been detained in street roundups. In Auschwitz he worked as a gardener until November 1944.

Several documents at the State Archive in Katowice, Division Office in Oświęcim, support the fact that the crew used authentic goods that belonged to Auschwitz victims and former Auschwitz prisoners, which were in the possession of the Regional Office for the Liquidation of German Property. The document from June 21, 1947, enumerates goods borrowed from its stores by Film Polski to be used as props in the film, among them 14 luggage bags, 500 pots, and 100 old shoes—all items belonging to former prisoners.[49] The document also states that all items would be returned after the completion of the film. Another document, signed by producer Mieczysław Wajnberger on July 15, 1947, confirms the receipt of a Viennese grand piano "Hofbauer" for the film composer Roman Palester from the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum.[50]

The idea of shooting the film on location in Auschwitz-Birkenau not only contributed to its quasi-documentary appeal but also had an enormous impact on the film's crew. For example, actress Hanka Redlichówna (aka Anna Lutosławska, who plays Urszula) stated that during the making of *The Last Stage* the actors lived in the authentic barracks of Auschwitz and their "clothes were the authentic striped clothing of prisoners that, although disinfected, still contained blood stains. . . . The air was filled with a characteristic unpleasant smell that had a depressing

effect on us."[51] Commenting on filming in Auschwitz, cinematographer Monastyrski stressed that this was a difficult task not only for actors, but also for those on the other side of the camera: "Looking at our actors playing in the selection scene, when people are selected to crematoria, even we had to stop shooting—tears not allowed us to work."[52]

Several press reports published in the summer of 1947 emphasized that this was still the kingdom of death, perhaps the largest cemetery in the history of mankind: "Everywhere on the ground there are visible small white fragments of human bones—everywhere we are walking on human remains."[53] Actress Barbara Fijewska (Anielka), who was reliving her own concentration camp experience, stressed that actors were motivated by the fact that this film was intended as a "document of human suffering": "Numerous bruises and swellings that we brought from [the film set of] Auschwitz testify how we immersed in our roles—the result of a realistic treatment of their tasks by our friends who were cast as the camp authorities. It could not be avoided, however, if the film was going to give the impression of truth and authenticity."[54]

Given the grim topic of the film, its location shooting, and the participation of people traumatized by the war, it may perhaps come as a surprise to observe the presence of dark humor on the film's set. Roman Dziewoński recalls conversations with his father, the actor Edward Dziewoński, who often said that he had never listened to so many macabre jokes as were told on the set of *The Last Stage* by former Auschwitz prisoners. Without them, the actor believed, they couldn't have survived the making of the film in this horrific place.[55]

The importance of dark humor in the camps was often stressed by former prisoners. This was a way to preserve sanity in an insane environment, a defense mechanism to survive the grim and absurd situation, and perhaps one of the ways to resist by ridiculing the inhumane system. In a conversation with Stuart Liebman, Jakubowska pointed out her tattooed camp number and said: "The reason the numbers became smaller is because I was telling jokes to the person tattooing me!"[56]

In a documentary film about Jakubowska made in 1997, *I Am a Grandmother of Polish Cinema* (*Jestem babką polskiego kina*), actor Jacek Chmielnik—who was involved in Jakubowska's last film, *The Colors of Loving* (*Kolory kochania*, 1988)—commented that during the making of this film Jakubowska was telling stories and anecdotes from Auschwitz.

One story involved the inmates who were staging a traditional drama, the performance attended by other prisoners and the SS guards. The play included a scene of a middle-class funeral with a proper casket and flowers. During that scene, both the SS personnel and the prisoners started to laugh hysterically—they were all aware of its surreal nature in Auschwitz.[57]

Jakubowska started shooting her film with the scene of a roll call on the *Appelplatz* and the scene of a *kommando* leaving the camp for work. The extras in those scenes (masses of female prisoners) were, interestingly, played by Soviet soldiers. After Stalin's approval of *The Last Stage*, Jakubowska recalled that the Red Army stationed in Poland was at her disposal: "The entire Russian Army in Poland was put at my disposition. I therefore had a very easy time making the film. . . . Many of the people in the film were Red Army personnel. Because the Russian Army participated, it was as cheap as red borscht!"[58] The Soviet soldiers appeared as female prisoners in scenes requiring thousands of extras. Jakubowska praised them in interviews, stressing that they were much disciplined and well trained.[59] This is corroborated by several testimonies of others; Jan Wiktor Lachendro, one of the Polish extras, writes:

> Along the road was a column, first of extras in striped uniforms, followed by troops of soldiers who had scarves on their heads made of gray ruffled tissue paper and, behind the soldiers, we—brought on trucks from the surrounding area. Despite the heat, we stood there for a couple of hours. The actors in uniforms, with dogs, herded us to the column when we wanted to sit down on the grass in a ditch. We had been experiencing then the feelings of actual prisoners. Later, during the screening of the film, it turned out that this shot, repeated for so many hours, have been edited out.[60]

The authorities of Film Polski looked at the first rushes, liked what they saw, and allowed Jakubowska to continue her work.[61] She also wanted to cast a group of female German POWs in supporting roles and extras as the SS personnel. The Polish Ministry of Public Security, however, strongly objected to this idea. Responding to Jakubowska's inquiry, the

ministry's Department of Prisons stated in a letter of March 24, 1947, that they could not fulfill the request of Film Polski to put at its disposal German female prisoners because, apart from some technical and legal problems, "it would be offensive to the memory of millions of Poles murdered by the Germans, if their martyrdom was to be replicated on screen by the Germans, even if only in the role of extras."[62] Despite the sentiment that the presence of the Germans on the set of the Auschwitz film might offend the memory of those who were killed in Auschwitz, Jakubowska worked closely with Schneider and a select group of German POWs. Jerzy Kawalerowicz recalled that Schneider's role was more prominent than just serving as a coscriptwriter. For him, Schneider basically codirected the whole film.[63]

On October 1, 1947, the magazine *Film* reported from the set of Jakubowska's production that the "film's crew made their home in the former SS quarters, and Wanda Jakubowska decided to stay in the house belonging to the former commandant of the camp, the recently hanged Rudolf Höss."[64] This same report also contained information about the German POWs who volunteered to appear in the film: "It is worth seeing how the self-effacing German POWs, when they obtain the almost new SS uniforms and put them on, immediately regain their former haughtiness; they seem to be truly dangerous. First and foremost, this makes the director happy, who wants to portray the Germans the way we all know them."[65]

The production history of *The Last Stage* offers many such absorbing narratives. Edward Zajiček comments that the film's producer, Mieczysław Wajnberger, used as extras a group of unsuspecting Jewish-French visitors in Auschwitz, to whom he offered a free train ride from Auschwitz to Birkenau. He kept them for several hours in the heat of a summer day locked in a cattle train. When the doors opened, the tourists faced the SS guards with their dogs. Although the filmmakers were very pleased with the verisimilitude of the scene, Zajiček writes, the tourists were not, nor were the French Embassy and the Polish Foreign Service.[66] It is worth adding that Wajnberger had been described as a penny-pinching producer by some of those involved in the production of the film. For example, in his memoirs, Edward Dziewoński recalled the making of a scene with prisoners being loaded on trucks heading for the gas chambers. During the filming, a couple of extras fell off the truck, injuring

themselves. When somebody shouted that blankets were needed, Wajnberger responded by yelling, “Only the old ones!”[67]

Jakubowska was making her film about a camp whose victims belonged to many nationalities. One of her principal goals was to document a struggle with fascism that united different people under the communist banner. This international aspect is reflected by the presence of the German communist scriptwriter, the Soviet cinematographer Boris (Bentsion) Monastyrski (1903–1977), and the international cast. The role of the French prisoner Michèle that was originally planned for actress and singer Juliette Gréco (who initially agreed) was eventually played by another French actress, Huguette Faget.[68] Two actresses from the Soviet Union, Tatiana Górecka (as Eugenia, the Russian prisoner-physician) and Maria Winogradowa (as Nadia, the Russian nurse), had to be approved at the highest level (Jakubowska’s first choice to play Eugenia did not get a Soviet passport, and the Soviet authorities replaced her with Górecka without consulting the film’s director).

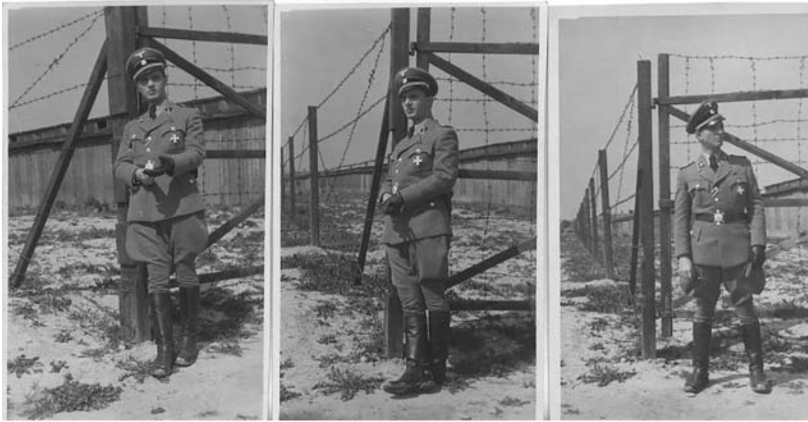
In several interviews and published statements, Jakubowska called her film a quasi-documentary (“all the characters were real, not fictional”), and she asserted that some of the characters were based on people she knew personally and others on stories told her by other inmates.[69] Determined to produce a documentary-like film, Jakubowska (as mentioned earlier) planned to cast German actors and POWs to play the SS staff of Auschwitz, but this was not permitted by the Film Polski authorities. Art director Jan Rybkowski, who was responsible for casting (among other things), brought actress Aleksandra Śląska (1925–1989) originally to play Marta, and Barbara Drapińska (1921–2000) for the role of an Auschwitz overseer. Jakubowska recalled that she decided to reverse the roles and ordered an SS uniform for Śląska from the same Jewish tailors who were making SS uniforms in the Litzmannstadt (Łódź) Ghetto. It was after a dress rehearsal, when she noticed Śląska’s “small cold eyes” (Śląska had slightly squint eyes), that Jakubowska realized that the actress was perfect for the German part. “The moment when I gave her a riding whip I knew that she wouldn’t play any female prisoner, but an SS woman,” said Jakubowska.[70] It also helped that Śląska spoke very good German. When the sound was later recorded in Berlin, with German actors and actresses dubbing for Poles cast as Germans, Śląska was not dubbed.[71]

On the film set. From the left: Maria Kaniewska (*Raportführerin*), Edward Dziewoński (*Lagerarzt*), Wanda Jakubowska, Janina Marisówna (*Aufseherin*), Aleksandra Śląska (*Oberaufseherin*). Edward Dziewoński archive. Courtesy Roman Dziewoński.

Piotr Skrzypczak writes that postwar Polish film and theater awaited an ideal actress to play "demonic Hitlerites."[72] The acting style of Śląska—later an accomplished theatrical and film actress—was often described by Polish critics as "royal" and "cold," and her stage presence as "Nordic." Asked why she kept playing German characters, Śląska responded that "it was something new in drama and in literature. Until then we did not have such a prototype; our war experiences had given us such 'opportunities' and provided models to portray these characters."[73]

Playing SS characters soon after the war ended was a demanding task in a country that did not need official communist propaganda in order to hate the German occupiers. In a private letter sent by Aleksandra Śląska to her friend Edward Dziewoński on January 4, 1948, she expressed shock and disgust after seeing photographs of herself wearing an SS uniform on the set of the film. "Are we still actors?!" she asked. "Sometimes it terrifies me."[74]

Dziewoński, who played the *Lagerarzt* (SS doctor), remembered an encounter between actors dressed in SS uniforms, who were just returning from the film set, and a group of unsuspecting French tourists: "One day we were returning to Oświęcim from Birkenau, where the filming



Edward Dzieworński as SS doctor during the shooting of the film at Birkenau. Edward Dzieworński archive. Courtesy Roman Dzieworński.

took place. In the front there were three motorcycles, then a car with SS officers, a big car with Zygmunt Chmielewski as an SS General, and in the end the car with [Aleksandra] Śląska. On that day Auschwitz was visited by a large group of French people who had no idea about the film. I shall never forget the look on the faces of these people."[75] Dzieworński added that in order to avoid similar incidents in the future, the costume and makeup departments were moved from the city of Oświęcim to the film set—the camp itself.

The situation Dzieworński described happened repeatedly. The correspondent of the biweekly *Film* reported in 1947:

> One day during the shooting, the Film Polski cars rode to the market square in Oświęcim in order to pick up actors and extras who were waiting there. The vehicles were already filled with actors and other extras dressed in SS uniforms, armed and ready for filming. When the cars appeared at the market square, the armed SS men jumped out and a group of people rushed to escape in panic, and only after a while did they realize that these are film people.[76]

Fear, panicked reactions, and negative emotions toward the uniformed "Nazis" on the set of *The Last Stage* were also described by those who

served as extras in the film. One of them, Jan Wiktor Lachendro, in 1947 a high school student in Oświęcim, recalled from his childhood:

> Columns of exhausted prisoners were returning from work. . . . The eyes of a child became familiar with this cruel sight. Wishing to help the starving unfortunates . . . we placed in the grass slices of bread spread with something and wrapped in paper in front of the approaching column of striped uniforms. Inmates were quickly bending over and hiding this meager gift. But when the SS men figured out our dealings, they began to walk in front of the column with dangerous looking German Shepherds. With remorse, we then had to give up our assistance. Years later, when Wanda Jakubowska was shooting The Last Stage, we were brought by cars to stand behind actors in the background, who were dressed in striped prisoners' uniforms, to enlarge the waiting crowd. Seeing actors dressed in German uniforms and running along our column with dogs, we looked at them unwillingly almost with hatred, remembering the scenes that occurred in recent years.[77]

Apart from relative newcomers, such as Śląska and Dziewoński (who later became accomplished actors and recognized faces in Polish cinema), Jakubowska and Rybkowski cast experienced prewar actors for other German parts, including actors Zygmunt Chmielewski (SS officer), Kazimierz Pawłowski (head of the Gestapo), and Władysław Brochwicz (*Lagerkommandant* Hans Schmidt). The role of the *Raportführerin* was played by Maria Kaniewska, later an accomplished actress, scriptwriter, and director (chiefly remembered for her films for young adults), and a teacher at the Łódź Film School. For the main parts of Birkenau prisoners, Jakubowska opted for inexperienced young actresses who, with the exception of Wanda Bartówna (Helena), started their careers after the war; some of them—chiefly Alina Janowska (Dessa), Antonina Gordon-Górecka (credited as Antonina Górecka, Anna), and Zofia Mrozowska (Gypsy woman)—later received popular and critical acclaim.

Jakubowska initially planned to work with her friend Stanisław Wohl as a cinematographer, but he was too busy with the production of his own

Birkenau 1947. On the set of *The Last Stage*. Roma Rudecka as *Kapo*, Aleksandra Śląska as *Oberaufseherin*, Władysław Brochwicz as the camp commandant, and Maria Kaniewska as *Raportführerin*. Wanda Jakubowska's archive. Courtesy Katarzyna Rudomino.

film, *Two Hours* (*Dwie godziny*, 1946; released in 1957), a vision of the traumatized and demoralized postwar Polish society, featuring a former *Kapo* from Majdanek and his brutalized victim.[78] Film Polski was able to secure the help of the Soviet cinematographer Boris Monastyrski, who earlier had worked on such projects as Mark Donskoi's *The Rainbow* (*Raduga*), released to positive reviews in 1944 (in Poland in 1947). Based on a novel by Wanda Wasilewska, a Polish communist writer residing in the Soviet Union from 1939 (and three-time recipient of the Stalin Prize for literary works, including *The Rainbow* in 1943), the film offered images of German atrocities and was praised by Stalin himself. Depicting the occupation in Ukraine, Donskoi (who, like Monastyrski, was Jewish) chose to abstain from identifying Jews as the prime target of Hitler's murderous policy. Jeremy Hicks, in his book *First Films of the Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and the Genocide of the Jews, 1938–1946*, argues that the Sovietization of the Holocaust

> involved depriving victims and eyewitnesses of language: for example, despite being photographed, no Jews were recorded in synchronous sound interviews recounting why their counterparts had died. . . . The films address the spectator, demanding a response to suffering in a contribution to the war effort figured as vengeance. To rouse Soviet soldiers to avenge the dead, however, filmmakers thought it necessary to downplay the victim's Jewish identities so as to avoid confronting the Nazi propaganda leaflets' claims that the common Russian soldier was exploited to fight for the Jews. Sovietizing the Holocaust meant editing images of Jews to appeal as widely as possible to the Soviet population, whose feared and presumed anti-Semitism might otherwise cause this call for vengeance to founder.[79]

Hicks lists films by some accomplished Soviet filmmakers that were not released because they made references to Nazi German anti-Semitism and, more important, because the world they represented was too close to the Soviet reality. This group includes Vsevolod Pudovkin and Iuryi Tarych's *The Murderers Leave for the Road* (*Ubiitsy vykhodiat na dorogu*, 1942) and Grigori Kozintsev's *Young Fritz* (*Iunyi Frits*, 1943).[80]

Monastyrski is also known for his work on Donskoi's next film, *The Unvanquished* (*Nepokorennye*, 1945), which explicitly refers to the killing of more than 30,000 Kievan Jews in September 1941. Donskoi's film, according to Hicks, is "the first feature film to reconstruct events of the Holocaust in its depiction of the Nazi massacre of Kiev Jews at Babyi Iar, re-enacted on the actual site of the atrocity."[81] Hicks writes that with its on-location shooting at Babyi Iar "for reconstructing witnessed memory," *The Unvanquished* influenced *The Last Stage*.[82] Indeed, one may add other similarities. Like Jakubowska, Donskoi emphasized Nazi German atrocities, carefully researched his film (during the preproduction stage he visited Babyi Iar and cross-examined eyewitnesses and those who survived the massacre), shot the film soon after the terrible events occurred, ended his film with a scene of the liberation by the Red Army, and attempted to evoke a feeling of hatred toward the fascist ideology.

It has to be noted, however, that Jakubowska's aim from the start was to create a semi-documentary film, shot on the actual location, and with the

participation of people who were knowledgeable about the past, often reliving their camp experiences. Later, she insisted on working with Monastyrski (though not her first choice) because she wanted a paradocumentary look and she knew that Monastyrski would be able to provide this.

Today, given the lack of any archival references, it is difficult to say whether *The Unvanquished* (released in Poland in 1947 as *Dusze nieujarzmione* and barely noticed by reviewers) had any impact whatsoever on Jakubowska's film, although she was likely familiar with it. The same applies to other Soviet films that came to dominate Polish screens after the war. In 1948, some of them were finally released in Poland—for example, Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (*Aleksandr Nevskiy*, 1938) and Donskoi's *Maxim Gorky Trilogy* (*The Childhood of Maxim Gorky/Detstvo Gorkogo*, 1938; *My Apprenticeship/V ludyakh*, 1939; and *My Universities/Moi universitety*, 1940). Even though Polish audiences frequently reacted with hostility to the presence of Soviet films, especially overtly propagandist pictures that idolized Stalin, Jakubowska shared the films' ideological perspective.[83] She was, however, very critical of the way Soviet filmmakers portrayed characters as cartoonish in nature in depicting images of the Nazi German enemy.[84]

On the set of *The Last Stage* Monastyrski was helped by two Polish camera operators. One of them was Andrzej Ancuta (1919–2009), who had documented the Warsaw Uprising in 1944 with his camera and spent the remainder of the war imprisoned in a German concentration camp. The other, less experienced operator, about to begin his career, was Karol Chodura (1921–2001).

Roman Palester (1907–1989), a highly regarded composer of classical and film music, was asked by Jakubowska to write a musical score. They had collaborated once earlier, on the unreleased *On the Niemen River* in 1939. In 1940, Palester was imprisoned for six weeks at the Pawiak prison. He survived the war in Poland and in 1947 settled in Paris, while maintaining close contacts with his homeland. He provided the musical score for the first Polish film, *Forbidden Songs*, and later for *Border Street* (*Ulica Graniczna*, 1949, Aleksander Ford). After 1949—the year in which Stalinist principles in the arts were imposed—he emigrated from Poland, unwilling to produce works in the spirit of Socialist Realism. "Following his final departure from the country, Roman Palester's name was removed from all Polish publications and his scores were

On the set of *The Last Stage*. Barbara Drapińska as Marta (*left*), camera operator Karol Chodura (*center*), Wanda Jakubowska (*center*), Boris Monastyrski (*behind the camera*). Wanda Jakubowska's archive. Courtesy Katarzyna Rudomino.

taken out of circulation. The Governing Board of the Association of Polish Composers (Związek Kompozytorów Polskich) also struck his name from the organization's list of members. Performances of his music were banned."[85]

During the editing stage, Jakubowska consulted her friend, director Jerzy Zarzycki, who suggested several deletions, including the removal of most of Palester's music—she kept only 25 percent of his original film score.[86] Jakubowska recalled that given the enormous size of the project, her male colleagues were convinced that it would be impossible to edit the footage. She commented:

> Behind my back they asked Monastyrski to edit it. Luckily, Lidia Pstrokońska [the film's editor, credited as Róża Pstrokońska] let me know immediately that the cameraman was editing the film on my behalf. I rushed to Monastyrski and shouted that he should get lost, and he gave up. Then they employed Kawalerowicz, who asked to shoot in the studio some idiotic close-ups

> of Drapińska [Marta], completely not in the spirit of my footage. But somehow I was able to free myself from all the helpers that were forced upon me. I asked Lidia [Pstrokońska] to restore the original shape to the single frame. I sat there and edited the whole film in ten days.[87]

Working closely with her editor Pstrokońska, Jakubowska cut the film from 3,600 to 2,800 meters.[88] The released film lasted 104 minutes (2,874 meters) and this version is preserved in the Polish Film Archives (Filmoteka Narodowa). It has been distributed on video and DVD by Polart Video in America. American (and probably Western European) audiences often watched different versions of the film: a 110-minute version (3,011 meters) released in 1949, and a 122-minute version (3,365 meters) shown in 1996.[89]

The ending that Jakubowska intended in the last version of her script never materialized due to bad planning, time constraints, and the large amount of footage that had to be edited out.[90] Instead of a more mainstream ending featuring the surviving female prisoners walking on the road during the evacuation of Auschwitz and being liberated by the advancing Soviet troops, the released film offers a hastily edited, expressionistic, and unfocused ending. The excessive heroics of the last scene were pointed out by several reviewers, including former Auschwitz prisoners, as one of the chief weaknesses of the film. Interestingly, Jakubowska also commented about this film's "wrong resolution" and "ineffective ending."[91]

At the meeting of the Commission for Film Approval (Komisja Kolaudacyjna) in Łódź on April 11, 1948, *The Last Stage* was evaluated as "very good," which was the highest rating on the scale.[92] The commission, chaired by the recently appointed head of Film Polski, Stanisław Albrecht, and including film critic and theorist Bolesław W. Lewicki (an Auschwitz survivor), also applauded the film's "social usefulness."