Screening Auschwitz

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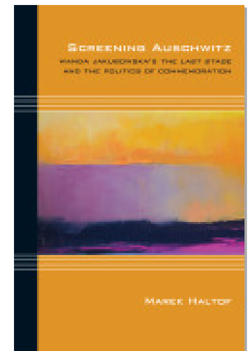

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CHAPTER 6

Representation of the Holocaust in *The Last Stage*

After the collapse of communism, several scholars perceptively discussed the politics surrounding the postwar history of Auschwitz and the attempts at internationalizing the camp.[1] As discussed in chapter 5, for the Polish communist regime Auschwitz symbolized Polish martyrdom and the victory over fascism. In his well-received book *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration, 1945–1979*, Jonathan Huener identifies three "dominant modes of collective memory at the memorial site":

> First, Auschwitz was presented and groomed as a site of Polish national martyrdom. Second, the plight and struggle of the political prisoner, often styled as a socialist hero or resistance fighter, was elevated over the fate of the Jewish victim of genocide at Auschwitz. Third, the memorial site, through its exhibitions and commemorative events, was often used by the Polish state and its representative to gain political currency and at times was even instrumentalized as a stage for political propaganda.[2]

Huener stresses that both the Catholic Church and the communist state used the commemorative site for their own political purposes, in some cases in an "exclusionary manner, understating or even excluding the memory of nearly a million Jews killed at Auschwitz—some 90 percent of the camp's victims."[3]

In their descriptions of the symbolic meaning of the former death

camp and the communist attempts at memorialization, some researchers emphasize that the communist regime's efforts also targeted the "Polish aspect" of the camp. For example, Andrew Charlesworth, a political geographer, persuasively argues that "by emphasizing its international character and ignoring the fact the victims were Jewish, the Communists linked Poland through the memorialization of Auschwitz to the other Warsaw Pact countries, both as past and potential victims of German aggression and as present beneficiaries of their liberation by the Red Army and of their continuing defense by the Soviet Union."[4] According to Charlesworth, the communist authorities "succeeded to a large extent in de-Polonising as well as almost totally de-Judaizing Auschwitz."[5]

The policy of the Polish communists to make Auschwitz a memorial to those who fought against fascism led to the absence or marginalization of the camp's largest group of victims—the Jews. As Jakubowska stated on several occasions, after the film's premiere some of the Polish concentration camp survivors did not appreciate the fact that the leading character in her film, Marta Weiss (played by Polish actress Barbara Drapińska), is Jewish, although her Jewishness is not highlighted in the film. Such a representation, Jakubowska stated, was her "moral duty. Only Jews went straight to the gas from the transports."[6] Indeed, during the war Jakubowska was knowledgeable of the plight of Polish Jews. She was at the Pawiak prison in Warsaw (located inside the ghetto) when the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising started, and the prison building was used by the Germans as an attack base against the Jewish insurgents.

When Jakubowska was transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, she was also very much aware of the German program of extermination of Jews in the camp: "The smokestacks were going all the time. We knew what was going on."[7] During that time several transports from the ghetto in Salonika (Thessaloniki), Greece, arrived in Auschwitz. Three days before Jakubowska was registered in Auschwitz, on April 29, 1943, a transport with 2,700 Jews from the Salonika ghetto arrived. After the selection, 2,062 people were immediately gassed. Another transport from Salonika arrived on May 4, 1943. Out of 2,930 Jews, 2,392 were killed in the gas chambers, while others were admitted to the camp.[8] Later, in August 1943, when Jakubowska was still housed in Birkenau but working in the Rajsko subcamp, several death transports with Polish Jews from the Bendin (Będzin) and Sosnowitz (Sosnowiec) ghettos arrived.

The Last Stage: representation of Birkenau. Author's collection.

It has also to be stated that some members of Jakubowska's film crew were Jewish. They included producer Mieczysław Wajnberger and cinematographer Boris Monastyrski. In addition, during the preparatory stage, the project had to be approved by the top echelon of Film Polski executives, many of them of Jewish origin, including Aleksander Ford (Mosze Lifszyc), Jerzy Bossak (Jerzy Burger-Naum), Stanisław Wohl, and Jerzy Toeplitz. It is also worth noting that the premiere of *The Last Stage* corresponded with the unveiling of a small monument in Birkenau on the fifth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (April 19, 1948), near the ruins of one of the crematoria. Erected in part thanks to the pressure exerted by the Central Committee of Polish Jews (Centralny Komitet Żydów Polskich, CKŻP), the monument commemorated the murdered Jews. In the summer of 1946, there were approximately 245,000 Jews in Poland, mostly people repatriated from the Soviet Union (157,420 according to the CKŻP figures) who, as Jaff Schatz writes, faced economic hardships, anti-Semitism, and the fact that Poland had become "a gigantic Jewish cemetery."[9]

A Polish production made with the help of an international contingent, *The Last Stage* emphasizes—like other postwar films made

elsewhere—the universal, and not the Jewish, aspect of Auschwitz. Although the viewer watches Jewish prisoners in several scenes (wearing the Star of David, their plight often explicitly addressed), the film predominantly refers to "people," and the nationality of screen characters is of minor importance. For example, Marta's "cosmopolitan looks," multilingual abilities, and proper communist convictions make her a model protagonist who symbolizes the "fighting Auschwitz" that the communist regime wished to represent on the screen.

Polish, German, Russian, French, Romany, and Serbian—but, interestingly, not Yiddish—languages are all spoken onscreen in the Auschwitz Babel of tongues. Given Jakubowska's objective of documenting the camp as truly as possible and, consequently, the attention she paid to the language aspect of her film, the lack of Yiddish onscreen—the historical language of Ashkenazi Jews and the first language of the majority of victims of the Holocaust—may be puzzling at first. However, as Timothy Snyder reminds us, Auschwitz was the killing center of assimilated West European Jews in particular. Most of the Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jews (Soviet and Polish) who found themselves in the territories occupied by Nazi Germany had already been murdered. Snyder provides some chilling figures:

> Of the million or so Soviet Jews killed in the Holocaust, fewer than one percent died at Auschwitz. Of the three million or so Polish Jews killed in the Holocaust, only about seven percent perished at Auschwitz. Nearly 1.3 million Polish Jews were killed, usually shot, east of the Molotov–Ribbentrop line. Another 1.3 million or so Polish Jews were gassed in Operation Reinhard in the General Government (more than 700,000 at Treblinka, roughly 400,000 at Bełżec, 150,000 at Sobibór, and 50,000 at Majdanek). Another 350,000 more were gassed in the lands annexed to the Reich (besides 200,000 at Auschwitz, about 150,000 at Chełmno). Most of the remaining Jewish victims were shot during the ghetto clearings (about 100,000) or in Operation Harvest Festival (42,000), or during the many smaller actions and in individual executions. Many died of hunger or disease in the ghettos or as laborers in concentration camps.[10]

Snyder explains that before "1943 and 1944, when most of the killing of West European Jews took place, the Holocaust was in considerable measure complete. . . . The main victims, the Polish and Soviet Jews, had been killed by bullets fired over death pits or by carbon monoxide from internal combustion engines pumped into gas chambers at Treblinka, Bełżec, and Sobibór in occupied Poland."[11]

Jakubowska's film reflects the status of the postwar debates about Auschwitz—namely, the emphasis on the victims' country of origin (the nation-state), rather than their ethnicity. "If any group suffered especially under the Germans, Stalin maintained wrongly, it was the Russians. In this way Stalinism has prevented us from seeing Hitler's mass killings in proper perspective," writes Snyder.[12] The Polish historian Marek Kucia argues that this approach regarding Auschwitz originated with the findings of the Soviet commission that inspected the site of the concentration camp soon after its liberation by the Red Army.[13] The Soviets categorized the victims of Auschwitz according to their state affiliations, which resulted in the absence of the category "Jews." Their approach certainly had an impact upon subsequent Polish attempts at documenting Auschwitz. Instead of reflecting the camp's true fabric, the language used in the official documents, as well as in several early literary accounts, relied on universal categories such as "people," "victims," and "men, women, and children."

One also finds a similar absence of Jewish suffering and a lack of references to the ethnic origins of the majority of victims in several postwar Polish literary works describing the horror of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Zofia Nałkowska, a member of the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland (Główna Komisja Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich w Polsce), deals mostly with the plight of the Jews in her masterpiece, a collection of short stories titled *Medallions*. Despite that, however, her references are mainly to generic "people," in line with the motto for her book: "People dealt this fate to people."[14] It has to be noted also that some Jewish-Polish survivors of Auschwitz-Birkenau, who after the war published their memoirs, also disguised their Jewish identities. Krystyna Żywulska (Sonia Landau), who was sent to Auschwitz from the Pawiak prison in Warsaw on August 25, 1943 (camp number 55908), in her widely read book *I Came Back* (published in Poland in 1946), con-

cealed her Jewishness even though she referred frankly to the plight of her fellow Jewish citizens.[15]

References to people of all nations being the victims of Nazi Germany and the lack of emphasis upon the Jewish victims did not, however, constitute a uniquely Polish approach. For example, as Peter Novick notes, "the words 'Jew' and 'Jewish' do not appear in Murrow's broadcast about Buchenwald, nor do they appear in Margaret Bourke-White's account of photographing the camp."[16] Several postwar documentary and narrative films made outside Poland also did not mention explicitly the Jewish victims, although they dealt with Jewish suffering. For example, in *Nazi Concentration Camps* (1945, George Stevens)—the documentary material shot by Allied military photographers after the liberation of the German concentration camps and used at the Nuremberg Trial—the victims are referred to according to their country of origin. Similarly, in *Die Todesmühlen* (*Death Mills*, 1946, Billy Wilder), the film produced for screening in occupied Germany and Austria by the United States Department of War, the Jewish martyrdom is not named explicitly ("millions of men, women and children were tortured to death"). These films, while aptly portraying the horror of the camps, marginalize the Jewish suffering and stress the collective trauma with the use of Christian iconography.

Describing the way postwar films dealt with the plight of Jews, Stuart Liebman commented that the postwar filmmakers "framed the greatest Jewish catastrophe of modern times by translating it into the representational idioms and symbolic rituals of an alien tradition, that of Christianity."[17] In another study Liebman writes:

> Most of the films made between 1944 and 1949 barely mention Jews except as one category of victims among many, that is, as an afterthought. The specificity and disproportionality of Jews as the principal targets of the Nazis' extermination plans are *never* acknowledged. Rather, most subsume Jewish fates in Christian, *resistancialiste*, antifascist, or universalist rhetoric that conceptually fogs the extent to which Jews were singled out for special treatment. They hardly address, let alone measure up to, the enormity of the Jewish disaster.[18]

As an exception to the rule, Liebman singles out for emphasis *Our Children* (*Unzere Kinder*, 1948), the first postwar narrative film in Yiddish, produced in Poland by Saul Goskind and directed by Natan Gross.[19]

The lack of emphasis on the Jewish catastrophe is seen not only during the first postwar years. In 1955, Alan Resnais's *Night and Fog* includes only four scenes featuring prisoners wearing the Star of David, and the word "Jew" is uttered only once ("Stern, a Jewish student from Amsterdam"). The 1959 representation of the Holocaust in George Stevens's *The Diary of Anne Frank* with its "distinctly generic representation of innocence and tragedy in times of crisis," as Wulf Kansteiner describes the film, might also serve as a good example here.[20] In their films made several years after the war and in a context largely devoid of political pressures experienced by filmmakers behind the Iron Curtain, both Resnais and Stevens disregarded historical accuracy.

Soviet "atrocity films," although sometimes featuring (and sporadically naming) images of Jews and Jewish suffering, also by and large downplayed the issue of ethnicity. Unlike the Soviets, Polish filmmakers who documented for the first time the industrialized mass murder (*Majdanek, the Cemetery of Europe*) and the first trial of Nazi German concentration camp staff (*Swastika and Gallows*) referred candidly to the Jewish suffering. Liebman compares *Swastika and Gallows* with the Soviet film made two years earlier, in the summer of 1943, *The Verdict of the People* (*Prigobor Naroda*). The latter is a film about the trial of Soviet citizens who aided the Germans in the killing of 6,700 civilians, half of them Jewish, in the city of Krasnodar. Although both films share some obvious elements of Stalinist propaganda, the Polish film, apart from the presence of Christian religious symbolism, "used stunningly candid accounts of actions taken *against the Jews*."[21]

The same can be said of narrative films. After the first (and only) portrayal of the Holocaust in *The Unvanquished*, images of the Holocaust disappeared from Soviet screens for almost fourteen years, until the release of Sergei Bondarchuk's celebrated *The Fate of a Man* (*Sudba czeloveka*, 1959).[22] During the same period, however, in addition to *The Last Stage*, Polish filmmakers produced several narrative films about different aspects of the Holocaust, among them *Border Street* (1949), the first film about the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (April 19–May 16, 1943); A

Generation (*Pokolenie*, 1955), Andrzej Wajda's film about the communist resistance and its help for the Warsaw ghetto fighters; *Three Women* (*Trzy kobiety*, 1957), Stanisław Różewicz's film about three female survivors (including a Jewish woman) of Auschwitz; and *White Bear* (*Biały niedźwiedź*, 1959), Jerzy Zarzycki's wartime drama about a Jewish man who escapes from a transport to a concentration camp and hides in a resort town wearing a white bearskin and posing for photographs.[23]

Like several other films released during the postwar period, *The Last Stage* is perhaps not explicit enough in presenting the wartime extermination of European Jewry. Rather, it emphasizes the tragedy of nation-states subjected to Nazi German exterminatory policies. Strictly speaking, it is a film not about the Holocaust, but about the "concentrationary universe."[24] However, given the postwar geopolitical context and restrictions in Soviet-liberated (and occupied at the same time) Eastern and Central Europe, Jakubowska's representation of the Holocaust deserves to be considered sincere and pioneering.

Several scenes of *The Last Stage* introduce Jewish characters and truthfully address the Jewish suffering. The segment depicting the arrival of Marta's transport and the selection at the ramp has to be emphasized. It unmistakably shows the arrival of a Jewish transport. The German officer in charge reports the number (2,100) of Jews in the transport to the *Lagerkommandant*. Marta and her mother wear the Star of David on their coats, like other people in the transport. Although only Polish and German are spoken during this fragment, not Yiddish, this may be explained by noting that the whole transport consists mostly of Polonized Jews like Marta and her family. The brutal selection follows and then a scene that may be considered characteristic of Jakubowska's strategy for portraying the extermination process. In order to conform to the cinematic conventions of the day and to make her film bearable for a wide spectrum of viewers, she avoids graphic naturalistic depiction. Instead, a medium closeup of a child's toy in the mud, trampled by a marching SS guard, signifies the fate of the Jewish transport that viewers saw on the screen minutes ago arriving at the ramp in Birkenau.

The expressionistic flames and smoke coming from the chimneys of the crematoria (pictured on the horizon) leave no doubt as to what happened to the Jews. Jakubowska depicts the extermination process through the extensive use of metonymies and synecdoches. As Cathy S. Gelbin

Marta (Barbara Drapińska, *in the middle*). Author's collection.

writes, she conveys "the mass destruction process in panning the victims' spoils—spectacles, prosthesis and suitcases—which refer metonymically to the loss of human lives, and through the synecdochic image of the crematorium at the end of the main camp road."[25]

The following scene, the admission to the camp, also emphasizes the plight of Jews, including Marta, who is first seen with the Star of David and later with an armband of *Lagerdolmetscher* (camp interpreter). As a translator, she can keep her hair, has an access to information, and relatively freer movement, and she therefore also has the ability to help others.[26]

The Holocaust historian Omer Bartov is right when he observes: "As fellow sufferers, some of the inmates have distinguishing religious, national, and political marks. The Jews, however, though they may be victimized as such, have no language, religion, or culture of their own. And, if they happen to manifest particularly striking heroism, they must be assimilated into the national-communist camp."[27] This is what happens to Marta, although she is not affiliated with any particular nation (even if Polish seems to be her first language) but rather with the internationalist communist cause. She dies not as a Jew, although this was the reason she was deported to Auschwitz, but as a member of the communist resistance.

Mala and Edek

Some critics pointed out that the romantic subplot involving Marta and Tadek had been somehow artificially incorporated by Jakubowska into the film in order to conform to the conventions of mainstream cinema and to satisfy the demands of the public.[28] As elaborated by many writers and scholars, including former Auschwitz inmates, the character of Marta is modeled on Mala (Malka) Zimetbaum (1918–1944), a Jewish woman born in the Polish city of Brzesko, 31 miles (50 kilometers) east of Kraków and only 76 miles (123 kilometers) from Auschwitz. At the age of ten, she moved with her family to Belgium. In September 1942, she was arrested and sent to Auschwitz. Fluent in several languages, in the camp she became a translator (camp number 19880), and played an active part in the camp's underground. She is remembered by many eyewitnesses for her spirit and aid to other prisoners. On June 24, 1944, she escaped from Auschwitz with a young Polish prisoner, Edward (Edek) Galiński, but was caught two weeks later, returned to Auschwitz, and sentenced to death. Primo Levi comments that in Auschwitz "the flight of even a single prisoner was considered the most grievous fault on the part of all surveillance personnel." He adds that the capture of an escapee was "punished by public hanging, but this hanging was preceded by a ceremony that varied each time but was always of an unheard of ferocity, an occasion for the imaginative cruelty of the SS to run amok."[29] Levi provides the following account of Mala Zimetbaum, which is similar to several other testimonies:

> In Birkenau she acted as an interpreter and messenger and as such enjoyed a certain freedom of movement. She was generous and courageous; she had helped many of her companions and was loved by all of them. In the summer of 1944 she decided to escape with Edek, a Polish political prisoner. . . . [After her capture] she had managed to conceal a razor blade on her body. At the foot of the gallows, she cut the artery on one of her wrists, the SS who acted as executioners tried to snatch the blade from her and Mala, under the eyes of all the women in the camp, slapped his face with the bloodied hand. Enraged, other guards immediately came running: a prisoner, a Jewess, a woman, had dared

> defy them! They trampled her to death; she expired, fortunately for her, on the cart taking her to the crematorium.[30]

Levi's version of Mala's heroic death resembles the one from Wiesław Kielar's book, *Anus Mundi: Five Years in Auschwitz*, which offers an honest, factual account of his ordeal as well as of his friendship with Edek Galiński and Mala Zimetbaum.[31] Kielar was one of the first prisoners at Auschwitz. He writes about the story of Zimetbaum and Galiński's love, their escape, capture, and heroic death:

> Next day the little Slovak girl runner told me of Mala's execution. Just like Edek, Mala was determined to prevent the SS men from executing the sentence. As she was standing on the scaffold under the gallows, while the sentence was read out, she slashed her wrists with a razor blade. But, as with Edek, they would not allow her to die in the way she had chosen. Rapportführer Taube rushed up to her, and she slapped his face with her blood-streaming hands. The enraged SS men almost trampled her to death in front of the whole women's camp.[32]

The story of Mala and Edek's love features prominently in numerous camp memoirs and testimonies. It is now generally agreed that Zimetbaum escaped with her lover, Edward Galiński (1923–1944), who was sent to Auschwitz with the first transport of Poles from Tarnów (camp number 531). However, according to another Auschwitz survivor, Krystyna Żywulska, the character of Tadeusz (Tadek) is based on a prewar right-wing nationalist activist, Jan Mosdorf (1904–1943), who was imprisoned at Auschwitz in January 1941, and there, "facing the Holocaust, he understood where his fascist way was leading," and he "underwent an ideological change."[33] Also for another former Auschwitz prisoner, Henryk Korotyński, Tadek is Mosdorf who "abandoned fascism while in the camp."[34]

The published script by Jakubowska contains a scene supporting that claim, which never made it fully to the final version of the film. This scene shows that the characters knew each other before the war. Tadeusz is surprised by Marta's presence in the camp, to which she responds bitterly, "You should be happy. Everything here is the way you wanted it to

be in your university leaflets. 'Down with the Jews!' 'Beat the Jews!' And so on. There is only one thing that you did not predict—that you also will end up here . . . together with me."[35] In the film's scene featuring their first encounter, a slightly surprised Tadek acknowledges that they knew each other before the war and admits: "It's sad, but only here in the camp have I understood a number of things." Marta tells him that she remembers his speeches and that she, too, started to think correctly in the camp and that she owes it to her female comrades. Their conversation is interrupted by a raging SS man on a horse.

Several testimonies from former prisoners who knew Mala and witnessed her death, however, contradict the screen version of events presented by Jakubowska. For example, Anna Palarczyk (Szyller, camp number 17524), although praising the verisimilitude of the film, states that there were no gallows in Birkenau. According to her, numerous later testimonies about the fate of Mala were actually influenced by Jakubowska's depiction of events. In Palarczyk's version of events, Mala slapped the face of the SS man on duty, Reuters, with her bleeding hand; she was taken on a wheelbarrow first to the infirmary to bandage her arm, and then toward the crematorium where, most probably, she was shot by Reuters.[36]

Similar comments came from another eyewitness, Wanda Marossanyi (camp number 7524). She stated that with other prisoners she stood in a circle in front of Block 4. For her, the gallows in the film were Jakubowska's invention, later repeated by Mala and Edek's friend Wiesław Kielar in his book, among others.[37]

One can, however, expect to read slightly different testimonies concerning the fate of Mala, provided by former prisoners. Elissa Mailänder, in her book *Female SS Guards and Workaday Violence* dealing with the *Aufseherinnen* in Majdanek, discusses the circumstance of a young woman who was hanged in Majdanek in 1943. When her case was presented at the Majdanek trial in Düsseldorf, 150 eyewitnesses provided their testimonies, which varied significantly and resulted in the charges against the perpetrators being dropped. She writes:

> Even though the survivors had all witnessed the same event, each remembered it differently, typically along national, religious, and social lines. . . . Though the hanging was staged as a ritual

> of shunning and exclusion, this aspect met with little success. Nor did the SS succeed in convincing the assembled prisoners to identify with the perpetrators rather than the victim. Instead, the testimony of the witnesses suggests that the Jewish and Polish prisoners each claimed the young woman as one of their own.[38]

The heroic account of Jewish-Polish Marta is usually in the center of debates surrounding the film, but *The Last Stage* features other scenes and characters that address the Holocaust. The discussion in the SS commandant's office directly reveals the Nazi German plans to annihilate the Jews of Europe. The debate about the "efficiency" of the camp provides details about crematoria capacity. It also introduces arguments by some SS officers, who opt for a speedy extermination of prisoners from different countries (no Jews are mentioned here), and the representatives of German industry, who prefer forced slave labor and extermination through labor. The *Oberaufseherin* fervently concludes: "Gentlemen, I think that you haven't quite yet understood the greatness of our task. The Führer has given our camp, that is, he has placed on our shoulders the great task first and foremost of purging Europe of all racial and political inferior elements. Extermination—that is the only way. And this endless back and forth about those who are fit to work and those who are not, about Jews and non-Jews, this I simply cannot understand!"

Even though Jakubowska avoids explicit images that may now be staple shots in any Holocaust drama, such as images of violent roundups in ghettos, drastic images of starvation, and religious Jews being persecuted by Nazi German soldiers, she accentuates those moments in the camp's history that, although true, were certainly not representative, such as the heroic death of the Jewish-Polish woman Marta and the portrayal of the Jewish-French prisoners (although not identified explicitly as Jewish) who sing the "Marseillaise" while being carted to the crematoria. Jakubowska includes scenes that had been influential and often copied in other Holocaust films, such as Jewish transports arriving at Birkenau's *Judenrampe* secretly at night, brutal selections to a work detail or to the gas chamber, the plight of Jewish children, and the ruthless and frenzied selection of Jewish prisoners by the *Aufseherin*. *The Last Stage*

introduces images of assimilated, nonreligious Jews who do not speak Yiddish and do not observe Jewish customs. Rather than see it negatively, as not singling out the Jewish tragedy for emphasis, one may view this way of presenting the Holocaust as strengthening the horror as well as the absurd nature of the whole persecution.

Jakubowska attempted to represent the Holocaust and the reality of the camp truthfully, while staunchly following the communist doctrine. The result, as pointed out by several scholars, was more a legend convenient for the communist state. Omer Bartov has the following to say about *The Last Stage*: "Watching this film more than half a century after it was made, one cannot but be struck by the fact that the exposure of the lies and fabrications that underlay Nazi ideology and policies was already predicated on a new series of lies and fabrications meant to facilitate the reestablishment of Polish nationalism and to legitimize communist domination."[39] If we look, however, at *The Last Stage* in a broader context of postwar world cinema and literature, its pioneering aspect cannot escape viewers' attention.