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Screening Auschwitz

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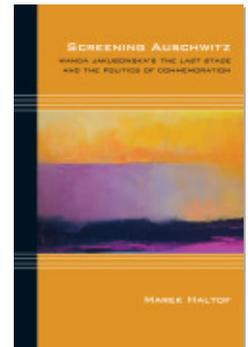
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CHAPTER 5

Fighting Auschwitz

The Heroic Account of the Camp

I am a fierce and unrelenting Communist. Look at me, I am not ashamed. I am a “Commie.”

—WANDA JAKUBOWSKA

The Last Stage emphasizes the heroic aspect of Auschwitz and strives for the impossible goal of representing the true reality of the camp while faithfully following the tenets of communist ideology. It epitomizes the efforts by the communist regime to internationalize Auschwitz—to make it a symbol of Polish martyrdom as well as a symbol of victory over fascism. That is to say that Jakubowska instrumentalizes the memory of the camp to place it at the service of communist ideology, but also in line with the traditional, martyrological version of Polish history that emphasized heroic struggle and self-sacrifice at the altar of high, often unattainable, national needs. The plight of Auschwitz prisoners is presented as a fragment in the “historic struggle” against German expansionism and aggression.

It has to be stressed, however, that by accentuating resistance and the heroic aspect of Auschwitz at the expense of victimhood, Jakubowska’s film was not unique, but in line with other representations of the war and the Holocaust, and not only in the communist bloc. As Peter Novick writes about American attitudes toward the Holocaust: “Whereas nowadays the status of the victim has come to be prized, in the forties it

evoked at best the sort of pity mixed with contempt. It was a label actively shunned.”¹ Thus, for example, the early memorials unveiled in Warsaw to commemorate the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising emphasized armed resistance and martyrdom rather than the memory of those who were exterminated in the ghetto and in the camps. The inscription on the memorial unveiled in April 1948 makes this notion apparent: “To the Jewish nation — to its fighters and its martyrs.”²

In the introduction to the script of *The Last Stage*, published in 1955, Jakubowska writes about being perfectly aware that her choice of a small group resisting and fighting instead of suffering silently was not representative of the whole concentration camp.³ In line with her own ideology and the communist state’s goals, one of the early versions of her script was titled in a military manner — *The Birkenau Front Reports*. The heroic aspect of Jakubowska’s portrayal of Auschwitz was, however, expected by several former Auschwitz prisoners. Krystyna Żywulska was convinced that “after seeing this film, the viewer is not broken: he was a witness to a victory, of faith in the human being and social justice.” Żywulska applauded *The Last Stage* for being “a tribute to the dead and the murdered in the camp, precisely because the film does not portray passivity before death, but instead of martyrdom, it shows a noble attitude by celebrating struggle, as well as the greatness of the ideology that led to the gates of Berlin.”⁴ Ryszard Matuszewski, emphasizing that the film shows the only true picture of the camp — fighting Auschwitz — stressed that Jakubowska portrayed real heroes and “amid the wide-ranging misery and degradation, she revealed the purest atmosphere of true heroism, which we know was factual.”⁵

The same portrayal was expected by the members of the Communist Party Politburo, who watched the hastily edited film before its final approval for general screening. According to Jakubowska, the communist leader Bolesław Bierut immediately embraced the film, as did Józef Cyrankiewicz, the prime minister of People’s Poland. Jakubowska later recalled that the latter “was of great help.” “After all,” she said, “there was that Auschwitz connection between us.”⁶

Cyrankiewicz was a former political prisoner in Auschwitz (camp number 62933), and an active member of the international Auschwitz Combat Group from September 1942 to January 1945. The postwar secretary general of the Polish Socialist Party (Polska Partia Socjalistyczna,



Eugenia (Tatiana Górecka), *Lagerkommandant* (Władysław Brochwicz), Jerzy Passendorfer (SS officer, *in the middle, back*), and Zbigniew Filus (International Committee representative). Wanda Jakubowska's archive. Courtesy Katarzyna Rudomino.

PPS), Cyrankiewicz merged the collaborationist wing of his party with the communist Polish Workers' Party (Polska Partia Robotnicza, PPR) into the Polish United Workers' Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, PZPR) in 1948. This cunning politician, with a long political life ahead of him (he served as prime minister in 1947–52 and 1953–70), was carefully building his image as an antifascist leader at Auschwitz. In Cyrankiewicz's version of history, also propagated by Jakubowska, only the communists were able to build a resistance network in the camp. As an extension of this, only they could liberate Auschwitz and Poland from fascism.⁷

The Auschwitz experience—more precisely, the legend surrounding “the fight with fascism” and “the struggle for peace” that originated in the camp—was later used to legitimize communist rule and to propel the careers of Cyrankiewicz and other members of the left-wing resistance, like Lucjan Motyka.⁸ Information about the Home Army (AK) members inside the camp and their role in the resistance was suppressed in Poland before 1989. With the publication outside Poland of books

such as Józef Garliński's *Fighting Auschwitz: The Resistance Movement in the Concentration Camp* (1974), a more complete picture of the Auschwitz resistance started to emerge.⁹ In recent years, thanks to the sifting of communist archives, we have learned about several unknown heroes of the resistance, such as Witold Pilecki (1901–1948), a prewar cavalry officer and member of the AK, who in 1940 volunteered to be incarcerated at Auschwitz (number 4859, under nickname Tomasz Serafiński) in order to provide the Western Allies with information about the camp.¹⁰ In Auschwitz, Pilecki organized the resistance network, gathered information, and worked closely with the whole political spectrum of the camp resistance, including Cyrankiewicz. On April 27, 1943, two days before Jakubowska was transported to the camp, he escaped from Auschwitz and later took part in the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. Imprisoned by the communists after the war and accused of espionage, this Auschwitz hero was executed in May 1948 after a show trial, just weeks after Jakubowska's film about Auschwitz resistance premiered in Poland.

The Last Stage therefore presents an ideologically correct version of the Auschwitz resistance, suited to the times, by emphasizing the role of the Soviet army in the liberation of the camp, coupled with pro-Stalinist messages; by stressing the role of the communist resistance in Auschwitz; and by introducing the dignified figure of a brave female Russian doctor, Eugenia. According to several accounts, however, the brave doctor who tried to reveal the true nature of Auschwitz to the Red Cross delegation was Polish. For example, the Auschwitz survivor Halina Birnbaum writes the following about the person portrayed by Jakubowska as Eugenia:

The woman in charge of the sick bay, a Polish doctor, paid for her courage immediately after the delegates departed by torture in the *Gestapo* dungeons in Auschwitz. People said she died with outstanding heroism, and she certainly knew what awaited her when she told the Red Cross delegates the whole horrible truth about the Auschwitz tortures. This woman doctor, like the runner Mala, became to us the personification of human dignity and courage.¹¹

Although not present on the screen, Stalin seems to be the true hero of Jakubowska's film. Female prisoners mention his name with reverence, almost religiously; he seems to be their only hope and their only protector. Despite the fact that the Soviets became the aggressors in 1939 and oppressors (not liberators) after 1945, several scenes were carefully constructed to depict an ideologically correct situation full of pro-Soviet sympathies. In one scene, for example, Helena reads a manifesto circulating in the camp about "the liberation of Europe from Hitler's tyranny," and she almost ecstatically utters its author's name—Stalin. Other prisoners also worship the communist leader. As pointed out by several Polish researchers, one scene in particular fittingly illustrates the worship of Stalin and communist ideology: A group of Polish inmates starts a prayer, then another group begins to sing the Polish patriotic song, "The Song of Warsaw" (*Warszawianka*), composed during the anti-Russian November Uprising of 1830–31, only to be silenced by the Russian women singing the Soviet war song, "Sacred War" (*Vstavai strana ogromnaya!* [*Arise, colossal land!*]). Some Polish and Russian prisoners then dance together while others clap, and this situation engages an older Polish woman (who had earlier intoned a prayer), and she joins the others after learning about the German defeat at Stalingrad.¹²

The pro-Stalinist tone of the film should not be a revelation, given not only the postwar politics but also Jakubowska's strong belief in communist ideals. In a letter dated November 13, 1949, concerning her next film project, *The Soldier of Victory* (*Żołnierz zwycięstwa*, 1953), a two-part bio-pic about the Soviet general of Polish ethnicity Karol Świerczewski, she writes to Jerzy Borejsza, one of the most prominent figures in postwar Polish culture:

I chose what it seems to be the best way and surrounded myself with books by Lenin and Stalin, and I am looking for and obviously finding guidance and advice first hand, so to speak. What is particularly interesting, I find there not only directions of an ideological nature concerning the construction of particular scenes, but also the material for dialogues, for both negative as well as positive parts. It should be noted that these are not some dry and doctrinaire, but very emotional scenes and dialogues.¹³

In the introduction to Jakubowska's published script (1955), her former START colleague Jerzy Toeplitz wrote: "The value of the film lies in the ideological stand of its maker, who put her great talent and all her strength into the effort to fight fascism, to unmask its genocidal method."¹⁴ Throughout *The Last Stage*, the pro-Soviet attitude is forcefully imposed on the viewer by attributing anti-Soviet comments to dishonest characters collaborating with the Germans. Only the negative Polish characters in the film may utter anti-Soviet comments, such as "I would prefer ten years in the camp to living under the Bolsheviks." Jakubowska, according to Tadeusz Lubelski, clearly favors communist agitation at the expense of the self-proclaimed "strategy of a witness."¹⁵ For her, the film about Auschwitz was not just a "cinematically attractive topic," but a politicized—in line with the postwar situation in Poland—representation of Auschwitz and an indictment of fascism.

Portraying the Auschwitz-Birkenau communist resistance, Jakubowska returns to her own camp experiences (discussed in chapter 1, above): She became actively involved in the camp resistance during her imprisonment in Auschwitz. When she was sent from the Pawiak prison in Warsaw to Auschwitz, the left-wing network in the camp was informed about her arrival. A former prisoner, Kazimierz Sztemberg, testified that in the summer of 1943 he was asked to find Jakubowska, who arrived in the camp the next day. He gave her clothes and helped her to obtain food.¹⁶ Thanks to the socialist and communist network in the camp, she was moved to the more privileged Rajska subcamp. One of the Birkenau inmates testified that this happened thanks to Józef Cyrankiewicz's recommendation.¹⁷

Testimonial accounts of some former prisoners at Rajska mention that Jakubowska was a member of the Auschwitz Combat Group, an international organization of Auschwitz inmates founded in May 1943. According to Waleria Śłosarczyk, Wanda Jakubowska even organized a clandestine commemoration of the Bolshevik October Revolution and arranged talks that mobilized female prisoners to resist and to persevere.¹⁸ Jakubowska is mentioned in Garliński's book as a "liaison officer between the women and the men's underground movement in the central camp."¹⁹ She is also listed by Jerzy Ptakowski, a survivor of Auschwitz and Dachau, among those who were active members of the Auschwitz Combat Group. According to him, the women's section of the Combat

Group was initiated by the French communist Danielle Casanova, who was helped by Wanda Jakubowska and Gerda Schneider, among others.²⁰ In another study, entitled *The Resistance Movement*, Henryk Świebocki emphasizes the issue of solidarity among the prisoners; he discusses the *Kampfgruppe Auschwitz* dominated by the communists and socialists, among them Jakubowska, and also mentions Schneider as an activist in the Rajsko subcamp.²¹

The Polish sociologist Anna Pawełczyńska, former Auschwitz prisoner (camp number 44764) and member of the camp resistance group, discusses the supportive psychological role participators in the camp resistance played:

Being part of the resistance movement was the greatest privilege. Along with the higher place in the camp hierarchy, thanks to which one's chances of survival increased, went the awareness of participation in a battle. A member of a camp organization was no longer just a hunted animal, but in his own mind became a complete human person, doing battle with criminals. Regardless of how unequal the two sides of the battle, the very consciousness of being able to resist, to cooperate, to participate in rescuing others created a mental climate that in the camp conditions was a luxury of the spirit. There was also the awareness of support from an organized structure inside the camp and the awareness of cooperation with those who were fighting in freedom.²²

After the war, Polish society was by and large preoccupied with its own pressing problems outside of the returning concentration camp prisoners. The former prisoners tried to organize themselves in order to help each other. At the beginning of 1946, they created the Polish Union of Former Political Prisoners (Polski Związek byłych Więźniów Politycznych, PZbWP). From its inception, some prominent members of PZbWP made proposals to change the image of a former concentration camp prisoner from a mere victim to “the avant-garde in the fight of fascism and reactionary forces.”²³ As a result, the PZbWP became more politicized and supportive of the new communist regime after 1947. This was accompanied by organized attempts to change the image of a political prisoner from a helpless victim of German savagery to a principled

hero engaged in antifascist resistance, which was accomplished in 1948–49. During that period, writes Zofia Wóycicka, the communists took control of the prisoners' organization (almost all regional heads of PZbWP were communists) and successfully tried to oppose a martyrological portrayal of being a prisoner (*walka z cierpiętnictwem*).²⁴

For the Polish communist leadership, the concentration camp was a battlefield where the struggle against fascism and the struggle for the new political system were fought.²⁵ This was succinctly addressed by the vice-deputy minister of culture in a speech to the Council for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites (Rada Ochrony Pamięci Walk i Męczeństwa), which was founded in July 1947: "Not only suffering, but struggle was the central moment of international unity in the war, the consequence of which was total victory over fascism. It is precisely that moment of struggle which should be dominant in the work of the Council and its commemoration should be one of its primary tasks."²⁶ Similar statements were addressed to the PZbWP by the Department of Propaganda and Press of the Polish Workers Party: "The celebrations to commemorate the victims of Hitlerite terror should be limited to healthy and necessary boundaries and they should have a fighting, not a martyrological, character. Political prisoners should be treated not as 'preachers of martyrdom,' but as conscious and active members of the society."²⁷

Discussing "Holocaust film before the Holocaust," David Bathrick argues convincingly:

These developments, of course, did not just emanate from postwar Soviet policies in Eastern Europe. They found their genesis as well in a foundational narrative at the core of postwar antifascism that by definition inaugurated the Soviet Union and its German communist allies as the primary victims of Nazi aggression, as the only source of active resistance and, by virtue of their "victorious struggle," as the rightful founders of a state that would never let it happen again. What this meant in turn for everyday praxis was a government-sponsored memorial culture that portrayed life in concentration camps with a focus primarily on the heroism and victimization of political prisoners. At the center of this scenario were the communist cells that resisted and, as was alleged apocryphally in the case of Buchenwald,



Auschwitz resistance. German Anna (Antonina Górecka, *second from the right*), Polish Helena (Wanda Bartówna, *reading pamphlet*), Russian Eugenia (Tatiana Górecka, *in the center*), Russian nurse Nadia (Maria Winogradowa, *top left*), and other resisting prisoners. Author's collection.

ultimately liberated their less motivated and thoroughly unorganized cohorts—be they criminals, Sinti and Roma, religious prisoners, gays or Jews. Canonical as well was the invocation that declared anti-Communism, not race, to be the major component of Nazi ideology; and that defined anti-Semitism as simply a tool of manipulation emanating from the profit motive of the capitalist ruling class.²⁸

Political prisoners no longer were victims, but returning fighters for an independent, communist Poland and builders of the new system. Other voices became marginalized, such as the one belonging to Maria Jezierska, who questioned the image of the camp as “a torture chamber of noble people, fighters of unblemished character” and, instead, demanded to present “the naked truth.” For her, “the camp was so gruesome because it was squalid.”²⁹

Wanda Jakubowska was always interested in promoting the prisoner-as-fighter image. For her, Birkenau was not only the site of interna-

tional martyrdom but, above all, the site of international resistance. Several scenes in *The Last Stage* stress the fighting aspect of the camp, which, although not representative—as she emphasized on occasion—nonetheless happened in reality. One scene, in particular, involves Michèle, a heroic French nurse and member of the camp resistance, who in an act of defiance initiates the singing of the “Marseillaise” when she is loaded with her French-Jewish compatriots onto trucks and taken to the gas chambers. Earlier, she bravely rescued two prisoners and escorted them to the *Revier*.

Anna Palarczyk’s testimony describes a similar scene that occurred in the camp: “One French woman somehow handed a bowl of water to someone at Block 25 [housing prisoners sentenced to death] through a window. The SS man Anton Taube noticed it. Because it just so happened that at the same time the truck came to take these women to the crematorium, he put that French woman, a French Communist, on the truck with the others and sent her to the crematorium.”³⁰ Other eyewitness accounts confirm that a group of French women were singing the “Marseillaise” when they marched into the camp.³¹ Józef Garliński writes that the first serious and organized attempt at resistance in Birkenau happened after the arrival of the transport with 230 French female political prisoners from Romainville on January 27, 1943. Among them were several noted communists, including Danielle Casanova (camp number 31655), a resistance fighter who later, on May 10 of the same year, died of typhus (almost two weeks after Jakubowska’s arrival).³² The French communists started a resistance network that included communists of other groups: German (such as Gerda Schneider), Czech, Polish, and Jewish. The resistance group grew bigger during the summer of 1943.

Referring to Serge Klarsfeld’s study, Margaret-Anne Hutton writes that out of 75,721 Jews from France who were deported to Auschwitz, only 3 percent survived. “Of this total, approximately 8,637 women were not selected for the gas chambers immediately upon arrival in Auschwitz, and only 740 women were still alive in 1945.”³³ Studying French women’s testimonies from Nazi German camps, including Rajsko, Hutton states that in the communist-dominated Rajsko subcamp, the French communists attempted to recruit new party members and to educate the rest. Their activities and solidarity, based on party allegiance, how-

ever, often excluded noncommunist inmates. The complex picture that emerges from numerous testimonies often depicts a solidarity that is exclusionary, based on a political affiliation, and with little regard for non-members.³⁴

Garliński writes about Russian female communists that “direct contact between fellow-prisoners in the knowledge that both belonged to underground organizations was limited by Russian women to Communists. Their years of isolation from other countries, and their upbringing in a quite different political system created a barrier of distrust which only a few individuals managed to break down.” He lists among such individuals Nina Gusiewa (Guseva) and Nadia Kostenko, both of whom, according to several commentators, influenced Jakubowska.³⁵

Another prominent subplot in *The Last Stage* has to do with the character of Dessa and her fellow Yugoslav partisans. Many Yugoslav women prisoners (Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes), belonged to the communist partisans of Marshal Tito, or to General Michailovic’s partisans (the “royalists”). Garliński writes that “among them was the General’s wife, who died of typhus in 1943.”³⁶ Anna Pawelczyńska left the following account about the Yugoslav women in Auschwitz:

Although Yugoslav prisoners were relatively few in number as compared with Poles, Soviet citizens, and Germans, their presence was strongly felt in the women’s camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. A transport of Yugoslav partisan women arrived at the camp as a tightly-knit group of dynamic young women. They came into the camp like an army detachment, demanding the rights of prisoners of war. They alone forced the camp authorities to make a concession: they would not allow their hair to be shaved off, and they were the only female *Zugang* [newcomers to camp—MH] to stand out from the rest externally by their long hair. That exterior sign of separateness symbolized their great unity and determination to resist.³⁷

In the film’s opening scenes, Dessa is portrayed as a proud officer in a military uniform, who demands to be treated as a prisoner of war. Later, wearing a striped prisoner’s uniform, she refuses to obey orders and is killed on the *Appelplatz* by the sadistic *Lagerkommandant* of Birkenau.

Despite Jakubowska's stress on women's solidarity and resistance in the camp, Yisrael Gutman points out a different, perhaps more accurate, image of the camp:

In a world with all moral norms and restraints lifted and no holds barred, where congestion, severe deprivation, and nervous tension were ubiquitous, the prisoners easily succumbed to violence and rudeness. Conditions of life in the camp managed to undermine any solidarity that might be expected to arise among human beings who found themselves in identical situations. The assumption that common suffering bridges distances separating people was not borne out by camp reality. Tempers were short, and foreign customs and habits, manifestations of religious piety, and the sound of foreign languages kept the prisoners on edge.³⁸

In a published review of the film, Béla Balázs proclaimed: "Never before have we witnessed such human wickedness and never, too, such human greatness. Never before have we seen so much suffering. But they endured and withstood it!" He added that *The Last Stage* was an "uplifting heroic poem to the greatness of the human spirit."³⁹

The representation of Marta Weiss, the heroic Jewish-Polish woman working as an interpreter in the camp and involved in the communist resistance, fits Balázs's label of an "uplifting heroic poem." Leaving the historical aspect aside (see chapter 6, below), in the film Marta is portrayed in line with the ideological requirements of the postwar era and Jakubowska's own communist convictions.

Although *The Last Stage* was released one year before the official advent of the Socialist Realist doctrine in Poland, the Stalinist model unmistakably imprinted itself on this film. It is seen in the development of Marta's character, who undergoes a desired ideological change. At the beginning of the film, she is personally chosen by the camp commandant to serve as an interpreter. At first, she displays complete ignorance of the surroundings. Her ideological change from a middle-class character to a communist martyr, however, takes place quickly. During her first conversation with Tadek, Marta says that "only here, in the camp, have I learned how to think. I owe it to my comrades." Stuart Liebman labels her a typical Socialist Realist character, and comments: "Over the course of the

film, however, Marta's role evolves into that of a stock Socialist Realist heroine for whom the camp barriers pose no problem as she slips out past an armed guard carrying the German liquidation plans for the camp to the standard-issue Socialist Realist resistance chief."⁴⁰

Similarly represented is another convert to communism, Helena. She is portrayed as a "Polish Mother" who symbolizes "the suffering and heroism experienced by the whole nation."⁴¹ After losing her baby, Helena embarks on a swift ideological transformation. In the film's final scene, which invites symbolic interpretation, she holds a dying Marta in her arms, and promises her that Auschwitz will never be repeated.

While depicting Marta Weiss—and other characters, for that matter—*The Last Stage* suffers from several weaknesses inherent in many later projects that aimed at re-creating the horror of the Holocaust, including the melodramatization of situations and characters, due to a dependence on mainstream narrative patterns, and the use of inspiring endings. Aaron Kerner aptly states that "the shocking verisimilitude sometimes collapses under the excruciating weight of melodramatic pandering."⁴² The incorporation of some Hollywood conventions is indeed seen in the last, much-discussed scene of the film. Portrayed with a low-angle shot on the gallows, Marta Weiss defiantly encourages her fellow prisoners: "Don't be afraid. They cannot do us any harm. Hold on—the Red Army is near!" She dies a martyr's death while warning others: "You must not let Auschwitz be repeated." Marta's last words are juxtaposed with the image of planes over Auschwitz creating havoc among the SS guards, an image that is in line with the Soviet representation of death, which is avenged by instant and necessary retaliatory actions leading to final victory. In death as in life, Marta is an exemplary heroine.

According to the film's logic ("The Red Army is near!"), the planes must be Soviet. Jakubowska commented, however, in a conversation with Stuart Liebman that these were the dive bombers of the United States. She used archival footage with American planes and inserted it into her film.⁴³ It has to be noted, however, that American airplanes bombed several targets in the vicinity of Birkenau, killing some SS guards, on December 26, 1944. Earlier the same year, on September 13, American planes bombed the I. G. Farben plant near Auschwitz, also hitting the compound of Auschwitz I (four residential blocks of the SS, among others) and Birkenau where, as historian Danuta Czech chronicles,

“one damages the railroad embankment and the connecting track to the crematoriums; the second destroys a dugout between the tracks, killing 30 civilian workers.”⁴⁴

The pompous music by Roman Palester makes the ending of Jakubowska’s film even more blatantly heroic, bordering on the hysterical. The optimistic ending, which from today’s perspective looks perhaps like a mockery of happy endings (“a complete fantasy,” writes Ilan Avisar),⁴⁵ was expected by audiences and encouraged by the state authorities at that time. The artistic director of Film Polski, Jerzy Toeplitz, specifically asked the renowned Hungarian film theorist Béla Balázs, who was a consultant to Film Polski at that time, to convince Jakubowska of the necessity of an optimistic ending. In a private letter to Jakubowska dated April 9, 1948, Balázs strongly suggested that it is “absolutely essential for the foreign versions, for artistic, for political and, last but not least, also for commercial reasons” to include an optimistic ending designed chiefly for foreign viewers.⁴⁶ He provided several suggestions for Jakubowska and recommended adding a few extra shots to make her film a success with international audiences:

The most important image is that of the orchestra, which now plays one last time. The conductress who had so often sadly conducted the tragic labor march—and never cried!—now directs the song of freedom in rapturous ecstasy, and the tears flow down her beaming face. Another very important image must be made for the export version: *for the translator should not die in the final moments*. Especially since one has the impression—I myself did—that she was shot down by the Russian airplanes. As the women must stream out into freedom, the translator must also be brought out on a stretcher with a smiling, hopeful face. The optimistic, victorious feeling that reality itself brought as a conclusion to this tragedy cannot be absent from the film, and certainly not from the export version.⁴⁷

Despite his privately expressed reservations, in a published review, entitled “Concerning the Great Polish Auschwitz Film,” Balázs stressed the documentary nature of the film (“a film of authentic photographs,” a “historical document”) in which “the most horrible reality in mankind’s

history crashes over our brains and hearts as a landslide of photographed documents.”⁴⁸

Jakubowska’s heroic vision of the camp clearly differed from that portrayed in several acclaimed literary accounts published in Poland immediately after the war. This prominent group included, among others, *Farewell to Maria* (*Pożegnanie z Marią*, 1947) by Tadeusz Borowski (1922–1951).⁴⁹ Borowski’s work, offering a classic account of life in Auschwitz written by an eyewitness, provides no distinction between good and evil, and presents a brutal, matter-of-fact narration that is deprived of authorial commentary and uplifting messages, portraying instead all characters as infected by the devastating degeneration of human values.

Borowski’s polemic with Zofia Kossak-Szczucka (1889–1968) and her vision of the camp in *From the Abyss: Memories from the Camp*, published in 1946, received much publicity in Poland.⁵⁰ Kossak-Szczucka was sent to Birkenau from the Pawiak prison on October 5, 1943, and was registered there as Zofia Śliwińska (camp number 64491).⁵¹ A well-known Catholic writer of historical fiction, Kossak-Szczucka was also a member of the resistance and a cofounder of the Council for Aid to the Jews (*Żegota*), a special branch of the Home Army (AK). For her activities she was imprisoned for more than a year in Auschwitz. Her literary account about Auschwitz was by and large very well received. Nevertheless, Borowski mercilessly criticized her memoirs in a text significantly titled “Alicja w krainie czarów” (Alice in Wonderland), which was published in January 1947.⁵² His attack on the “second-rate” and “false” book by Kossak-Szczucka, a respected writer involved in the resistance, shocked Polish readers and stirred a heated debate.⁵³

Borowski demanded from Kossak-Szczucka (and this could be also extended to Jakubowska):

Tell us at last, how you purchased places in the hospital, in good work details, how you were pushing the *Muselmänner* into the gas chambers, how you bought women and men, what you did in the *Unterkunfts*, the *Kanadas*, the *Krankenbaus*, in the Gypsy camp. Tell this and also several other small things; tell us about everyday life in the camp, about organizing things, the hierarchy of fear, the loneliness of every human being. But write that you

yourself did it! That you are entitled to a portion of the grim fate of Auschwitz. Maybe not, huh?⁵⁴

In a collection of memoirs published in 1946 in Munich by three displaced persons, former Auschwitz prisoners Janusz Nel Siedlecki, Krystyn Olszewski, and Tadeusz Borowski bluntly warned against future falsifications of the camp experience. In the preface to their book, simply titled *We Were in Auschwitz*, they wrote:

Auschwitz, the meeting place of the whole Europe, a sliver of earth where the living were gassed and the dead burned. We were united by commonplace, pitiless death, not death on behalf of the nation or honor, but death for worn-out flesh, boils, typhus, swollen legs. Years of lying to death, cheating her, slipping by her stealthily, bind us tightly together as if we'd fought battles in the same trench, even though these were not heroic years. . . . Confinement in the camp, destitution, torture, and death in the gas chamber are not heroism, are not even anything positive. It was defeat, the almost immediate abandonment of ideological principles. A primeval battle remained waged by the solitary, debased prisoner for his existence against the equally debased SS and against the terrible force of the camp. We stress this strongly because myths and legends will arise on both sides. We did not fight for the concept of nation in the camp, nor for the inner restructuring of man; we fought for a bowl of soup, for a place to sleep, for women, for gold and watches from the transports.⁵⁵

We Were in Auschwitz opens with a note "From the Publisher," Anatol Girs (another ex-prisoner of Auschwitz), who emphasizes the documentary aspect of the book and candidly states that "false legends are being created around many aspects of this war. This book removes one of them: the legend of the concentration camp."⁵⁶ Borowski and his fellow authors were against the legend of a heroic political prisoner fighting the fascist system.⁵⁷

The factual, despairing picture by Borowski, a writer frequently accused of cynicism and moral indifference, is replaced in *The Last Stage* by the vision of human solidarity in the face of evil and the strong anti-

fascist and procommunist (pro-Stalinist) messages. Unlike Borowski, for whom Auschwitz revealed the repulsive side of contemporary civilization, Jakubowska (who privately praised Borowski as a writer)⁵⁸ became a propagator of a different set of images that stressed dignity, solidarity, and friendship among those who suffered in the camp. In several interviews Jakubowska emphasized the heroic aspect of Auschwitz, marked by friendship and solidarity: “The thesis that the camp unshackled the worst instincts is false. It was just the opposite: great camaraderie dominated, solidarity, and willingness to help. To bring water to someone sick, to replace the camp numbers during the selection, to protect from a gas chamber. As a whole, prisoners helped each other.”⁵⁹ Discussing the issue of solidarity in Jakubowska’s film, Aaron Kerner eloquently singled out for emphasis an early scene of the roll call: “The entire group performs as a kind of collective midwife, in locked arms the entire group, like a gentle rolling oceanic tide, sway side to side to comfort the woman in labor.”⁶⁰

The Polish literary historian and author of a seminal book on Borowski, Andrzej Werner, writes that, as is typical for subjective narratives, regardless of their ideological positions, “the idealization of human relationships in the camp, if they go beyond the prisoner–perpetrator relation, results in a portrayal that becomes, in a sense, softened; as a rule, examples of solidarity, fraternity, compassion, and sacrifice are elevated.”⁶¹ Werner emphasizes that, from a later perspective, Jakubowska’s film, notwithstanding its objective (“to show the truth about Auschwitz and to stir up a feeling of hatred toward fascism”), and despite the fact that it was received after its premiere as an almost documentary work, portrays not a representative, but a mythologized reality.⁶²

In her pioneering book on Polish cinema between 1944 and 1949, Alina Madej discusses the political and cultural contexts of Jakubowska’s film and explains that Borowski’s representation of Auschwitz, which is deprived of martyrological and heroic gestures, “simply did not conform to the image of terrorized and suffering society,” which was then expected by the authorities and audiences alike. Madej concludes that “*The Last Stage* became truly successful in Europe because nobody was waiting for a different truth about Nazi German concentration camps.”⁶³ Similarly to Madej, Stuart Liebman summarizes the postwar political climate around 1948 that prompted the production of films such as *The Last Stage*:

The Western Allies' efforts to rehabilitate Western Germany as a bulwark against communism and the ensuing onset of the Cold War provided the Communist-dominated regimes in Poland, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia with ideological inspiration to find ways of embarrassing the Western Allies. One particularly glaring moral lapse that could be exploited involved the Allies' lackluster denazification efforts. Films recalling and rendering palpable the horrible epicenter of Nazi evil—especially those that highlighted determined communist resistance to it—therefore offered a subtle, effective means with which to wage the propaganda battle for world opinion. The filmmakers' expressive needs and state policy converged.⁶⁴

Undoubtedly, let us reiterate, *The Last Stage* reflects more the postwar political atmosphere, and less the reality of the camp. After the film's premiere, several Polish papers published "letters from concerned viewers" that were painfully in line with the current state of affairs, such as this one: "The film shows fascism. Fascism, Auschwitz, death factories—all this is the last reserve that the capitalist system mobilizes in the moment of utmost danger. . . . American imperialism offers fascism a safe haven."⁶⁵

The Last Stage presented images expected by the state authorities as well as by the majority of former Auschwitz prisoners and propagated through its commemorative exhibitions and publications at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. Like Jakubowska's film, the museum became an important tool in cementing the postwar process of building a "new nation" and "fighting for peace," as understood by the Stalinists. The Polish prime minister and former Auschwitz prisoner Józef Cyrankiewicz emphasized in his speech during the ceremony at the opening of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum that its goal would be "not only an eternal warning and document of unbound German bestiality, but also at the same time proof of truth about man and his fight for freedom—a document arousing intensified vigilance so that genocidal powers that bring destruction to nations will never rise again."⁶⁶

Ironically, given the ideological stand of *The Last Stage* and its director's staunch communist credentials, during the 1949 congress of film-

makers organized to enforce the doctrine of Socialist Realism in Polish cinema, Jakubowska's film was subjected to criticism for its lack of "revolutionary spirit." Other successful postwar films, such as *Forbidden Songs*, *Border Street*, and *Treasure (Skarb)* (1949, Leonard Buczkowski), were also subjected to the same criticism.⁶⁷ The doctrine demanded adherence to the Communist Party line, the necessary portrayal of the class struggle (the struggle between old and new), an emphasis on class-based images, the rewriting of history from the Marxist perspective, and the elimination of "reactionary bourgeois" ideology."⁶⁸ *The Last Stage*, the film that was the forerunner of the Socialist Realist Polish cinema, was among the first to fall victim to its restrictive policies.

