Screening Auschwitz

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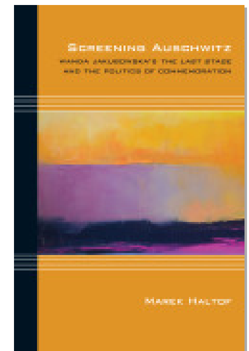

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CHAPTER 4

The Film and Its Reception

The Last Stage opens with a brief, quasi-documentary, pre-credit scene of a German raid on a Warsaw street, which is not present in the available versions of the script. With Helena shown in a medium shot, the dreaded Polish word *łapanka* (roundup) is yelled by one of the fleeing men on the street. Several Polish people are trapped, hastily arrested, and put on a lorry.[1] Among them is pregnant Helena, one of the film's leading characters, who is separated from a man (perhaps her husband) trying to protect her. Nobody checks her occupation identity card (*Ausweis*); everything seems to be done randomly, regardless of nationality, gender, profession, and age.

Although this was neither Jakubowska's nor Schneider's own experience, they attempted from the start to universalize the terror of the occupation and the nightmare of Auschwitz. The roundups were often used by the German occupier to terrorize the population of Warsaw—those caught in roundups on the streets were arrested and transported to labor and concentration camps. In 1943 alone, 6,947 inhabitants of Warsaw were arrested in roundups and sent to concentration camps, chiefly to Auschwitz.[2]

Another scene, over the credits, moves the action of the film to Auschwitz-Birkenau. In a long shot, a steam locomotive pulling a freight train (loaded with Polish prisoners, according to the logic of the film), passing the so-called "death gate" at Birkenau, slowly arrives at the ramp. The arrival of the train at Birkenau, with the SS guards waiting, is one of

the most iconic images in Jakubowska's film and is referred to in several subsequent films, including the best known examples of Holocaust cinema, such as the documentary *Night and Fog* and narrative films *Kapo* (1960, Gillo Pontecorvo), *Sophie's Choice*, and *Schindler's List*.

The credits continue over a low-angle shot of a barbed-wire fence framed against a dark sky. When the credits end, Jakubowska introduces a statement about the authenticity of presented scenes ("the film is based on authentic events"), a disclaimer that they "represent only a small fraction of the truth about the concentration camp in Auschwitz," and an inflated figure in accordance with the knowledge of the day about the number of the victims ("4,500,000"), who are described as "men, women, and children from all of the occupied countries of Europe."[3]

The heavy, dark smoke coming from the arriving steam locomotive in the opening scene is matched by the heavy smoke above a crematorium during the scene of a penal roll call on the *Appelplatz*, a place covered by mud and puddles. The opening shot reveals several barracks and thousands of female prisoners who stand in front of them. The camera then portrays suffering inmates, among them Helena, and an SS-*Aufseherin* (played by Janina Marisówna, aka Morrisówna), who is followed by the Polish *Kapo* Elza (Barbara Rachwalska). When Helena faints, the *Aufseherin* orders the *Kapo* to punish the entire *kommando* ("tell the Russians and the French to thank the Polish woman"). The *Kapo* shouts at Helena, threatens the rest of the *kommando* ("I'll break your bones"), and eventually leaves for her room in one of the barracks. The image of the smoking crematorium ends the scene.

While the *Kapo* is helped in her room by the *Sztubowa* (*Stubendienst*, the room orderly, played by Zofia Niwińska), and entertained by a Gypsy singer (Zofia Mrozowska), the women on the *Appelplatz* attempt to help Helena. One of them, the French prisoner Michèle (Huguette Faget), runs to the *Revier* to ask for help from fellow prisoner functionaries—the German nurse Anna and the Russian physician Eugenia. In the next scene, the fearless Anna is shown in Elza's room informing the *Kapo* that she has taken Helena to the *Revier* because she is about to give birth, and she orders her to relieve the prisoners. The upset Elza has to oblige and dismisses the roll call with a warning: "If you ever again complain to these monkeys from the *Revier*, you'll go out through the chimney of the crematorium."

Publicity still. Helena (Wanda Bartówna, *second from the left*) in front of *Kapo* Elza (Barbara Rachwalska) on the *Appelplatz*. Wanda Jakubowska's archive. Courtesy Katarzyna Rudomino.

The action of almost the entire film is set in the *Konzentrationslager* Auschwitz II (Birkenau), in operation from March 1942 to January 1945. Birkenau is chiefly known as the place where the extermination of Jews took place. Apart from the extermination facilities, however, Birkenau also consisted of transit camps, a quarantine camp for men, a men's camp, a women's camp, the Gypsy family camp, the family camp for Jews from Theresienstadt, the camp hospital, and the warehouses called in camp slang "Kanada," filled with goods stolen from the Jewish transports.[4]

Jakubowska intentionally limited the action to the *Frauenkonzentrationslager*—the women's camp—and focused on its infirmary for the sick, the *Revier*. Her goal was always to depict just one fragment of the camp where, as she writes, "one could accumulate as many facts as possible to show the resistance and at the same time to highlight events typical of all prisoners. The objective was also to select the place of the action that was the least fluctuating. That is how the camp hospital was chosen, the so called *Revier*."[5] The Polish historian Irena Strzelecka writes the following about Auschwitz hospitals:

> In 1942–44, political prisoners, mostly Poles, gradually replaced German criminal prisoners in various positions in the camp hospital system, and they largely monopolized auxiliary jobs. Taking advantage of their dominant position, these prisoners endeavored to help specific patients, especially Poles. Acting mostly underground, they managed to bring sanitary conditions to a tolerable level in a number of hospitals. Thanks to their contacts with various camp underground organizations inside and outside the camp, illegal shipments of otherwise unavailable medical drugs began reaching the hospitals. A considerable quantity of medicine was procured ("organized" in camp slang) by prisoners working in the depots of commando Canada [*sic*] storing and sorting property plundered from the Jewish victims of mass murder. As a result, many prisoners considered at least some camp hospitals as places where professional medical help could be had.[6]

Strzelecka also comments on the important role of "prisoner-doctors (the overwhelming majority of whom were Poles and Jews)" who "made great efforts to counteract the role of camp hospitals in the extermination. In this work they were supported by other prisoners among hospital personnel. Hospital work was one of the few jobs in the camp which prisoners performed with dedication and commitment."[7]

Jakubowska's choice of this location for the setting of the action was in line with several accounts about the resistance in the women's camp in Birkenau emphasizing—as Józef Garliński writes in his book *Fighting Auschwitz*—that "the chief area of activity was the Hospital."[8] Irena Strzelecka stresses yet another aspect of the *Revier*, important in the context of Jakubowska's film: "Like hospitals at other concentration camps of the Third Reich, the hospitals in Auschwitz enjoyed an autonomy of sorts. They were administered by a separate management and were usually set apart from other camp installations and facilities, constituting a sort of enclave in the camp."[9]

In the *Revier*, as depicted in *The Last Stage*, Anna, Eugenia, and the Russian nurse Nadia deliver Helena's baby boy and try to hide him and to protect his mother. The image of the tired but radiant Polish mother Helena with her newborn child is juxtaposed with a shot of imminent

danger—an image of a whistling *Lagerarzt*, the SS doctor approaching the hospital block. Anna and Eugenia tell him that the mother died during birth.

The next scene introduces a famous shot—sometimes present in other films as a documentary image—of a transport train arriving under the cover of night at Birkenau. The graphic scene of the arrival and selection of 2,100 Jews (their number and ethnicity is stated by a German reporting officer) follows. Among the transported people is one of the main characters, Marta Weiss (Barbara Drapińska), who is accompanied by her family. When the *Lagerkommandant* Schmidt notices that Marta is translating his short speech for her fellow prisoners, he chooses her to be a camp translator. This saves her life; most of the transport, including Marta's family, is taken away to be murdered in the gas chamber.

Jakubowska captures different stages of admission to the camp: the arrival in a transport train that is surrounded by the cordon of the SS, ruthless selections, heads being shaved, prisoners forced to strip naked and shower in the presence of fellow female prisoners and the watchful German guards. (Among the guards is a character who might have been taken from future films of Werner Herzog—a strange dwarf, *Oberscharführer*, played by Bolesław Kamiński, who takes care of the stolen goods.) Finally, the new arrivals are tattooed with camp identification numbers on their arms.

As a translator and thus a privileged prisoner, Marta can keep her personal clothing and her hair. In the next scene she is quickly taught by a fellow prisoner the true meaning of the camp. She witnesses a *Muselmann* (the Polish term *muzułmanin* is used), an exhausted prisoner who has lost the will to live, commit suicide by throwing herself against the electrified barbed wire. Soon after, seeing smoke at top of the chimneys, she points to a building covered with dense smoke and asks: "What is this factory?" She learns that this is not just a factory, as she presumed, but the smoking chimney of the crematorium where her transport has just perished: "This is the crematorium where people are burned. Now they are burning those who came with your transport. One day we will all go through the chimney."

The image of heavy smoke over the crematorium dissolves into a photograph of Hitler hanging on the wall and the *Lagerarzt* sitting be-

Publicity still. Prisoner committing suicide by throwing herself against the electrified fence. Author's collection.

hind his desk and talking to nurse Anna. In the next scene the *Lagerarzt* kills Helena's baby by an intracardiac phenol injection, a routine practice with newborn children in Auschwitz until June 1943.[10]

In her film Jakubowska attempts to document an experience that was frequent in the camp. Stanisława Leszczyńska (camp number 41335), a Polish midwife working in the Birkenau *Revier* who was deported to Auschwitz on April 17, 1943, writes in her memoirs that she delivered 3,000 babies in the camp and "despite the appalling mass of filth, vermin, rats, despite infectious diseases, lack of water and other indescribable horrors," all the mothers and newborns survived the birth.[11] A well-known example is the case of Anna Fefferling (Gomez), a pregnant Jewish woman from Warsaw who was transported to Auschwitz on February 12, 1943. She was registered as a Pole under her maiden name Katz (camp number 35133) and on April 18, 1943, gave birth to her son, Józef, who was protected by the nurses and concealed from the SS for several weeks. Later, he was registered in the camp (number 155910).[12]

Unable to bear the pain after losing her child, Helena is shown walking slowly across muddy terrain toward the electrified perimeter fence, visibly considering suicide. The next scene, however, shows her in the *Revier*, surrounded by Eugenia and Anna. She is a woman transformed from a *Muselmann* into a member of the camp resistance who reads aloud a clandestine pamphlet signed by Stalin that was smuggled to the camp by the left-wing resistance. When Helena utters Stalin's name with utmost reverence, the camera cuts to the next scene, which opens with the portraits of Hitler and Himmler hanging on the walls in the office of the Auschwitz SS chief. With a scar on his face, the SS chief is portrayed as a demonic monster by a prewar actor, Kazimierz Pawłowski. The meeting of Auschwitz top personnel, devoted to the need to increase the efficiency of the factory of death, is attended by the Birkenau *Lagerkommandant* Schmidt and introduces the *Oberaufseherin* (Aleksandra Śląska), arguably modeled on Maria Mandel, the *Lagerführerin* of Birkenau.

Throughout *The Last Stage*, Jakubowska depicts the nightmarish conditions in Auschwitz: recurrent roll calls, random executions and selections, images of powerless people being herded to the gas chambers, and the terrifying efficiency of Auschwitz as run by the SS guards and camp administrators—both groups portrayed as the embodiment of evil. The meeting of the camp authorities is followed by a scene of prisoner *kommandos* marching off to work. Shots of *Kapos* viciously beating the weak and older prisoners are juxtaposed with images of the all-female camp orchestra playing cheerful music and the closeups of the distressed face of the orchestra conductor (Halina Głuszkówna). Similar music, as well as imagery, are employed again later when the exhausted prisoners return to the camp.

One of the most brutal scenes depicts the selection of Jewish prisoners, which is administered personally by the SS-*Oberaufseherin* and the SS-*Raportführerin*, the latter clearly modeled on Margot Drechsler. The *Lagerkommandant* calls the crematorium staff to inform them in advance about the action. The prisoners (whose terrified faces are shown in closeups) are guarded by the *Kapos* and the SS men with their dogs, and are loaded onto the awaiting trucks. The *Oberaufseherin*, who during the same scene shows affection for her pet dog, gives an order to proceed, and the prisoners are driven toward the smoking chimneys of the crematoria. The scene ends with the image of white smoke filling the screen.

Aesthetic Issues

In addition to political and ideological problems, Jakubowska faced aesthetic issues while making this first major film about the horrors of Auschwitz. Her goal, as well as the goal of the Film Polski authorities, was to reach large audiences, including those in the West, which entailed the omission of graphic imagery. Jakubowska commented in 1955:

> The camp's reality was human skeletons, piles of dead bodies, lice, rats, and various disgusting diseases. On the screen, this reality would certainly cause dread and repulsion. It was necessary to eliminate those elements which, although authentic and typical, were unbearable for the postwar viewer. . . . Although to some extent the reality of the camp was sanitized, thus less realistic, we decided already in the script not to show these images of the camp that, although typical, were too drastic. This decision did not come easily, but then it turned out that it was completely correct.[13]

Considering the postwar sensitivities, one has to agree with Jakubowska's comment. Films of this period were often subjected to censorship not necessarily on political, but mostly on moral grounds.[14] Jakubowska was aware that despite her goal to document the monstrosity of the camp, in the postwar period "no cinema goer in the world could bear the image of the real Auschwitz."[15] For this reason, Jakubowska tried to avoid explicit imagery and, instead, appealed to the viewer's knowledge of the mechanisms of the death camps. Frequent shots of smoke and flames indicate rather than depict the true nature of the factory of death—the extermination process.

Compared to the early version of the script, the film included fewer explicit scenes showing the brutality of the camp. Yet brutal selections, violence, and random killings are still shown, such as the execution by an SS guard (Tadeusz Bartosik) of a young female prisoner who is singing a joyful song. When asked by *Kapo* Frieda (Anna Jaraczówna), the guard forces her to move near the barbed-wire fence, then arbitrarily kills her, and is rewarded for his deed with three days of leave.

Jakubowska's method concerning on-screen violence is apparent in a

Publicity still. SS officer (Artur Młodnicki) and a girl from the Jewish transport. Author's collection.

scene showing the approaching transport train with Jews whose arrival has been expected by the armed SS with their dogs. In one series of shots, Jakubowska shows a group of Jewish children, unaware of their fate, walking toward the gas chamber. The SS officer (Artur Młodnicki) notices a smiling young girl playing with a ball, asks her to approach him and to pass the ball, returns the smile, and throws the ball away. The image of the marching group of children, surrounded by SS men, is cut abruptly into an image of burning grass and a medium shot of the SS guards returning to their barracks as if finishing a day shift. Another shot captures the child's ball being thrown into a pile of personal belongings left by the Jewish transport. This tracking shot, which shows the extermination process through metonymical images, reveals the actual victims' possessions that Jakubowska used during the filming.

The scene's last image—that of an antique-looking flower vase among the victims' belongings—is superimposed with the image of flowers in this very vase—now in a German home belonging to one of the *Aufseherinnen* who is hosting a festive party. Jakubowska cuts between the

images of mass killing and the theft of Jewish property, and the images featuring a dance party organized for the Auschwitz personnel, attended by some top camp officers and female overseers wearing evening gowns. She also cuts between night transports approaching the awaiting SS guards and the SS men returning home afterward.

The Last Stage, as Jakubowska stated, is a "paradocumentary" with real characters and authentic sets, such as the camp hospital and the doctor's office, that capture real conditions of the camp.[16] The Polish camera operators, Karol Chodura and Andrzej Ancuta, working with the experienced Boris Monastyrski, often employed high-angle shots to show the topography of the camp, its sinister daily operations and structured cruelty: thousands of people standing for hours in agony during roll calls, prisoners marching off to and returning from work; inmates being beaten by guards; the smoking chimneys of the crematoria on the horizon; the trucks with Jewish prisoners moving toward the gas chambers; and the whole process of dehumanization on the muddy terrain full of ditches and puddles, guarded by watchtowers. The shots of terrified prisoners' faces are contrasted with the repulsive faces of their tormentors. Nevertheless, the film's "striking imagery never seems gratuitous or virtuosic," write Stuart Liebman and Leonard Quart, since "Jakubowska always uses it to deepen our vision of the camp ethos rather than merely for esthetic effect."[17]

Tadeusz Lubelski attributes the "overaesthetization" of several camp images to Monastyrski, who had filmed equally "unreal" images of war in Mark Donskoi's *Rainbow*.[18] When *The Last Stage* was released, however, the majority of critics praised Monastyrski, among them writer Jalu Kurek, who called him "an artist of the camera!" and singled out for emphasis scenes with "the forest of women in striped uniforms during the penal roll call that is waving like a field of grain propelled by the wind; this is a picture of despair reaching a mystical dimension."[19] Monastyrski's contribution, the way he perfected the dramatic use of the camera in Polish cinema, and the scene on the *Appelplatz* were singled out for emphasis by other reviewers, including Leon Buczkowski, who stressed the film's "wild beauty."[20] Critics of the film, however, often neglect the role played by the two set designers: Czesław Piaskowski, who knew the reality of the concentration camps firsthand, and Roman Mann, one of the most accomplished set designers working in Polish cinema.[21]

Jakubowska's film, although groundbreaking with regard to its subject matter, takes into account audiences' expectations and follows the established conventions of the day by often indirectly portraying events that were considered too graphic. Jakubowska may not have been familiar with American films such as *Brute Force* (1947, Jules Dassin), but she framed and edited her film similarly, in such a way as to keep graphic violence offscreen.[22] During the scene of interrogation of a prisoner by Captain Munsey (Hume Cronyn), for example, the music comes from an onscreen phonograph, and it is used to block the cries of the tortured person. As Stephen Prince—who discusses this film fragment—writes in his book on representing violence in classical Hollywood cinema: "The politics of the period placed some kinds of violence off-limits to visual representation."[23] Although Poland had only political, not aesthetic (the Production Code) regulations governing screen content during the postwar era, Jakubowska opted mostly for violence that is suggested and can be imagined by the viewer.[24]

Today, in spite of its powerful imagery, for many viewers *The Last Stage* may seem archaic and artificial, in line with the official cultural policy and the dominant aesthetic modes of the late 1940s. Contemporary critics sometimes emphasize the employment of traditional cinematic conventions and the use of proper lighting and makeup that was not appropriate for the context. The film's lighting, as Aaron Kerner observes, possesses some elements of the 1940s Hollywood melodrama. He singles out for emphasis interior shots of female inmates giving them almost angelic qualities (lighting from above): "When one of the women gives birth . . . light emanates from the newborn."[25] For Jakubowska, the emotional response from audiences was clearly as important as the film's "reality effect."

The "Nazis"

To enhance the authenticity of her film, Jakubowska from the start intended to secure German actors to play the Auschwitz personnel. She had already indicated her intention of casting Germans for the German parts in a letter to Film Polski in January 1946.[26] Her efforts to cast German actors were definitively rejected in May 1947. Responding to the decision of the Production Department of Film Polski, Jakubowska

wrote bitterly: "I emphasize that the film is consequently losing its character of a dramatic documentary. Its artistic and political concept is changing for the worse, and the film is losing its propagandistic importance abroad because of a smaller chance of convincing a foreign viewer about the truth of Auschwitz."[27]

Despite the earlier discussion of Jakubowska's extensive research, which included interviews with some of the SS guards from Auschwitz, from today's perspective the Germans are portrayed in a stereotypical and borderline grotesque manner; they are almost demonic, repulsive, sadistic, and lacking in any human qualities. Even a German boy wearing a Hitler Youth uniform, the son of one of the *Aufseherinnen* who is hosting a party for the Auschwitz officers, shouts in the presence of the *Lagerkommandant*: "Shut up you *Muselmann*! Stand up in the line or you'll go through the chimney!" While this causes general laughter, he is complimented by one of the guests: "He'll make a good SS man!"

The corpulent *Lagerkommandant* Hans Schmidt, modeled on the commandant of Birkenau, SS-*Hauptsturmführer* Josef Kramer, is almost ridiculed in a performance by theatrical actor Władysław Brochwicz.[28] He is depicted as a primitive sadist who personally torments and kills prisoners, "a walking rubber truncheon that you never know where it will strike," as the former Auschwitz prisoner Krystyna Żywulska wrote after the film's premiere.[29] Somewhat more nuanced is Jakubowska's portrayal of SS female auxiliaries (*Aufseherinnen*) who, as Irena Strzelecka writes, "distinguished themselves in their savage treatment of women prisoners. Their brutality was shocking even by Auschwitz standards; they also took part in selections, and often initiated them."[30]

Looking at the formulaic German characters on the screen, however, one has to take into account the "Nazis" that peopled earlier European films, for example, the celebrated *Rome, Open City* (*Roma città aperta*, 1945) by Roberto Rossellini. The portrayal of the Gestapo chief, Major Bergmann (Harry Feist), in that film also bordered on caricature, in particular when juxtaposed with the masculine, laconic, communist resistance leader Giorgio Manfredi (Marcello Pagliero). It is safe to assume, however, that Jakubowska was not familiar with Rossellini's film, since it was not released in Poland until 1949.

Interestingly, although for today's viewers *The Last Stage* arguably offers almost cartoonish images of "the Nazis,"[31] their representation was

not seen as untruthful when the film was released. Polish viewers at the time often commented that the film depicted the true nature of fascism: “the horrible mechanism that dehumanized the Germans.”[32] The depiction of the Germans by Jakubowska, however, was in line with strong anti-German sentiments after the war, complete with hatred toward everything German and a heavy emphasis on German barbarity, a portrayal orchestrated by the communists. The Polish communist regime, cognizant of its unpopularity and also aware of strong anti-Soviet feelings in Polish society, channeled negative emotions toward the Germans.

In her perceptive discussion dealing with the screen representation of “Nazis,” Sabine Hake writes that although they have the “status as absolute enemies,” they are undeveloped and lacking individual characterization: “The Nazis rarely acquire the status of fully developed characters; they appear primarily as stereotypical villains, clichéd madmen, and voiceless, faceless extras. . . . Consequently, the main protagonists—the anti-Nazis, antifascists, and nonfascists—assert their narrative agency and prove their democratic credentials.”[33]

While emphasizing German atrocities, Jakubowska introduces images of the brave German prisoner Anna (modeled undoubtedly on scriptwriter Gerda Schneider), announcing perhaps the new policy toward “good Germans” in the German Democratic Republic. The only “good German” in the film, not surprisingly, is a communist political prisoner. Her portrayal is also consistent throughout the early versions of the script, and the references to Schneider’s life are difficult to miss: the same principled character, the same camp number, and the same number of imprisonment years in different camps.

Female Prisoners’ Solidarity

Jakubowska’s objective was not so much to portray the repelling reality of the concentration camp, as to show the camaraderie among women and their solidarity in suffering as well as in their struggle against fascism (see chapter 5, below). She focuses on carefully chosen female inmates, mostly communists and supporters of the communist resistance in the camp, who represent different oppressed nationalities and groups of people. They are chiefly exemplified by a Russian prisoner-physician and a Russian nurse, Nadia; a German nurse, Anna; a Polish woman,

Helena, whose newborn baby is murdered in the camp; a French patriot, Michèle; a Jewish-Polish interpreter, Marta; a Serbian prisoner of war, Dessa;[34] and an unnamed Gypsy singer.

Several scenes in the film depict the resistance in the women's camp. Eugenia and Anna outsmart the *Raportführerin* and protect the women in the *Revier* from the selection to the gas. The camp hospital is supplied with medications and clothing, as well as with political pamphlets, by another communist political prisoner, Bronek (Stefan Śródka), who is one of the resistance leaders, and his comrades, among them Tadeusz (the diminutive form "Tadek" is used throughout the film; played by Stanisław Zaczyk). The result of one of their actions—informing the outside world about Auschwitz—is shown later, when a dance party for the SS officers is interrupted by radio news in German and in Polish about their crimes. In another scene, the Russian doctor Eugenia learns some rudimentary German and tries, to no avail, to reveal the truth about Auschwitz to the Red Cross delegation while it inspects the camp, accompanied by some high-ranked SS officers. For her deed, she pays with her life after a brutal interrogation including hanging by her arms twisted behind her back. In this and several other scenes Jakubowska employs upbeat diegetic music that contradicts the harsh images. The cheerful music serves as a prelude to the graphic interrogation scene (with an image of the SS man preparing the torture tool), and the sound of music continues later, throughout the torture scene that happens mostly offscreen. Similarly, Jakubowska recurrently juxtaposes the images of maltreated work units leaving the camp with closeups of the horrified conductress of a prisoners' orchestra playing joyful music near the entrance gate of the camp.[35]

The German communist Anna briefly leads the women after Eugenia's death. She exposes Lalunia, the false Polish doctor who replaced Eugenia, for stealing medications, collecting jewelry, and having no regard for the lives of others. Anna is tortured and killed after *Kapo* Elza finds proof of her underground activities—a report about Auschwitz to be broadcast by radio outside the camp—and gives it to one of the female SS overseers.

The last segment of the film deals with the workings of the camp resistance and continues to show images of valor and martyrdom. After learning that the Germans killed the prisoners in the first liberated camp, Majdanek, as the Red Army approached, the women in Birkenau are afraid

to share the same fate and decide to fight. Dressed in SS uniforms and carrying false papers, Tadek and Marta escape separately from the camp to inform the world about the German plans to kill the prisoners and to liquidate Auschwitz. They meet in a house in the vicinity of Auschwitz where Bronek, another escapee from the camp, awaits them. Jakubowska cuts from the image of Bronek and his telegraphist sending the message to the world (to the Soviet authorities, according to the logic of the film) to a medium closeup of the Auschwitz SS commanding officer listening to the radio broadcast that reveals the German plans to obliterate the camp and provides a warning to the camp authorities.

The killing of Dessa by the Birkenau *Kommandant* Schmidt is followed rapidly by another violent scene featuring the caught escapees, Marta and Tadek, standing in front of the SS chief in the same room where Eugenia's torture took place. As in the scene with Eugenia, he whistles three times and his henchmen enter the room. The same cheerful music is played on the phonograph during the brutal interrogation that happens offscreen. The viewer sees only the reaction shot of Marta, who is watching Tadek being tortured.

Another abrupt cut brings the viewer to a medium closeup shot of Marta, who is briskly walking, her hands tied behind her back, escorted by the SS. The camera reveals in a long shot that she being is led to the gallows, followed by the SS officers, including the *Lagerkommandant* and the *Oberaufseherin*. Jakubowska intercuts between the low-angle closeups of the heroic Marta on the gallows and the images of female prisoners from the *Revier* who are forced to watch her execution. After a fellow prisoner standing on the gallows unties her hands and covertly hands her a knife, Marta cuts her veins and shouts at the commandant who is reading her death sentence. In a scene as if taken from Soviet agitprop cinema, Marta is captured in an extreme closeup against the sky, and she encourages her fellow prisoners to carry on the struggle because the Red Army is nearing the camp. When the commandant rushes toward her, she slaps him several times in the face ("You will not hang me!"). The sudden appearance of planes in the sky over the camp creates panic among the SS men, who escape, leaving the dying Marta alone on the gallows, looking into the sky. The film ends with her dying words addressed to fellow prisoners and the image of the planes that signal the end of the nightmare.

The Premiere

The first screening of *The Last Stage* was for the members of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party, a standard practice in a totalitarian country where cinema, like other arts, was treated as a vital instrument in the political struggle. The first showing was hastily organized—so much so that the film lacked credits and, more important, did not have proper sound. "When the projectors began to run," recalled Jakubowska, "there was some commotion, then total silence. There was a break between reels, but nobody spoke. Because [Bolesław] Bierut [then President of Poland—SL] did say nothing, no one said anything. Suddenly Bierut started crying. He said it was a wonderful film and took me in his arms."[36] Later, as Jakubowska commented in another interview, Bierut told her that he had viewed *The Last Stage* 103 times with different political delegations.[37]

The first public screening of *The Last Stage* took place, incidentally, outside of Poland, in Czechoslovakia. The prime minister of People's Poland, Józef Cyrankiewicz ("my Auschwitz buddy," Jakubowska called him), suggested that the film be sent to Prague.[38] It premiered on March 5, 1948, with great success, at the Festival of Slavic Films in the cinema theater "Sevastopol."[39] The published reviews emphasized that Jakubowska was "the best female director in the world" and that her film would "conquer all European markets," because it was a work of art that had "not been seen on world screens."[40] Jakubowska described the festivities after the screening: "I was given a standing ovation and a crowd of people carried me in their arms to the hotel, where the party to my honor took place. Everyone ate and had a great time except me, because they forgot to hand me food vouchers; without them you could die there of starvation."[41]

The film's "social usefulness," emphasized by the communist authorities, and its adherence to the reigning communist ideology were also appreciated in Czechoslovakia at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in 1948, where *The Last Stage* received the grand prize, the Crystal Globe (the award for best director went to William Wyler for his Oscar-winning film, *The Best Years of Our Lives*). This success was desperately needed by the new management of Film Polski, which was struggling to produce a film able to fulfill the expectations of the com-

munist authorities as well as to respond to the needs of Polish audiences. Polish filmgoers were yearning to see a Polish film about the occupation, because they had been surviving mostly on a steady diet of mass-imported Soviet films. Reporting from Karlovy Vary, the *Polish Newsreel* (PKF; 33/1948) proudly pronounced the "international success of the young Polish cinema industry" that was "the true sensation in the film world" and which, according to the commentary, confirmed the importance of nationalizing the film industry in order to produce art cinema. This was an important official endorsement of Jakubowska's film: The *Polish Newsreel*, a short, approximately ten-minute-long "filmic newspaper," had a wide national distribution; since December 1, 1944, it had been shown before the main feature in Polish cinema theaters.

The Polish premiere of *The Last Stage* took place in April 1948 (the "month of national memory" in Poland), not, as perhaps expected by several former prisoners, in January, the anniversary of the liberation of the camp, or in June, the anniversary of the first transport of Polish political prisoners from Tarnów to Auschwitz. Jakubowska's "poignant monument to suffering," as poet-writer Jalu Kurek labeled it,[42] immediately garnered ample interest and press coverage. The film's premiere on April 1 in the Warsaw cinema "Palladium," an event covered by the *Polish Newsreel* (15/1948), was attended not only by the makers of the film (interestingly, Gerda Schneider was not present),[43] its actors, and the Film Polski authorities headed by Stanisław Albrecht, but also by some members of the new political elite, including Władysław Gomułka, who was then the deputy prime minister and (after 1956) the new leader of the Communist Party. The commentary by the *Polish Newsreel* regarding "the dramatized reportage about Auschwitz" stressed the "unquestionable success of the young Polish cinema industry," and showed the enthusiastic response of the audience that gathered the see the much awaited Polish production.

Apart from numerous reviews and praise published in Polish dailies, *The Last Stage* also received coverage in influential journals, such as *Odrodzenie* and *Wolni Ludzie*. Another journal, *Warszawa*, published two issues devoted entirely to the film, with the majority of texts focusing on its realistic dimensions (some of the texts were written by former Auschwitz-Birkenau prisoners).

The film also became an instant success in the communist bloc. Its cinematographer Boris Monastyrski received Polish state honors, includ-

ing one of the highest Polish medals (Krzyż Oficerski Orderu Polonia Restituta), which he was awarded on October 8, 1948, at the Polish embassy in Moscow. Before the official release of *The Last Stage* in the Soviet Union in May 1949, Jakubowska went to Moscow with her film and was invited to the Kremlin, where she met Stalin. She recalled that Stalin greeted her warmly and kissed her hand. She described, however, her bitter disappointment when commenting on the dictator's appearance: "Small, pockmarked, bad teeth—nothing resembling that poster look." She added, "It was a dreadful experience."[44]

The French and American Premieres

The Last Stage also received critical acclaim in several Western European countries, and its release was warmly welcomed and supported not only by many former concentration camp prisoners, but also by left-leaning intellectuals and artists. The film was particularly well received in France.[45] Wanda Jakubowska, thanks to her knowledge of French and connections with French communists and left-wing intellectuals, personally introduced her film in France. One of her supporters was Pablo Picasso, who, she recalled, "traveled with me throughout France like crazy."[46] The enthusiastic crowds, lined up in front of the theaters showing *The Last Stage*, were also emphasized in one of the segments of the *Polish Newsreel* (47/1948). The Polish writer Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz praised Jakubowska in a 1950 speech: "I had the opportunity to attend the screening of this picture in one of the cinemas on Champs-Élysées. . . . I witnessed how the audience of this Parisian cinema responded to the trials and tribulations of Jakubowska's protagonists, how their response was profound and lively to such an extent that the room started to sing 'La Marseillaise' along with the group of female prisoners shown on the screen who were transported to their death."[47]

The film's success in France and the publicity surrounding Jakubowska and her Auschwitz experience later generated some unwelcome responses. Documents held at the Archive of Modern Files in Warsaw reveal that the Polish daily published in France, *Narodowiec* (*The Nationalist*), published an editorial comment and a letter signed by an Auschwitz inmate (camp number 21992, no name provided) that attacked Jakubowska's conduct in the camp and her alleged anti-Polish

behavior.[48] The editorial emphasized that Jakubowska was a *Kapo* known for the anti-Polish propaganda among the prisoners.[49] In a letter of July 1, 1949, addressed to the Polish Association of Former Political Prisoners (PZbWP), Jakubowska protested this treatment and sought justice by asking the PZbWP to act on her behalf.[50] The PZbWP organized a conference on August 9, 1949, and invited several former Rajsko prisoners, representatives of the Foreign Ministry, and members of the PZbWP to discuss the issue. Testimonies provided by the former prisoners who knew Jakubowska in the camp defended her conduct and rejected the accusations as baseless.

The Polish biweekly *Film* reported in April 1950 on the defamation trial involving Michał Kwiatkowski, the editor of *Narodowiec*.[51] He was sentenced to pay 500,000 francs in compensation for defaming Jakubowska. The film director stated in an interview that she gave the entire sum to the cause of fighting fascism.[52]

American audiences had a chance to see Jakubowska's film in October 1948, although the film was not officially released until March 1949. Often referenced as *The Last Stop*, *The Last Stage* won the New York Film Critics Circle Award for best foreign film and was well received by several prominent reviewers who usually compared it favorably with Italian Neorealist classics, such as Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* and *Paisan* (*Paisà*, 1946). They emphasized the film's on-location shooting, the use of nonprofessional actors in supporting roles and as extras, and, above all, the realistic manner of depicting recent history.

Jakubowska's procommunist worldview was not questioned when the film was released in America. *New York Times* readers, in particular, became familiar with *The Last Stage* and the commendation it received from the United Nations Film Board "in recognition of its moral and artistic values."[53] Critics working for that newspaper, such as William Friedberg and Bosley Crowther, emphasized the authenticity of the film and its shocking realism, as well as the unusual circumstances surrounding its production on location at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Writing in the *New York Times* on the American release of *The Last Stage* in March 1949, Bosley Crowther pointed out "the staggering accumulation of daily atrocities, seen in the pattern of the story through a pitilessly factual camera's eye. From the opening shot in the death camp, showing the brutality of a guard to a pregnant girl, standing among a

group of women in a dreary sea of mud, the film is a continuation of horrifying episodes which make up a modest realization of the inhumanity of the Nazi camps."[54] The title of William Friedberg's review stressed the verisimilitude of the film: "Nazi Concentration Camp Reactivated for Film." Friedberg wrote that this was partly a result of the film's on-location shooting: "Polish actors, at first reluctant to portray the hated Nazi officials, took to playing their parts so wholeheartedly that the former prisoners began to fall into their former habits. . . . The mass scenes were so realistic that the extras hesitated to break their lines until told to do so."[55]

Former Prisoners Review the Film

The realistic dimension of the film, its pacifist tone, the strong divisions between good and evil—all combined with the use of mainstream narrative principles—certainly contributed to the film's critical acclaim in Poland and its success at international film festivals abroad. Negative criticism of *The Last Stage* was rare and usually meekly voiced by some Auschwitz survivors. It concerned chiefly two aspects of the film: (1) its alleged anti-Polish bias (a number of Polish characters, portrayed as inept, brutal, or both, collaborate with the Germans); (2) the fact that naturalism in the camp scenes was sacrificed at the altar of ideological needs and cinematic conventions.

Several Auschwitz survivors were critical concerning the negative portrayal of some Polish characters, mostly brutal and primitive *Kapos*, chiefly the vicious block *Kapo* Elza—who, interestingly, has Gerda Schneider's camp number (586). Another Polish character singled out for criticism was a pharmacist's wife rightly nicknamed by prisoners Lalunia (Bimbo), an almost cartoonish individual who pretends to be a physician and steals prisoners' medications, endangering their lives. Much stronger words to describe the film and its representation of Poles were employed by prominent Polish writer Maria Dąbrowska who wrote in her diary (published in 1996) that the film is clearly "anti-Polish." According to Dąbrowska, *The Last Stage* favors the communists (Jews and Russians) at the expense of Poles, who are portrayed as "depraved" and as "louts." She described her thoughts after seeing the film:

Polish *Kapo* Elza (Barbara Rachwalska) in her room entertained by a Gypsy singer (Zofia Mrozowska). Wanda Jakubowska archive. Courtesy Katarzyna Rudomino.

> After breakfast we went to see the film about Auschwitz, *The Last Stage*, quite famous that even Stach (Stempowski) called "shocking." But nothing is able to fool my vigilance and detect a lie. For a Polish film (although it seems that it was coproduced with Czechoslovakia) it is well made, it even contains scenes of extraordinary value. But it is forged in the same perfidious way as *Ashes and Diamonds* and everything else. All in the camp that is nice, these are the Russian and Jewish women—communists of course. Everything in the camp that is depraved and wicked, these are Polish women. After the perfect, angelic, and heroic Russian doctor, a Polish woman is shown—a fraud pharmacist's wife, an idiot and sleazebag who steals medicine from the sick. Ideologically, this is pro-Soviet propaganda kitsch, not a film about the tragedy of the Polish nation and not a film about Auschwitz.[56]

Satisfied at seeing a serious attempt at portraying the reality of Auschwitz, however, some former inmates, such as Seweryna Szmaglewska, Henryk

Korotyński, and Krystyna Żywulska, openly voiced their reservations concerning other aspects of Jakubowska's visualization of the camp.[57] Several former Auschwitz prisoners commented about the film lacking some defining elements of camp life: the desperate fight for survival, the ever-present hunger and fear, and the terrible sounds (and, at times, equally terrifying silences) of the camp. They complained about the focus on the privileged—mostly political—prisoners at the expense of the struggling and dehumanized masses. Henryk Korotyński, for example, wrote that the film is missing images that he preserved in his memory: hunger, piles of children's strollers, the remains left after the Jewish transports.[58] Halina Laskowska also disapproved the film's one-dimensional depiction of the camp—the focus on the uplifting, heroic aspect and neglect of its existing immoral aspect—the fight for survival at all costs, and the moral degradation, which, as she wrote, should also be presented as a German crime.[59]

By and large, however, the published testimonies of the former prisoners—and their tone and content were undoubtedly censored to conform to the official dogma—expressed both nervousness before seeing the film and relief that their experiences were finally being portrayed truthfully on screen. Korotyński acknowledged the verisimilitude of Jakubowska's representation and pointed out some of its defining scenes:

> Authentic is the camp orchestra and the female prisoners on the way to the gas chamber who were singing "La Marseillaise," and the Yugoslav female partisans who behaved impressively and did not allow their hair to be cut (the Germans—astonishingly!—gave up). The dancing and singing in the block and "organizing things" really happened; the luxury of the *Blockowa*'s room was true; children were born in the camp and news from the world was distributed. The Auschwitz resistance group was a real force in camp life.[60]

After viewing the film numerous times, another eyewitness, Hanna Tomaszewska, agreed that it aptly captured the atmosphere of the camp.[61] A former female prisoner who preferred to remain anonymous wrote that she "cried during the screening. . . . The film showed everything that

was boiling inside me."[62] Publishing her review, titled "Auschwitz for the Second Time" and signed only by her camp serial number (44737), the author (Krystyna Kobyłecka) revealed that, like many other ex-prisoners, she feared to see her Auschwitz experiences on screen being trivialized, melodramatized, and distorted by the pathetic-heroic version of events.[63]

Other reviewers emphasized scenes or images that defined the camp. Kazimierz Truchanowski focused his attention on the image of steam locomotives under the cover of the night "bringing new transports of prisoners." For him, they "acquire traits of living monstrous beasts" and function "like a symbol of the grim soul of Hitlerite war criminals, and at the same time they symbolize the whole system."[64]

Several Polish critics, including former Auschwitz prisoners, praised the film's portrayal of the Germans as truthful and not at all exaggerated. For Krystyna Żywulska, they were "ordinary, human-like creatures" whose "human appearance and apparent ordinariness are both incomprehensible and terrifying."[65] Karol Pędowski described the German characters as "frighteningly real . . . just the same as they remained in our memory," and he also added that seeing them brought back the dreadful years of the occupation.[66] In an interview with Alina Madej, Jakubowska pointed out that she insisted on working with Schneider (although in the postwar atmosphere in Poland this was an unusual and unwelcome partnership, which had to be approved at the highest level) because she wanted a proper representation of the Germans, "as it should be, not as they were represented in, for example, Soviet films, that mostly featured caricatures."[67]

For Stanisław Grzelecki, Jakubowska did not try to stylize the Germans as human monsters but "showed them as they were in reality. . . . They are not ordinary criminals. They are artists of crime. They murder out of inner need; for some of them cruelty is a doctrine complementing their worldview, for others—only their craft."[68] The Polish literary historian Stanisław Helsztyński emphasized the importance of this film abroad as "a lesson about German barbarity that may explain to people who are without imagination and ill-disposed toward Eastern Europe, why in our attitude toward our former aggressors we are so vigilant, careful, distrustful, and sensitive seeing signs of fostering a nation that has committed the abomination of Auschwitz."[69]

To Plow-under Auschwitz: Debates about the Future of the Museum

The release of *The Last Stage* in Poland coincided with the heated debate concerning the future of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. In the June 1948 issue of the influential journal *Odrodzenie* (Revival), the prominent communist writer and politician Jerzy Putrament commented ironically about the touristy, sanitized, as well as ineffectual aspects of the museum, and, to the horror of many, proposed its closure.[70]

Putrament was not alone in mocking the touristy, sensationalist aspect of the museum. Several articles, most notably "A Delicate Problem" by writer Kazimierz Koźniewski, pointed out problems with the museum, chiefly its falsification of the truth and inability to render the camp's true atmosphere. Koźniewski wrote that the memory of Auschwitz-Birkenau could be best preserved in historical studies and art works, such as *The Last Stage*, and postulated that since fewer and fewer people would remember the real (true) Auschwitz, it therefore would make sense to "plow the land and sow wheat." His call to plow-under Auschwitz (*Oświęcim zaorać*) was also taken up by other writers, who simply viewed the large site of the museum grounds as a waste of potentially profitable agricultural land that should be put into more productive use.[71]

The above-mentioned voices, published certainly with the approval of the highest communist authorities, were sometimes criticized as the ultimate victory of the Germans. Jonathan Huener quotes former Auschwitz prisoner and the former director of the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum, Kazimierz Smoleń, who provided another explanation for that carefully orchestrated action to test the views of Polish society concerning the future of the former camp—the proximity of the Soviet gulags. Smoleń stated that "the initiative to shut the site down was related to vivid Polish memories of Stalinist terror during and after the war: to document the crimes of Germans and to commemorate their victims would revive the memory of Soviet crimes and invite comparisons that the Warsaw regime was eager to avoid."[72] Huener also quotes another then-influential figure, Lucjan Motyka, an Auschwitz survivor and the former minister of culture, who reinforced this view by saying that Auschwitz is a place documenting German crimes, but "at the same time an indictment of Soviet camps, only we were not able to utter a single word about So-

viet camps."[73] Given the Polish collective memory of the war, Jonathan Huener fittingly writes, "too vivid a depiction of Nazi crimes would blur the all important distinctions between German and Russian, Hitlerite and Soviet, fascist and communist, perpetrator and liberator."[74]

Despite sometimes bitter criticism and short-lived debates questioning its purpose, the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum was more and more visible in Poland and abroad. From January to September 1948, more than 100,000 people, including 10,000 from abroad, visited the site.[75]