

Indelible Shadows

Film and the Holocaust

Third Edition

Annette Insdorf



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Foreword to 1989 edition © Elie Wiesel

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1

The Hollywood Version of the Holocaust

Few American films have confronted the darker realities of World War II – ghettos, occupation, deportation, concentration camps, collaboration, extermination. The Holocaust has been only touched upon in such Hollywood studio productions as *Exodus*, *Cabaret*, *Ship of Fools*, *Marathon Man*, *Julia*, *The Boys from Brazil*, and *Victory*, and brought to the fore in only a handful of postwar films like *Judgment at Nuremberg*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Voyage of the Damned*, and – increasingly – movies made for television. When “Judgment at Nuremberg” was first presented as a teleplay on *Playhouse 90* in 1959, however, commerce clearly got in the way of authenticity: the sponsor of the show, the American Gas Association, objected to the use of the word “gas” in reference to the concentration camp death chambers. According to the producer Herbert Brodtkin, the sponsor wanted it deleted; he refused; they got their way behind his back: “Although the program was televised live, CBS delayed its transmission for a few seconds, long enough for an engineer to bleep out the word gas each time it was mentioned.”¹ The major difference between “telefilms” like *Holocaust* and *Playing for Time* and theatrically distributed features is the commercial interruptions to which the former are subject. In conception, style, and appeal to a mass audience, nevertheless, these *are* “Hollywood” films, simply made for a smaller screen. Moreover, in the cynically realistic appraisal of screenwriter Paddy Chayefsky:

NBC wanted to do *The War Against the Jews*. That’s before they did *Holocaust*. I said the subject was simply too painful for me to write about. But if I had agreed to do it for television, I’d have had to make a soap opera of the whole thing. You’d have to get high emotional moments, regularly, because you have these damn ten-minute intervals all the time. You can never really accumulate the power; you have to capsulize a lot of emotion, and you have to overdramatize things. In fact, the word critics used on *Holocaust* was “trivialize,” and in a sense that was an unfair criticism, even though accurate. Trivialization *is* television.²

Whether on a small or silver screen, there is perhaps nothing inherently wrong in an entertaining film set against the backdrop of World War II, like *Victory*, for example.

James Woods (Karl) and Meryl Streep (Inga) in *Holocaust*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LEARNING CORPORATION OF AMERICA

But as we move further in time from the realities of Nazism and closer to comforting myths, many people shrug off the complexity of history to embrace the simplifications offered by films. It is consequently a premise of this study that filmmakers confronting the Holocaust must assume a special responsibility, commensurate with its gravity and enormity. Elie Wiesel told an interviewer, “Before I say the words, Auschwitz or Treblinka, there must be a space, a breathing space, a kind of zone of silence.”³ His fear that the Holocaust is becoming “a phenomenon of superficiality” is applicable to films.

The television program *Holocaust* (1978) heightened awareness of both the historical facts and the problems of how to dramatize them on film. This miniseries took Nazi atrocities out of the province of specialized study and made them a “prime-time” phenomenon – with both the benefits of exposure and the drawbacks of distortion. Its case illustrates the rewards and tendencies inherent in films made for mass audiences – from the power of sensitizing, to the danger of romanticizing and trivializing. Indeed, *Holocaust* must be appreciated for its stimulation of concern, both in America and Europe, but questioned for its manner of presentation – including commercials (for example, it packaged devastating gas chamber scenes into neat fifteen-minute segments separated by commercials for an air deodorizer and panty shields).

Holocaust was saddled with the dubious term “docudrama,” which coproducer Herbert Brodtkin now repudiates: “In my mind, what are called ‘docudramas’ don’t exist. We like to take a real situation, then create a drama out of it.”⁴ The introductory voice-over says: “It is only a story. But it really happened.” *What* really happened? Not



Deborah Norton (Marta) and Michael Moriarty (Erik) in *Holocaust*. PHOTO COURTESY OF LEARNING CORPORATION OF AMERICA



Meryl Streep (Inga) and James Woods (Karl) in *Holocaust*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LEARNING CORPORATION OF AMERICA

the story of the Weiss family, but the backdrop of events. The second “it” blurs the distinction between fact and fiction, as does the rest of the film. Directed by Marvin Chomsky from a teleplay by Gerald Green, *Holocaust* traces the victimization of the Weiss family – cultured Berlin Jews – by the Nazis, incarnated especially by Erik Dorf (Michael Moriarty). The Weiss family is uprooted, deported, and killed (with the exception of the youngest son, Rudi) in scenes that depict the growth of Nazism, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the “efficiency” of Nazi planning, Auschwitz, the partisans in the forest, the “model” camp Theresienstadt, and the departure of Rudi (Joseph Bottoms) for Palestine.

The ground-breaking telecast sparked a great deal of controversy in the United States; some critics and viewers praised the fine acting of Moriarty, Rosemary Harris, Fritz Weaver, Meryl Streep, James Woods, Tovah Feldshuh, among a uniformly good cast, and the sensitizing effect it could have on mass audiences, while others decried the program for its lack of accuracy (a Jew keeping his suitcase in Auschwitz?!) and melodramatic contrivances. Rabbi Wolfe Kelman, for example, faulted *Holocaust* for distorting the image of the victims: most of those who perished were not cultured Berlin doctors, but ordinary Jews – shopkeepers, housewives, and day laborers as well as Yiddish poets and Talmud scholars – he claimed in an “NBC Reports” program that followed the rebroadcast of *Holocaust* in September 1979. The program came up with some astounding statistics: 220 million people had seen *Holocaust*, and in West Germany alone, 15 million. The broadcast in West Germany on January 22, 23, 25, and 26, 1979, provoked passionate public response. Television station switchboards and newspapers were flooded with reactions attesting to the failure

of general education and historians regarding Auschwitz. Many writers credited the program with destroying a taboo and creating a climate favorable to discussing the Holocaust at home, work, and school:

From now on German has been enriched by a new American word “Holocaust,” which simultaneously covers the Jewish genocide, the TV movie and its personalized tragedy, and the emotional and political reactions it provoked. These five days of collective emotion seem to have permitted the younger generation to perceive the Auschwitz trauma and the Jews from a totally new perspective, which could be called “the pedagogy of the Holocaust.”⁵

Nevertheless, critics of the telecast presented forceful arguments against its aesthetic – and by implication, ethical – shortcomings. Like Elie Wiesel in the *New York Times*, West German critics denounced the “soap opera” and its “kitschy music,” inaccuracies, and sensationalism. As an article in *Der Spiegel* put it, “*Holocaust* as docudrama blurs fact, trivializes events, and neither illuminates nor forces one to think about them.”⁶ Critics ultimately acknowledged – albeit grudgingly – that drama could have more emotional power than documentary, that trivialized information was better than none, and that the history of the Final Solution could be made accessible only through dramatic presentation: “The death of six million is beyond human comprehension, hence empathy, the death of six is not. . . . Finally, critics maintained that Germans had to experience the Holocaust emotionally, even if it was portrayed in Hollywood terms.”⁷

More than ten years later, the effects of the program are less palpable. Although an article in a 1979 issue of *Cahiers du Cinéma* claimed “that the fiction of *Holocaust* has more effect, *today*. . . than all the documentary material ever accumulated on the genocide of the Jews,”⁸ time has taken its toll. In the opinion of German filmmaker Peter Lilienthal, “*Holocaust* was like a thriller, and the level of the reaction was on the level of the film: how long did it last?”⁹ For the *New York Times* television critic John J. O’Connor, “the event demands intensity and a searing vision. NBC’s ‘Holocaust’ can claim neither.”¹⁰

Intensity does not necessarily mean sweeping drama: given the emotion inherent in the subject matter, perhaps the Holocaust requires restraint and a hushed voice – a whisper rather than a shout – as evidenced by the effective understatement of films like Lilienthal’s *David* or Markus Imhoof’s *The Boat Is Full*. Simplistic and emotionally manipulative, *Holocaust* is characteristic of American feature films on the subject. For example, *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Judgment at Nuremberg* – the former originally a hit play and the latter a television drama – depend on a confined theatrical setting, superfluous dialogue, star turns, classical editing (mainly with close-ups), and musical scores whose violins swell at dramatic moments. These studio productions essentially fit the bristling new material of the Holocaust into an old narrative form, thus allowing the viewer to leave the theater feeling complacent instead of concerned or disturbed. The fact that both films are in black and white gives them a stark quality – which is, however, undercut by their lush scores.

The Diary of Anne Frank (1959) was adapted by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett from their 1956 Pulitzer Prize-winning play, based on the published diary of a young victim of the death camps, and some brief location footage was shot of

the Amsterdam house where she wrote it. Reality also enters by way of documentary footage of camp life. Nevertheless, the authenticity of the tale is compromised by Hollywood conventions of casting and scoring. The thirteen-year-old Anne is played by Millie Perkins, who is clearly much older; when she dresses up, the thin, dark-haired actress bears a striking resemblance to Audrey Hepburn, one of the most popular female stars of the fifties. Peter, the boy on whom she has a crush, is played by Richard Beymer, a teen idol who later played the All-American lead in *West Side Story*. From the very start of the film – a postwar present tense that introduces a long flashback – the soundtrack plays an overly prominent role. Upon returning to his home after the war, Mr. Frank (Joseph Schildkraut) finds and puts on a scarf, and the lush Alfred Newman musical score signals that this is *significant*. (The scarf will subsequently be revealed as a gift from Anne.) The same thing occurs when he is handed Anne's diary; and when Anne and Peter are about to kiss, the music again rises – a redundancy, considering the image. The soundtrack also dominates by means of Anne's voice-over narration, as well as through the punctuation of sirens and Allied bombings that symbolize the continuous danger outside the attic. The only real "cinematic" element added to the play is superimposition, such as the sequence with the sneak thief at the safe on the second floor while at the same time the Jews remain immobile in the attic above. This spatial layering within a fixed frame is an effective device for stressing their claustrophobic life.

Judgment at Nuremberg, directed by Stanley Kramer in 1961, begins with more cinematic élan: an iris shot of a swastika opens up to reveal that the symbol is

Millie Perkins (Anne) in *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART/FILM STILL ARCHIVE



on a monument. During the credits, we hear a Nazi marching song; the swastika suddenly blows up; and a hand-held camera leads us through a hazy dissolve into ruins. We read “Nuremberg, Germany, 1948” before meeting the crusty American judge Dan Haywood (Spencer Tracy) who has come out of retirement in Maine to pass judgment on four Nazi war criminals. Most of the film is devoted to the tense trials, which are orchestrated mainly by the raging American prosecutor Colonel Tad Lawson (Richard Widmark) and the equally excitable German defense lawyer Hans Rolfe (Maximilian Schell). Their key witnesses are Rudolf Petersen (Montgomery Clift), a nervous young man who was sterilized by the Nazis for political reasons (Rolfe tries to justify the sterilization on the grounds that Petersen is feeble-minded), and Irene Hoffman (Judy Garland), who must be coaxed to testify about a case of “racial pollution.” Finally, the most important defendant – the German scholar and jurist Ernst Janning (Burt Lancaster) – breaks his silence. Respected by Judge Dan Haywood for his earlier writings on jurisprudence, Janning now bitterly explains that in a period of indignity, fear, and hunger, Hitler had returned to Germans their pride. “I am aware!” he yells. “Were we deaf? Blind? If we didn’t know, it’s because we didn’t want to know.”

Rolfe’s trenchant rejoinder is that if Janning is guilty, as he himself insists, then everyone is guilty: the Vatican, Churchill who indirectly praised Hitler in 1938, American industrialists who helped Hitler rebuild his armaments, and so on. The American judge finally indicts the men in the dock because, even if many more people are guilty, these four individuals *were* responsible for their actions. “If these murderers were monsters, this event would have no more moral significance than an earthquake”; on the contrary, he warns the court, “How easily it can happen.” After the four men receive sentences of life imprisonment, Rolfe wagers with Judge Haywood (who refuses to accept the bet) that the sentenced men will be free in five years. The prescient cynic’s prediction is fulfilled, for the closing title informs us that not one of the ninety-nine defendants sentenced in Nuremberg is still serving time.

This film raises central issues of responsibility – individual, national, and universal – but almost exclusively through dialogue. The self-conscious opening and frequent visual flourishes do not seem anchored in any conception of a unified cinematic style. Perhaps Stanley Kramer thought he was making the film less theatrical by panning 360 degrees around a speaker like Lawson, or zooming into a tight close-up for emphasis; however, both of these techniques seem gratuitous and manipulative. For example, when Lawson takes the stand as commander of the American troops who liberated the camps, he shows harrowing archival footage of the camps and inmates, of children tattooed for extermination. Rather than letting the images imprint themselves upon us, Lawson (and Kramer) hammer them in: Lawson’s voice-over is a harangue, and Kramer intercuts reaction shots which force audience identification with the surrogates in the courtroom rather than a personal response. Here, much of the same footage that is used in *Night and Fog* is material for prosecution rather than illumination. And as in Fritz Lang’s *Fury* (1936), projecting a film in the courtroom carries the self-conscious suggestion that film is equivalent to truth.

Judgment at Nuremberg is more successful in the scenes dramatizing personal relations, relying as it does on the casting of recognizable stars. Some are used for their suggestion of integrity (Tracy, Lancaster, Garland), and the relationship between Haywood and Janning resembles that of Rauffenstein and Boeldieu in *Grand*



Maximilian Schell (Rolfe) and Richard Widmark (Lawson) in *Judgment at Nuremberg*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MUSEUM OF MODERN ART/FILM STILLS ARCHIVE

Illusion, Jean Renoir's classic film about World War I. These men are bound by a code that cuts across national boundaries; their commitment to justice leads to a parallel situation in which the man in charge (Rauffenstein/Haywood) must destroy the other (Boeldieu/Janning), who understands and accepts his fate. On the other hand, Montgomery Clift and Marlene Dietrich connote the dubious psychological or moral states of their own film personas: for example, when the song "Lili Marleen" accompanies Haywood's walk with this German woman, her identity resonates beyond the frame. Dietrich's German accent rings true, whereas Hollywood's traditional neglect of language differences mars other parts of the film. At the beginning of *Judgment at Nuremberg*, there is a realistic quality when Rolfe speaks German and we hear a simultaneous translation. But after a zoom-in to a close-up, he suddenly breaks into English. Subsequently, he and Janning – two Germans – speak English between themselves! It is an accepted convention that an American film should be in English, but a strained one when we initially hear a major character speaking in his native language.

The histrionics of both Rolfe and Lawson are in keeping with their characters.¹¹ However, a voice of rage is not necessarily the best way to reach an audience; not unlike the violins that enter when Lawson convinces Irene Hoffman to testify, the sentimental tone betrays a fear that the material itself might not be sufficiently compelling. Some might argue that our numbed cinematic and moral senses demand a shout just to shake us out of lethargy. Nevertheless, the danger is that one could get so caught up in the emotion as to be incapable of reflecting on the message.

Otto Preminger's *Exodus* (1960) avoids this danger by presenting Auschwitz through a dispassionate verbal recollection, in the scene where the Irgun (Israeli

Underground) members interrogate Dov Landau (Sal Mineo) before initiating him. The question-and-answer session about the gas chambers and ovens is powerful not because Dov shouts but because he finally remains silent; he cannot reveal “who dug the graves.” His questioner (David Opatoshu) divines that Dov – who entered Auschwitz at the age of twelve – learned about dynamite as a *Sonderkommando*, digging mass graves. With these credentials, he is accepted. Auschwitz thus exists as a prelude to the Israeli struggle, and *Exodus* insists on the connection between Nazi and Arab anti-Semitism: the Grand Mufti’s urbane emissary tells Taha (John Derek), the Arab friend of Ari (Paul Newman), that they must destroy the Jews. This emissary is a former Nazi, ready to train new storm troopers.

The Boys from Brazil (1978) is an entertaining thriller that raises some important questions of Nazi continuity, but never really explores them. Adapted from Ira Levin’s novel, the film is directed by Franklin J. Schaffner for maximum suspense at the expense of verisimilitude. The rather contrived plot revolves around the attempts of Dr. Josef Mengele (Gregory Peck) and his Nazi network in South America to clone Adolf Hitler, and the efforts of Nazi-hunter Ezra Liebermann (Sir Laurence Olivier) to discover their scheme and stop them. Liebermann learns that Mengele managed to create and deposit around the world ninety-four little Adolf Hitlers (we see at least four incarnations, all played by Jeremy Black) through reproduction of the Führer’s blood and skin samples. Mengele’s group is to assassinate each of the ninety-four fathers, thus replicating Hitler’s lack of a father during his adolescence. These two obsessive dreamers – the chief doctor of Auschwitz and the Jewish survivor clearly modeled after Simon Wiesenthal – finally confront each other at the home of one of Mengele’s victims. The sinister physician is killed by a pack of black dogs, and Liebermann subsequently destroys the list of thirteen-year-old Hitler clones still at large.

To its credit, *The Boys from Brazil* calls attention to contemporary indifference – an imprisoned Nazi guard (Uta Hagen) yells at Liebermann, “Thirty years: the world has forgotten. Nobody cares!” – and to the relatively untroubled existence led by Nazis in Paraguay and other countries equally hospitable to war criminals. We see the local military leaders bowing and scraping before Mengele at a party dotted with swastikas. The film also conveys a chilling sense of the impersonality of Nazi death dealing: young “Bobby,” one of the Hitler clones, sets the dogs on to or off visitors by calling out “Action!” and “Cut!” as if he were directing a film. And when he tells them to kill Mengele, the order is “Print” – appropriate terminology for the clone of a man who murdered by the “remote control” of barked orders.¹² There is also a striking shot that functions as a visual foreshadowing of the plot: when Liebermann visits the home of the first man murdered by Mengele’s organization, he is greeted by a surly, dark-haired, blue-eyed boy. A mirror in the hall reflects – and multiplies – the boy’s image, endlessly repeating itself into the heart of the frame (like the famous extended mirror image toward the end of *Citizen Kane*). When the plot reveals that there are dozens of little boys with exactly the same appearance, one is reminded of this shot’s expressive construction.

Nevertheless, *The Boys from Brazil* is saddled with typical Hollywood conventions, including recognizable stars like James Mason playing Nazis. (And can we really believe that upstanding Gregory Peck with his Lincolnesque gravity is the man responsible for killing two and a half million prisoners in Auschwitz?) Moreover,



Gregory Peck (Mengele), Jeremy Black (Bobby), and Sir Laurence Olivier (Liebermann) in *The Boys from Brazil*. PHOTO COURTESY OF MUSEUM OF MODERN ART/FILM STILLS ARCHIVE

for anyone who saw *Marathon Man*, in which Laurence Olivier portrayed a Nazi dentist on the rampage in New York City, his fine performance here as Liebermann suggests *too* great a versatility. Instead of delving into the suggestive Freudian theme of patricide as a prerequisite for Nazi control (as Visconti's *The Damned* had done), *The Boys from Brazil* opts for a rather evasive explanation: the threat is simply genetic implantation rather than a psychological potential for evil. At the end, Mengele is killed – a historical distortion that allows people to leave the theater with the complacent assumption that justice has been done. The fact remains that Mengele is probably still alive in South America. *The Boys from Brazil* substitutes a hokey plot – the clones are waiting to take over – for the real danger of legally untouchable Nazis. As Pauline Kael warned in her review of the film, “Nazism has become comic-book mythology, a consumer product. Movies like this aren't making the subject more important, they're making it a joke. They're cloning Hitler to death.”¹³ The menace of Nazism is similarly reduced by the taut action entertainment values of *Victory* (1981). Crisply directed by John Huston, the film takes place in a World War II where Nazis are gentlemen and a POW camp is a soccer training school. With such popular figures as Sylvester Stallone and Brazilian champion Pelé in the leading roles, *Victory* seems closer to “Rocky Plays Ball with the Nazis” than to a realistic assessment of the relationship between the SS and captured Allies. As the film opens, Major Von Steiner (Max Von Sydow) notices that one of the officer prisoners is Colby (Michael Caine), an English athlete of former glory. They strike up a match between Colby's team and the Wehrmacht. Using his influence, the English officer manages to get more food and better clothing for his men and, as the idea snowballs into a propaganda stunt staged by the Nazis, to protect more prisoners. The single note of reality occurs when Colby

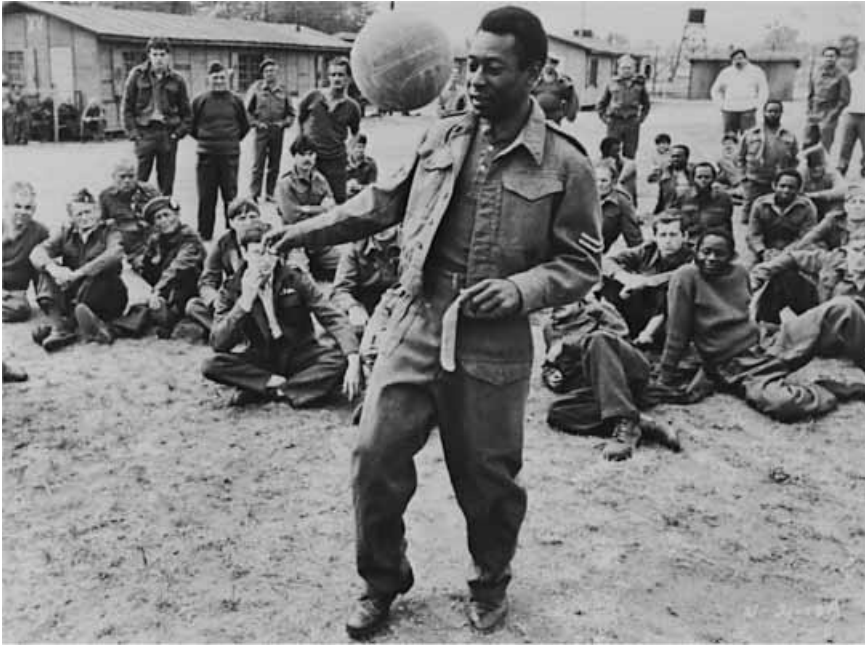
requests that the best East European players be transferred from labor camps to his barracks. The arrival of these athletes – now skeletal and stony figures – is sobering.

Stallone as Robert Hatch, the quintessential American bad-boy show-off, escapes (thanks to the efforts of the “escape committee” that the Nazis wink knowingly about). But his character, derived from the Bogart hero of the forties (“I ain’t sticking my neck out for nobody” finally yielding to noble sacrifice), allows himself to be recaptured in order to help the French Resistance’s escape plan for the entire team. Disbelief is truly suspended when the Nazis, instead of shooting Stallone, permit him to play goalkeeper in the big game. With some fancy footwork, the Allies win the match in Paris: the French crowd throbs “La Marseillaise” and storms the field – knocking down armed Nazi guards – to squire the players to safety. With this rosy last image of the mass overcoming (by sheer number and enthusiasm) its oppressors, *Victory* presents an ultimately pernicious illusion about Nazis, their prisoners, and the bravery of the average Frenchman.

Part of the problem is that the large budgets of American studio-made films permit a realistic reconstruction of period décor and costume, whether it be a stadium filled with thousands of people or the proper pleat on love-interest Carole Laure’s skirt. Particularly for those who know little about the Holocaust, the apparent reality disguises the fairy-tale aspects of *Victory*. Furthermore, the film’s opening image prepares the audience for a gritty reconstruction of suffering, rather than war reduced to a soccer game: a prisoner trying to escape at night through a barbed-wire fence is gunned down by the Nazis. This pre-credit sequence will quickly be forgotten by the film’s makers, but only after having served its misleading purpose: to establish the authenticity of wartime imprisonment, German vigilance, omnipresent danger and pain . . . into which a contrived story will be inserted.

Ultimately, the benign Nazi – in a film that contains no contrasting image of a German soldier – is a distortion.¹⁴ After all, this is not World War I, about which *Grand Illusion* presented a comparable situation, the German aristocrat Rauffenstein and the French aristocrat Boeldieu who are gentlemen officers above and beyond national boundaries. In World War II, the Nazi officer was *not* simply defending his country on the battlefield; he was part of a machine that savagely persecuted and executed millions of innocent civilians. The most courageous thing Colby does in *Victory* is to ask Von Steiner for East European players. The German is somewhat embarrassed because the Reich does not recognize their countries; nevertheless, he agrees. One wonders what might have happened had Colby asked for a *Jewish* athlete.

Max Von Sydow plays a similarly virtuous German in *Voyage of the Damned* (1976), which at least presents a range of German behavior. Directed by Stuart Rosenberg, this film is based on a wartime incident illustrating international indifference to the plight of 937 Jews who were permitted to leave Hamburg on May 13, 1939. Representing a broad sampling of class, profession, and situation, they board the S.S. *St. Louis* bound for Havana; Cuban officials refuse to accept the refugees; the good captain (Von Sydow) then assumes the burden of protecting his unwanted passengers. In a last-minute reprieve, the Jewish Agency arranges for Belgium, Holland, France, and England to take in these Jews. This ostensibly happy ending is qualified by end titles that recount the fate of the characters: “Over 600 of the 937 died in Nazi concentration camps.”



Above, Soccer star Pelé (Luis); *below*, Sylvester Stallone (Robert) and Michael Caine (Colby) in *Victory*. PHOTOS COURTESY OF PARAMOUNT PICTURES





Max Von Sydow
(Von Steiner) and
Michael Caine (Colby)
in *Victory*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF
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Voyage of the Damned contrasts the noble German captain (who does *not* belong to the Nazi party) with the vicious purser (Helmut Griem); it also confronts the reality of concentration camps (from which two of the passengers were released, with shaved heads), corrupt bartering in which Jews were treated as a commodity, and crass blindness to their plight – even by the American government. As a Cuban official (Fernando Rey) puts it, “With elections coming up, Roosevelt will do what is politically expedient.” Among the Jews as well, the casting is balanced so that some look more identifiably or aggressively Jewish (Sam Wanamaker, Ben Gazzara) and some less so (Faye Dunaway, Wendy Hiller, Julie Harris). But this very casting is problematic in the sense that *Voyage of the Damned* is primarily an “all-star” movie: everything takes place on the level of star turns and plot twists, rather than through cinematic expressiveness. Because there are so many noted actors playing virtually cameo roles, they emerge as types rather than as fully recognized characters: there is the Whore with the Heart of Gold (Katharine Ross), the Jewish Aristocrat (Oskar Werner), the Slimy Cuban Official (José Ferrer), the Naïve Young Steward (Malcolm McDowell), the Cynical Businessman (Orson Welles), and so on. Thus the film has the same narrative strategy as *Judgment at Nuremberg* and *The Diary of Anne Frank*: a dramatic situation with stars shown in huge close-ups, nonstop dialogue, and a

surging musical score. *Voyage of the Damned* is polished and suspenseful but lacks complexity, for while effectively presenting the material, it does little with it.¹⁵

In this context, a film does not have to be made in or by America to be considered a Hollywood film. Although *Au nom de tous les miens* (*For Those I Loved*) is a French-Canadian production, the fact that it was shot in English, stars Michael York, has melodramatic music by Maurice Jarre, and is a sprawling, big-budget tale, makes it closer to *Holocaust* and *Voyage of the Damned* than to French treatments of the Holocaust. Two versions were shot – a long one for TV and a shorter feature that was released in France in 1983. Directed by Robert Enrico, *Au nom de tous les miens* is adapted from Martin Gray's autobiographical novel and tells the incredible story of this survivor (Jacques Penot), who ultimately becomes a wealthy businessman (Michael York) – and then loses his wife (Brigitte Fossey) and children in a fire. The film begins after the fire, with a ravaged York receiving an anti-Semitic phone call. A tape recording in which his wife admonishes him to tell his story deters him from committing suicide. Instead, he speaks into the machine – “I was born with the war, at fourteen, when the butchers came” – accompanied by flashbacks. *Au nom de tous les miens* moves from Warsaw in the winter of 1939, to the Ghetto in 1940 where he becomes a successful food smuggler, to the graphic brutality of Treblinka, and back to the Ghetto where Martin finds his father (York again) and fights in the Uprising. By 1944, Martin has become a lieutenant in the Red Army, but by 1947, he has moved to New York. (Perhaps the turning point for him was a Russian colonel's line, “the problem with the Jews is that you take the war so personally”!) In 1970, this rich American is in the south of France, where – for the third time in the film – he loses those he loves.

To its credit, *Au nom* has gritty scenes that convey a measure of the horror inflicted upon European Jewry – for example, the brutality of some Ukrainians who search for hidden Jews during a 1942 deportation. And in the death camp of Treblinka, the sight of cadavers (after being gassed) from which gold teeth are extracted before the bodies are buried in a mass pit, is undeniably powerful. Nevertheless, the film is marred by scenes like that of young Martin – after his buddy has been shot for stealing herring – telling a cat that he will be a survivor, or saying to his father (York) in English, “Sorry, Papele.” As in *Judgment at Nuremberg*, the inclusion of the authentic language – in this case, Yiddish – renders even more inauthentic the English spoken throughout. Finally, the casting is problematic here, not only because Penot bears little resemblance to York in his dual role, but also because he looks nothing like his mother (Macha Meril); hence, when his New York grandmother tells Martin he resembles his mother, it is ludicrous. The rich story of an actual survivor deserves better treatment.

Melodrama also mars two other European adaptations of best-selling novels – films that feel like Hollywood productions. *The Assault* (1986) is a powerful story weakened by melodramatic music, a voice-over narration *in the present tense* – “and now, Anton does this . . .” – redundant with the images, hokey coincidences, and a lack of character development, especially among the women. Adapted by Gerard Soeteman from Harry Mulisch's celebrated novel, the Dutch film by Fons Rademakers was initially screened at the 1986 Cannes Film Festival in an English-dubbed and shortened version that was very poor. When it was released by Cannon with subtitles in 1987, *The Assault* had improved sufficiently to win the Academy Award for Best Foreign-Language Film.

The two-and-a-half hour version begins in January of 1945 in occupied Holland with the Steenwijk family. When the body of a hated collaborator is found dead in their yard (having been dragged there from a neighboring house), they are killed – with the exception of young Anton. He chooses to be an anesthesiologist (an appropriate profession for someone trying to forget his aborted childhood), and grows into a never-quite-happy adult. *The Assault* ends with Anton and his son at an antinuclear demonstration, where he bumps into a woman who unlocks the past: she tells him that neighbors placed the policeman's body in his family's yard rather than next door because Jews were hidden there.

Derek de Lint (who gives a superlative performance in *Bastille*, discussed in Chapter 10) is excellent as the young and subsequently aging Anton, a man who has repressed his wartime childhood to the extent that he suffers attacks when he is in his fifties. We learn that the central event in Anton's life was meeting a Resistance heroine in the dark of a jail cell the night his family's house was burned in 1945. We see only her mouth – the same mouth that Anton is drawn to on Saskia years later, and for which he presumably marries her. (Monique van de Ven plays both women.) He is marked forever by her blood, just as his identification papers are marked a few scenes later by the blood of a kind German policeman who feeds him.

A momentary but determining encounter provides the narrative thrust of *La Storia* ("History," 1986) as well, but here it is between an Italian woman and a German soldier. Directed by Luigi Comencini from Elsa Morante's sprawling novel of 1974, this Italian drama was first presented as a five-hour miniseries for the RAI, and subsequently cut to a 146-minute theatrical release version. Claudia Cardinale gives a powerful performance as Ida, a Roman schoolteacher through whom we experience the turbulent years from 1941 to 1947. After newsreel footage of Mussolini, we see a young German soldier getting drunk. Because Ida looked too anxiously at a sign about Jews, we assume that the reason she doesn't resist his rape more vigorously is her fear *as a Jew*; this is heightened by an intercut of a woman (probably Ida's mother in flashback) telling her daughter she was baptized so no one will know she is Jewish. The issue of the rape is a son, Useppe, for whose birth Ida runs to a midwife in the Jewish ghetto. This adorable child is loved by Ida and Nino, her older son, who had fought with the Fascists and later joins the partisans. When their home is bombed, Useppe goes with his mother to a shelter for refugees. Carlo (Lambert Wilson) collapses at their door: he is an anarchist – who will turn out to be Jewish – recently escaped from prison. He joins Nino in a partisan group, but this pacifist has a hard time killing a German soldier – until he finds the strength to kick his face with lethal blows.

One of *La Storia*'s most gripping scenes occurs at the train station, as Ida and Useppe are boarding a train to get away. On the next track is a sealed train with Jews crying out for water. Ida tries to stop an older woman seen in the ghetto from boarding, but the latter wants to be with her family in the sealed car. Then Ida's train is requisitioned by the Germans, and she must return to the shelter. After the war, Nino smuggles in an American jeep and is killed by Americans. Useppe has epilepsy, aggravated by a sense of abandonment when Nino doesn't return and Carlo won't respond (having become an alcoholic). Only when Useppe dies of a seizure does Ida admit he was Jewish – meaning that she is too. The bereaved mother goes into a catatonic state, sitting with his body for three days until the police break down the

door. Like other Italian films on the Holocaust, Jewish identity is so attenuated as to be nonexistent, except for guilt. Similarly, it shares with numerous films about World War II (such as *Two Women*) the depiction of woman as the embodiment of a nation – occupied, ravaged, and resourceful – in an often harrowing saga of survival and loss.

In *Hanna's War* (1988), however, the heroine is a blazing emblem of the Jewish spirit more than of her country, Hungary. Based on the true story of Hanna Senesh, this Cannon film directed by Menachem Golan does not completely avoid melodramatic excesses, reminiscent of television docudramas (not to mention rock music when freedom fighters prepare to parachute!); nevertheless, Maruschka Detmers's moving performance often compensates for these limitations. In 1938 Hungary, Hanna decides to leave a warm and privileged life with her mother (Ellen Burstyn) for the challenge of Palestine. She writes poems and letters home from Kibbutz Sdot-Yam, and then joins a group of paratroopers in 1943, who will risk their lives in returning to Eastern Europe. Under the crusty British commander (Anthony Andrews), they parachute into Yugoslavia, but Hanna insists on returning to Hungary. She is captured, tortured by Captain Roza (Donald Pleasance), and finally executed by order of Captain Simon (David Warner) – but not before making a passionate and prescient speech about the imminent downfall of the oppressors at her own trial.

The Israeli-born Golan, whose previous directorial credits include *The Delta Force* and *Operation Thunderbolt*, acquired the film rights from Senesh's surviving mother and brother in 1964. He subsequently lost the rights, optioned the memoir of her parachuting comrade Yoel Palgi (*A Great Wind Cometh*), and then reacquired the rights. When asked why he was so adamant about bringing this tale to the screen, he replied:

How many women can you count who came to prominence in the last two centuries . . . Rosa Luxemburg? Eleanor Roosevelt? Indira Gandhi? Golda Meir? . . . whereas there are numerous men to identify with as humanity's heroes. I grew up in Israel with the stories, songs and diary of Hanna, like every child in Israel. She became part of our education in primary schools. Over the years, for instance, Anne Frank was discovered by the world through a play and then on screen. In Hanna we have a unique young lady who I think represents such fantastic heroic qualities – one of the only ones who physically tried to do something in those dark days – coming from a free place back into terror. There were 33 people recruited voluntarily to do what Hanna did: most were captured, seven were killed. One could say that the operation failed, but the spirit of it is an unbelievable story.¹⁶

There was a time when Golan did not think it right or possible to make films about the Holocaust. In his words, "Movies are always entertainment, always selling tickets to people who leave their homes and come to a theater. The Holocaust is too horrifying an experience to make a movie from it. Films in a way are romantic, and the Holocaust can't be romantic." But once he defined for himself that *Hanna's War* is not "a Holocaust film, but the dramatic story of a young girl living through a horrifying period," he felt able to present the tale. "You know there's a war, but you don't see it on the screen," he added. "It's a power that exists off-screen. I'm still reluctant to show concentration camp scenes, although I know they should be done."



Auschwitz prisoners in *Playing for Time*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF STIGWOOD/YELLEN PRODUCTIONS

More successful in this regard is *Playing for Time*, the controversial CBS-TV film starring Vanessa Redgrave as a Jewish musician in the orchestra of Auschwitz; it does not flinch from presenting the demeaning circumstances of concentration camp life. *Playing for Time* was adapted by playwright Arthur Miller from Fania Fenelon's magnificent autobiographical account, and directed by Daniel Mann. By September 30, 1980, when the telefilm was first aired, CBS had learned from NBC's mistakes with *Holocaust*: "Because of the special nature of this presentation," announced a title, "CBS will only interrupt this drama four times." Within its first few minutes, *Playing for Time* re-creates unsavory conditions in the freight cars carrying prisoners to Auschwitz as Fania's young fan, Marianne (Melanie Mayron), relieves herself into a pail, which then falls and causes those around her to cry out for air.

The women's arrival at Auschwitz is a signal for the hair-cutting and scalp-shaving reserved for Jewish prisoners. A finely edited scene conveys the situation with poetic compression: a close-up of Fania being shorn is crosscut with one of Marianne, both silent amid the excessively loud sound of scissors and faraway screams. Numbers are tattooed onto arms in close-up, while a long shot of smoke emerging from a building is explained by the brutal phrase, "They're cooking." The coexistence of debasement and transcendence at Auschwitz is presented through a montage of fire, smoke, and shoveling, accompanied by the voice-over of Fania comforting Marianne with a story about a princess. The authentic source of these scenes is heightened by tinted archival

footage that punctuates the film throughout. Fact and fictional reconstruction are yoked when, for example, documentary images of Auschwitz are inserted into a scene of Fania's labor.

As a singer, Fania is taken into the women's orchestra, a relatively privileged domain where the women can hide inside their music. The conductor, Alma Rosé (Jane Alexander), is a complex character because, although Jewish, she is also Gustav Mahler's niece. She feels superior to the players (and closer to the Nazis) because she is "an artist." Indeed, her harsh enforcement of discipline with the musicians – including slapping them – smacks of SS behavior. That Alma is a "special Jew" is evident since her hair has not been shorn. She plays their game and her music submissively, trying to ignore the reality of the camp; "I refuse to see!" she screams once at Fania. Moreover, when Alma is finally poisoned by the jealous Frau Schmidt (Viveca Lindfors), the monstrous Dr. Josef Mengele kisses her violin before placing it in the casket, and salutes her conductor's baton! There is equal complexity in the characterization of Frau Lagerführerin Mandel (Shirley Knight), who is attractive, prone to humane gestures (she puts boots on Fania), and clearly affectionate with a little Polish boy that she takes from a transport (and from his mother). Fania's deepest tears seem to flow when she sings for Mandel after she has sacrificed the boy.

Fania specifies that Frau Mandel is "human" and "that's the problem." A figure of extreme integrity, Fania resists all the ideologies that are represented by various members of the orchestra. Whether the foil be Alma's artistic superiority, the Zionist's hyperbolic patriotism, or the Communist's barely articulated socialism, Fania transcends her fellow prisoners' beliefs. She is a defiant risk taker: a half-Jew, she nevertheless challenges the commandant (after her superb concert) with the statement that her father's name – and therefore her own – is really Goldstein. She refuses to join the orchestra unless they take Marianne too – an act of generosity for which her weak friend will hardly prove grateful when she becomes a Kapo. Fania's integrity is thrown into relief when she spies Marianne obtaining food through giving sexual favors. There is a long pause after Marianne hands her a piece of sausage: will the hungry woman, who has been orchestrating a score all night, be able to swallow such food? The camera remains on Fania's face as she hesitates, smelling and licking the meat, and then slowly begins to chew it, her clouded eyes expressing the price she is paying. (Redgrave here conveys a poignant struggle of physical need and moral repugnance solely through the tension between the lower and upper regions of her face.)

Fania incarnates the spirit that holds the orchestra together, the spirit that Terrence Des Pres describes so accurately in his book, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps*: "The survivor's experience is evidence that the need to help is as basic as the need for help, a fact which points to the radically social nature of life in extremity and explains an unexpected but very widespread activity among survivors."¹⁷ Fania warns Marianne that she must share at least a little of what she "earns" with the others, so that she won't become an animal. Though refusing to judge anyone, Fania insists on a standard of human dignity that abhors stealing or self-debasement. A similarly generous character is Elzbieta (Marisa Berenson), a Catholic Pole whose first act upon seeing the ravaged Fania is to wipe her filthy face clean with her own saliva. And Fania's "double" on a larger scale, inspiring and binding the inmates together, is the chief interpreter, Mala (Maud Adams), who carries on resistance activities inside Auschwitz. The scene in which she and her lover



Playing for Time production photo. PHOTO COURTESY OF STIGWOOD/YELLEN PRODUCTIONS

Edek are hanged after escaping and being captured is effective in its silence: as the women of Auschwitz pass the pathetically dangling bodies, they remove their scarves in speechless respect.

For the most part, *Playing for Time* succeeds courageously and admirably, with details that are corroborated in Wanda Jakubowska's definitive film about Auschwitz, *The Last Stop* (Poland, 1948). But the real Fania was five feet tall, and fresh out of her teens at the time she was taken to Auschwitz; her stamina and ability to tower over the others were thus even more remarkable when set alongside the sheer physical presence of an exceptionally tall, forty-three-year-old mature actress. One might therefore ask whether CBS was looking for some free publicity through controversy when it insisted on casting an outspoken supporter of the terrorist PLO as a Jewish concentration camp inmate – especially when she was physically a far cry from the real heroine, and when Fenelon publicly opposed the choice:

Vanessa Redgrave is a very great actress . . . but casting her is for me a moral wrong because she is a fanatic. . . I wanted Jane Fonda for the role. She has her political views, but she's not a fanatic. Or Liza Minnelli. She's small, she's full of life, she sings. Vanessa doesn't sing and dance, she doesn't have a sense of humor, and that is the one thing that saved me from death in the camp.¹⁸

Arthur Miller defended the casting by explaining that several actresses had turned down the part because they were unwilling to shave their heads, “yet Miss Redgrave was so dedicated that she lost weight, inflicted needle scars on her scalp and tore

at her flesh in the quest for dramatic verisimilitude.”¹⁹ Nevertheless, many viewers boycotted the telefilm.

CBS’s presentation of John Hersey’s *The Wall* on February 16, 1982, was riddled by more frequent commercial interruptions than *Playing for Time*, but *The Wall* (directed by Robert Markowitz) remains a compelling, well-acted, and reasonably accurate piece of TV drama. Like *Holocaust*, it focuses on a few individuals who personalize the extraordinary tale of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Shot primarily in Poland (with the cooperation of Polish television in Warsaw and with a local crew), *The Wall* conveys an authenticity of place – despite the staginess of the freeze frames that end each episode – and also roots the events in history by printing the date as each segment begins.

The Wall opens with crowds of Polish Jews being deported, under the watchful eye of a Nazi film crew. Things are not yet hopeless in the Warsaw of October 1940: a prosperous and accommodating Jew like Mauritz Apt (Eli Wallach) can still live normally with his family and entertain the prospects of buying their way out of the Ghetto. His daughter Rachel (Lisa Eichhorn) realizes that the time has come to organize the inhabitants when a Nazi soldier abruptly shoots an old Jew in the street. Others in the Ghetto, like the enterprising Berson (Tom Conti), merely try to survive, smuggle, and share their booty on a day-to-day basis. A month later, Apt buys false papers – but only for himself, thus abandoning his children, including Mordechai (Griffin Dunne), who is about to marry his fiancée (Christine Eubank). By March 1941, “resettlement” of the Jews to the east is announced to the Judenrat (the Jewish leadership in the Warsaw Ghetto);²⁰ as Berson and Rachel learn, the trains being packed with thousands of people daily are bound for Treblinka, the death camp (actually shot on location at Auschwitz). Through a kind of visual shorthand that might not have worked before *Holocaust* and *Playing for Time*, shots of chimneys and smoke are used to suggest the burning of Jewish bodies.

By September 1942, things have worsened: a montage sequence moves briskly from roundup to gunshots, to trains filling with bodies, to arrival at Treblinka, to smoke. As mechanical cinematically as the events it portrays, this sequence acknowledges the impersonal horror in the background of the protagonists’ actions. After Berson and Rachel build a new hiding place next to the oven of a bakery for the ever-diminishing group, Berson moves in and out of the Aryan sector to acquire arms. The Polish Underground makes excuses rather than offers of assistance, participating in the revolt only toward the end. The Jews launch their attack on German soldiers, using homemade bombs and the limited ammunition Berson has managed to buy. They succeed in temporarily driving the Nazi tanks out of the Ghetto. *The Wall* crosscuts these action scenes with a shot of a Nazi teletype machine constantly revising the date of the Ghetto’s ultimate liquidation. Berson and Rachel finally acknowledge their love, as the group is forced into the sewers where they must hide while waiting for the Underground. Only a few manage to escape to join the partisans in the forest: Mordechai, his wife, Yitzhak (an excitable fighter who had earlier killed the couple’s baby when it wouldn’t stop crying as they hid in the sewer), and Rachel. In the struggle, Berson has been killed, but *The Wall* asks us to end on a more celebratory note of resistance: “The Uprising began April 19, 1943. A year later there were still Jews fighting.”

The three-hour film traces Berson’s crucial movement from a “close-up” to “long-shot” perspective: after acting only on an immediate level, he grows to understand

the larger struggle and the need for organization. Primarily through this engaging character, we see a spectrum of characterizations: there are “bad” Poles (the hotel concierge who lets Berson escape only for a large sum) and “good” ones (Rachel Roberts as Berson’s landlady); “bad” Jews (Apt and Stefan, the Jewish policeman who asks his father to volunteer for deportation to save his own skin) and simply weak ones (Rachel’s vain sister and Berson’s sickly wife). The larger question that remains inheres in the “docudrama” format itself: the Nazis stage a restaurant scene for their propaganda cameras, forcing a few Jews to look as if they eat well in the Ghetto. A cut to the soup line where each inhabitant receives his meager cup provides a harsh contrast. This leaves us with the illusion that what the Nazis stage is “false,” whereas what has been staged for us by director Markowitz is “real.” Such reconstructions, however, are more real in terms of melodramatic convention than of historical fact.

John Toland, author of *Adolf Hitler*, called attention to distortions in the film:

Because the Polish government provided the principal settings, along with thousands of extras and some vintage World War II tanks, the producers of *The Wall* had to make certain compromises with the facts: the number of Nazi casualties in the battle scenes, for instance, is exaggerated, while the fact that few Poles at the time of the Warsaw uprising actively resisted Nazi persecution of the Jews has been conspicuously deleted. What’s important, though, is that *The Wall* has managed to retain the surge and spirit of the novel by adhering to its own compellingly drawn approximation of the truth.²¹

That the Americans were careful with Polish interests should come as no surprise: the cautiousness of the American film and television industry is also reflected in the fact that almost all its movies dealing with the Holocaust are adapted from another medium – successful plays (*The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Cabaret*) or novels (*Exodus*, *Ship of Fools*, *Marathon Man*, *Julia*, *The Boys from Brazil*, *Sophie’s Choice*). *The Wall* was a celebrated novel by John Hersey before it became a Broadway play by Millard Lampell – who then went on to write the television movie. It seems, therefore, that Hollywood will take a chance on films about the Holocaust only after the material has proven its commercial potential in another medium. And even then, the films merely touch upon the historical horror rather than grasp it. The American cinema often uses Nazi images to evoke instant terror or tears, whereas many European films use the cinematic medium as an instrument to probe responsibility. Perhaps the cinema of a country that has never experienced occupation cannot plumb the depths of the Holocaust experience. Or – more likely – perhaps the commercial imperatives of Hollywood and the networks tend to preempt the possibilities for truthful representation.

Nevertheless, recent American telefilms on the Holocaust have broken new ground. *Escape from Sobibor*, presented by CBS on April 12, 1987, chronicles the only – and relatively unknown – mass escape by Jews from a death camp, in a gripping but restrained manner. Directed by Jack Gold from Reginald Rose’s teleplay (based on the book by Richard Rashke), the three-hour “docudrama” filmed in Belgrade recounts the true story of this death camp in eastern Poland. It begins with a voice-over narrator (Howard K. Smith) explaining the stills and map that establish the tale’s authenticity. Three men escape, are shot, and displayed. A trainload of Jews disembarks to the strains of “Tales of the Vienna Woods,” followed by wrenching separation, selection, and dispersion to the “showers.” Only those with a trade will be spared, among them Shlomo (Simon Gregor) and his younger brother Moses, both

goldsmiths. One of the most powerful scenes occurs when the latter is ordered to the “Disinfection” site: he sees naked people lined up, screaming as they are forced to the showers, followed by smoke. But the protagonist of *Escape from Sobibor* is really a collective one, including Leon Feldhendler (Alan Arkin), who oversees the escape; Sasha (Rutger Hauer), head of the captured Russian-Jewish soldiers; and Luka (Joanna Pacula), who aids in the revolt mainly by pretending to be Sasha’s girlfriend. They engineer a plan whereby sixteen SS officers will be killed, as well as many of the 125 Ukrainian guards.

The taut last part of the film is devoted to the escape: of the six hundred prisoners, approximately three hundred survive the Nazis’ guns, barbed wire, and minefield. As they keep running toward the forest, the narrator tells us what happened to these characters – including Leon’s murder by anti-Semites in Lublin less than two years after the escape. The end titles present the names of the known Sobibor survivors alive today. Although the score by Georges Delerue is occasionally too intrusive, *Escape from Sobibor* is a commendable dramatization. Arkin exudes a quiet strength, especially in the scene where he visibly controls himself in telling Shlomo that his wife and child were killed. Hauer – despite his entrance only after the film’s midpoint – is a towering figure in his defiance. It is important to finally see victimized Jews fighting back – not only thirsting for revenge but caring for their fellows, such as when Leon insists that the escape must be for all six hundred inmates or not at all. This is a chapter of Holocaust history that needed to be told, for the Nazis razed Sobibor immediately after the revolt of October 14, 1943: records were destroyed, and the camp was never liberated by Soviet or Western troops.

Less than two years later, *War and Remembrance* reenacted another crucial episode of “The Final Solution” whose evidence the Nazis tried to hide – Babi Yar. The massacre of approximately thirty thousand Jews outside of Kiev is one of the many Holocaust sections in this thirty-hour miniseries for ABC-TV. Directed by Dan Curtis from a screenplay by Earl Wallace, Curtis, and Herman Wouk (author of the original novel), *War and Remembrance* illustrates both the advantages and the limitations of the television medium. The Babi Yar sequence is proudly narrated by Nazi Colonel Paul Blobel (Kenneth Colley) in the form of a flashback that does not spare details of defenseless Jews stripped, beaten, and machine-gunned into mass graves. In an effort to hide the traces of Babi Yar, his Commando 1005 (made up partly of Auschwitz prisoners) will open these graves and burn the corpses.

War and Remembrance juxtaposes graphic scenes of Nazi atrocities with several World War II stories, especially that of an American family. (It is the sequel to *The Winds of War*, the eighteen-hour miniseries telecast in 1986.) Captain Victor “Pug” Henry (Robert Mitchum) assumes command of a heavy cruiser in the American fleet after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. His son Byron (Hart Bochner) is a torpedo and gunnery officer, while his other son, Warren (Michael Woods), is a fighter pilot. Pug is in love with Pamela Tudsbury (Victoria Tennant), but has remained faithful to his errant wife, Rhoda (Polly Bergen). For narrative purposes, the most important family member is Byron’s wife, Natalie (Jane Seymour), a Jew who had the bad luck to be in Italy with her uncle Aaron Jastrow (John Gielgud) – a former Yale professor – when World War II exploded. We meet them on a boat headed for Palestine, led by Avram Rabinovitz (French actor Sami Frey in one of the film’s most compelling performances); but they disembark in Italy under the illusion that their special status



Jane Seymour and Sir John Gielgud as Natalie Jastrow and her Uncle Aaron in Herman Wouk's *War and Remembrance*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JAMES GLOVUS, COURTESY CAPITAL CITIES/ABC, INC.

will keep them safe in Europe. As the war continues, their situation becomes more perilous (and their Jewish identity stronger, as illustrated by a sensitive depiction of a joyous Sabbath dinner in Marseille); they are deported to Theresienstadt, and finally to Auschwitz. The fact that even an American Jew married to a Gentile could become a victim of the Nazis makes the story more accessible to an American audience. Indeed, what sets *War and Remembrance* apart from such pioneering television films as *Holocaust*, *Playing for Time*, and *The Wall* is not only its scale but also its capacity to reach a much larger audience than these avowedly “Holocaust” dramas. It cleverly “tricks” those who think they are watching a wartime adventure movie into looking at the horrifying reproduction of both Auschwitz and Babi Yar.

Since, for some viewers, *War and Remembrance* is the first encounter with concrete images of Nazi brutality and extermination procedures, the responsibility of the filmmakers is all the more weighty. It would seem that Dan Curtis and his colleagues fulfilled their duty, first through scrupulous research, and second by filming inside Auschwitz. As the producer-director told a *New York Times* interviewer about capturing the “reality” of the Holocaust, “Nobody had ever gone far enough in a film or television program. To put on film the true horror was impossible. Once one false note sneaks in, you’re gone. And, in my own eyes, I felt failing would be an absolute crime. . . . It was enormously important to shoot it where it happened.”²² Although ABC was incorrect in claiming that this was the first time the Polish government permitted a dramatic film to be shot there (Jack Eisner arranged for his autobiographical tale *War and Love* – a Cannon release – to be filmed in Auschwitz in 1984), it was the first time that one of the death camp’s crematoria was re-created on that site. Having found the original plans and specifications in the files of Auschwitz, the crew built to exact size one of the four crematoria that the Nazis blew up at the end of the war to hide evidence.

Even more significantly, part two presents a “Special Action” (for the audience’s benefit as well as for Gestapo Chief Heinrich Himmler’s) from beginning to end: a trainload of unwitting Dutch Jews disembarks; they are told there is “plenty of work here for everybody,” led to the “disinfection center” where towels and soap are neatly arranged, forced to disrobe, and herded to the showers as panic ensues. To the satisfaction of the SS, the Jews scream while gas fills the crowded chamber, until silence accompanies their deaths. We then see the corpses of men, women, and children being thrown into mass graves as Auschwitz’s Commandant Rudolf Hoess complains that “disposal is the problem”; Himmler complies by agreeing to make the construction of crematoria a priority over war labor needs.

Despite the undeniable force of this sequence, Elie Wiesel’s contention that Holocaust art is a contradiction in terms bears mention. Melodrama and crematoria are hardly compatible, and the concentration camp experience cannot be accommodated by a square tube associated with diversion. After all, we are invited to be horrified when Hoess insists that the “Special Action” must follow rather than precede lunch: but don’t we often get up during the commercials to get a snack or drink, even after scenes of horror? Possibilities for trivialization and distortion remain within the television medium, whatever the scale of the production. For example, the first half of *War and Remembrance* presents daily life in Auschwitz primarily through the male prisoners Berel Jastrow (Chaim Topol) and Sammy Mutterperl (John Rhys-Davies); they are not only strong enough to be useful as labor (and look reasonably well fed) but are part of the political resistance – with access to film evidence that Berel smuggles out. This was the case for only a fraction of the Jews in the death camp; most (and especially women) were too starved, degraded, or isolated to enact resistance or escape. (It is true, however, that in the second half of *War and Remembrance* – telecast in 1989 – Natalie endures Auschwitz.)

The number of films about the Holocaust has grown to such an extent over the past ten years that “reality” often boils down to how a movie compares with previous film treatments. During part two, some viewers might have been struck by how Hoess seemed so “real” – even more than the other characters played by an international cast. Perhaps it was because this was not the first time the actor had incarnated Hoess: Gunther Maria Halmer was indeed the same commandant in Alan Pakula’s film version of *Sophie’s Choice*. Although he had played his part alongside Meryl Streep in German, and was now speaking accented English, a subliminal link was made for those who had seen *Sophie’s Choice*. *War and Remembrance* uses a similar connection in part five, where Hoess proudly shows Colonel Blobel Auschwitz’s new gas chambers and crematoria. If the colonel seems even more sinister than the other Nazis in this film, it may be because the actor had already played Adolf Eichmann in *Wallenberg* opposite Richard Chamberlain. Recasting these actors is not merely effective; it raises the issue of whether authenticity and convention can be synonymous. This is not to say that the first eighteen hours of the thirty-hour miniseries are inaccurate: *War and Remembrance* is not only an extraordinarily ambitious and often moving drama, but the most meticulous reconstruction of Auschwitz in a film made for television. For a “Hollywood version” – and at a time when neo-Nazi groups are quite audible in the United States – it is not only commemorative but cautionary; this drama reminds us of the fatal American political indifference to the destruction of European Jewry, while illustrating what can happen when prejudice runs rampant and becomes doctrine.