

SCREENING AUSCHWITZ



CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS OF WORLD WAR II

INTERWAR PRELUDES, RESPONSES, MEMORY

PHYLLIS LASSNER, SERIES EDITOR

SCREENING AUSCHWITZ

WANDA JAKUBOWSKA'S
THE LAST STAGE AND THE
POLITICS OF COMMEMORATION

MAREK HALTOF



NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY PRESS | EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

Northwestern University Press
www.nupress.northwestern.edu

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Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Haltof, Marek, author.

Title: Screening Auschwitz : Wanda Jakubowska's The last stage and the politics of commemoration / Marek Haltof.

Other titles: Cultural expressions of World War II.

Description: Evanston, Illinois : Northwestern University Press, 2018. | Series: Cultural expressions of World War II: interwar preludes, responses, memory

Identifiers: LCCN 2017038008 | ISBN 9780810136083 (cloth : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780810136106 (pbk. : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780810136090 (e-book)

Subjects: LCSH: Ostatni etap (Motion picture) | Jakubowska, Wanda, 1907–1998—Criticism and interpretation. | Holocaust, Jewish (1939-1945), in motion pictures. | Auschwitz (Concentration camp)—In motion pictures.

Classification: LCC PN1997.O68 H35 2018 | DDC 791.4372—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017038008>

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Haltof, Marek. *Screening Auschwitz: Wanda Jakubowska's The Last Stage and the Politics of Commemoration*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I received a great deal of support during the preliminary planning and researching of this project. I gratefully acknowledge the help of Northern Michigan University in Marquette for supporting my research and this work with a generous grant—the Peter White Scholar Award—and with a sabbatical leave. I benefited greatly from an excellent collection of books at NMU Olson Library—The Holocaust Collection, presented to the university in honor of Lynn Cohodas Stahl and Nancy Cohodas Oberman.

Several colleagues at Northern Michigan University assisted in the preparation of this book in many ways at various stages of the work, among them Carol Strauss-Sotiropoulos, Jim McCommons, Gabriel Brahm, Stephen Burn (now at the University of Glasgow), Caroline Krzakowski, and Robert Whalen. Special thanks go to David Boe for his unvarying assistance regarding the complexities of the English language. Also, I am grateful to Ben Talarico and Benjamin Van Howe for their editorial assistance.

In the course of researching and writing this book, I received help from numerous individuals. Special thanks go to Adam Wyżyński and Krzysztof Berłowski at the National Film Archive (Filmoteka Narodowa) in Warsaw for their kind assistance. In addition, I would like to thank scholars who assisted in the preparation of this book in various ways: Ewelina Nurczyńska-Fidelska, Jolanta Lemann, Piotr Zwierzchowski, Mirosław Przyłipiak, Michał Oleszczyk, Stefan Czyżewski, and Stuart Liebman. My thanks also to Axel Braisz at the International Tracing Service in Bad Arolsen in Germany and Diane Afoumado at the Holocaust Survivors and Victims Resource Center (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). I am very much indebted to Jacek Lachendro at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, who generously introduced me to

its archival collections and supplied me with valuable information. At the museum, I also thank Wojciech Płosa, head of the archive, and Edyta Chowaniec, who is in charge of its audiovisual collection, as well as Paweł Hudzik, head of the State Archive in Katowice, division in Oświęcim.

I am very thankful to Professor Alina Madej, Katarzyna Rudomino (Wanda Jakubowska's granddaughter), and Roman Dziewoński (actor Edward Dziewoński's son) for stimulating conversations and help with archival materials. Also, my sincere thanks go to Stuart Liebman and Marat Grinberg—two readers for Northwestern University Press.

I extend my sincere gratitude to Phyllis Lassner, editor of the series *Cultural Expressions of World War II and the Holocaust: Preludes, Responses, Memory* at Northwestern University Press, for her continuous encouragement and scholarly support.

ABBREVIATIONS

AAN	Archiwum Akt Nowych (Archive of Modern Files)
AK	Armia Krajowa (Home Army)
APMAB	Archiwum Państwowego Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau (Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oświęcim)
CKŻP	Centralny Komitet Żydów Polskich (Central Committee of Polish Jews)
CŻKH	Centralna Żydowska Komisja Historyczna (Central Jewish Historical Commission)
FKL	Frauenkonzentrationslager (women's concentration camp)
FN	Filmoteka Narodowa (National Film Archive in Warsaw)
<i>Gestapo</i>	Geheime Staatspolizei (Secret State Police)
GG	Generalgouvernement (General Government; the central part of German-occupied Poland)
IPN	Instytut Pamięci Narodowej (Institute of National Remem- brance, Warsaw)
KL	Konzentrationslager (concentration camp)
KOS	Komisja Ocen Scenariuszy (Committee for the Evaluation of Scripts)
KPD	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (German Commu- nist Party)
KRN	Krajowa Rada Narodowa (State National Council)
MBP	Ministerstwo Bezpieczeństwa Publicznego (Ministry of Public Security)
NKVD	Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del (People's Commis- sariat for Internal Affairs, Soviet Union)
NZK	Naczelny Zarząd Kinematografii (Main Board of Cinema)
OUL	Okręgowy Urząd Likwidacyjny (Regional Office for the Liquidation of German Property)

<i>PAP</i>	Polska Agencja Prasowa (Polish Press Agency)
<i>PISF</i>	Polski Instytut Sztuki Filmowej (Polish Film Institute), Warsaw
<i>PKF</i>	Polska Kronika Filmowa (Polish Newsreel)
<i>PKWN</i>	Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego (Polish Committee for National Liberation)
<i>POW</i>	prisoner of war
<i>PPR</i>	Polska Partia Robotnicza (Polish Workers' Party)
<i>PPS</i>	Polska Partia Socjalistyczna (Polish Socialist Party)
<i>PRL</i>	Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa (Polish People's Republic)
<i>PWSFTviT</i>	Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Filmowa, Telewizyjna i Teatralna im. Leona Schillera (Łódź Film School), Łódź
<i>PZbWP</i>	Polski Związek byłych Więźniów Politycznych (Polish Union of Former Political Prisoners)
<i>PZPR</i>	Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza (Polish United Workers' Party)
<i>RP</i>	Rzeczpospolita Polska (Polish Republic)
<i>RPPS</i>	Robotnicza Partia Polskich Socjalistów (Workers' Party of Polish Socialists)
<i>SS</i>	Schutzstaffel (Protective Squadron)
<i>START</i>	Stowarzyszenie Miłośników Filmu Artystycznego START (Society for the Promotion of Film Art START)
<i>UBP</i>	Urząd Bezpieczeństwa Publicznego (Public Security Office)
<i>WFDiF</i>	Wytwórnia Filmów Dokumentalnych i Fabularnych (Documentary and Feature Film Studio)
<i>ZBOWiD</i>	Związek Bojowników o Wolność i Demokrację (Union of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy)
<i>Żegota</i>	Rada Pomocy Żydom (Council for Aid to the Jews)
<i>ŻIH</i>	Żydowski Instytut Historyczny (Jewish Historical Institute)

SCREENING AUSCHWITZ

Introduction

This study, about the early screen representation of Auschwitz—the “capital of the Holocaust”¹—is a continuation of my previous research that resulted in the book *Polish Film and the Holocaust: Politics and Memory*, published in 2012.² That book included a chapter on *The Last Stage* (1948, also known under the title *The Last Stop, Ostatni etap*), directed by Auschwitz survivor Wanda Jakubowska (1907–1998). The film’s cinematic, political, and ideological layers warrant a more detailed monograph.

In *The Last Stage*, Jakubowska depicted the monstrosity of *Konzentrationslager* Auschwitz-Birkenau and drew on her own camp experiences to portray the factory of death. She made her film with the significant participation of other Auschwitz survivors, including the German communist Gerda Schneider, who coscripted the film.

With its pioneering, powerful dramatization of the camp experience, *The Last Stage* established several quasi-documentary themes easily discernible in later Holocaust narratives: the dark, realistic images of the camp (the film was shot on location in Auschwitz-Birkenau); the passionate moral appeal; and the clear divisions between victims and victimizers. Jakubowska’s film shaped the future representation of Nazi German concentration camps. It also introduced the images of camp life that are now archetypal and notable in numerous films about the Holocaust and the “concentrationary universe” (*l’univers concentrationnaire*). These images include, among others, morning and evening roll calls on the *Appelplatz*; the arrival of a transport train at Auschwitz II (*Vernichtungslager* Birkenau)—a steam locomotive slowly moving, in a thick fog, through the “death gate” toward the armed SS guards with dogs; the separation of families upon their arrival at the Birkenau unloading ramp; the tracking shot over the belongings left by the gassed camp victims; shots of crowded prisoners’ barracks; and the juxtaposition of the camp orchestra playing

classical music with the selection process for the gas chambers. These and other images reinforced the depiction of Nazi German concentration camps, and their influence is discernible in subsequent American films, such as George Stevens's *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959), Alan Pakula's *Sophie's Choice* (1982), and Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993). Scenes from *The Last Stage* are also present (without acknowledgment and, interestingly, as actual documentary footage from the camp) in films such as Alain Resnais's classic essay on memory, *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et Brouillard*, 1955).

Undoubtedly, *The Last Stage* remains the “definitive film about Auschwitz,”³ a seminal work about the Holocaust, and a prototype for future Holocaust cinematic narratives. Stressing the need to record her Auschwitz experiences, Jakubowska herself wrote in 1951:

“This grinding sound needs to be recorded separately.” I remember that I said it loudly to my friend from the Pawiak prison, Danusia Markowska, when the gate at the Birkenau (Auschwitz) camp closed behind our transport. I said it without thinking, and at the same time I realized that I made a decision to make a film about Auschwitz at the very moment of arriving there.⁴

Here and in several other interviews, Jakubowska voiced her urge to record, to tell the truth about Auschwitz-Birkenau, to commemorate the dead, and to offer a warning against the repetition of this history. The need to represent the horrors of Auschwitz on film was also strongly posulated by a number of other camp survivors. Krystyna Żywulska wrote the following after the film's release:

During an epidemic of typhus in Auschwitz, one of my female friends, looking around with wild eyes at the *Revier* barrack [camp sickbay], full of moans and dying, whispered desperately: “Who is going to believe all this, who will express this and how?” Then she added with an already distant, strange voice: “Perhaps only a film, just a film.” And with some vague vision of this film, which will be a reflection of her suffering, she died in peace.⁵

While not a flawless work, *The Last Stage* nonetheless deserves pioneer status with its documentary feel and searing images, and enjoys a promi-

ment place in the history of cinema as well as in our understanding of the past. In addition to serving as a witness of war atrocities, it is also a testimony to the postwar political climate and Jakubowska's own communist biases. Similar to several other works produced immediately after World War II, this film is not predominantly centered on presenting the wartime extermination of European Jewry. Rather, it emphasizes the tragedy of nation-states subjected to Nazi German exterminatory policies, and serves as a study, and visual indictment, of the "concentrationary universe." I agree with Stuart Liebman who comments that *The Last Stage* is "an illuminating document of a period when artists' needs to render the horror were constrained by political exigencies that made such films possible yet which concertedly, if subtly, twisted the truth. Indeed, the film's projection of postwar political realities onto the facts of history does compromise somewhat the magnitude of its achievements."⁶

Jakubowska's film also reflected the status of postwar debates about Auschwitz and early attempts to memorialize the former Nazi German camp. Writing in 1974 about his own experiences, the Polish film scholar and Auschwitz survivor Bolesław Lewicki emphasized that *The Last Stage* created the method of representing "the horrors of the concentration camps—as a kind of crescendo of pathos and symbolism."⁷ The proximity of the traumatic experience, Jakubowska's own Marxist beliefs, and the policy of the new Polish communist regime trying to find its own voice within the tightly controlled Soviet eastern bloc all influenced the final shape of the film. Its historical accuracy was compromised by serving the Stalinist version of history. As a consequence, the present work is also a study about the post-World War II politics surrounding the commemoration of Auschwitz on screen.

Despite the importance of Jakubowska's film, this topic has not been the focus of a systematic book-length study. References to *The Last Stage*, however, appear in several books in English about the screen representation of the Holocaust—for instance, in Annette Insdorf's groundbreaking monograph *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*, Ilan Avisar's *Screening the Holocaust: Cinema's Images of the Unimaginable*, and Omer Bartov's *The "Jew" in Cinema: From The Golem to Don't Touch My Holocaust*.⁸ Infrequent insightful articles in English on the subject have been written by scholars such as Stuart Liebman and Hanno Loewy.⁹ Surprisingly, there is not a single book in Polish devoted to this classic film, although the first biography of Jakubowska was recently pub-

lished by Monika Talarczyk-Gubała.¹⁰ A small group of Polish scholars, including most importantly Alina Madej and Tadeusz Lubelski, have published essays about the film along with interviews with the director herself.¹¹ Although the above-mentioned works deal with *The Last Stage*, the topic has been awaiting an in-depth historical treatment.

In film criticism, *The Last Stage* is often discussed as “a model for other numerous, ideologically-oriented representations of victimhood and heroism under Nazi rule.”¹² This is—it has to be emphasized again—a pioneering work, the first narrative film to portray the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration/death camp. After seeing Jakubowska’s film, Béla Balázs proclaimed in an unpublished essay that “a new genre was born,” and he provided a brief parallel between Dante’s *Inferno* and *The Last Stage*, in which Auschwitz functions as vision of hell.¹³ Balázs’s comments were almost of a prophetic nature, given that we are now debating “the Holocaust genre.”

Apart from functioning as a metaphor for the Holocaust, Auschwitz has always served for Poles as a symbol of Polish wartime suffering. Poles were the first prisoners there—Auschwitz was established initially as a concentration camp solely for Polish political prisoners. The first transport of 728 Polish political prisoners (including a small number of Polish Jews) to Auschwitz took place on June 14, 1940. The mass deportations and exterminations of Jews began in Auschwitz II (Birkenau) in March 1942, when the camp became both a concentration and an extermination site.

It is also important to remember that in historical accounts of Polish filmmaking, *The Last Stage* marks the birth of post-1945 Polish cinema (although it was the third film released in postwar Poland), and was received as such after its much-anticipated premiere in April 1948. The triumphant titles of several reviews testify to that fact: “The New Stage of Polish Cinema,” “Cinematic Breakthrough of Polish Film,” and “The Triumph of the Polish Film Industry.”¹⁴ The film was received as a “national relic, a celluloid requiem to commemorate the murdered.”¹⁵ Apart from the critical praise, the film was also successful at the box office. With more than 7.8 million viewers, *The Last Stage* is number thirty on the list of the biggest box-office successes on Polish screens from 1945 to 2000, and it was exported to dozens of countries.¹⁶

Jakubowska’s name is almost exclusively linked with *The Last Stage*,

even though her career as a director spanned almost fifty years and included thirteen feature films. Her films made after *The Last Stage* are rarely discussed, arguably as the result of her persistent support for communist ideology and her several propagandist works. Her filmography, however, contains three other works in which she returned to her own Auschwitz ordeal, including the film she herself considered her best, *The End of Our World* (*Koniec naszego świata*, 1964).¹⁷

Since *The Last Stage* deals with the Nazi German camp built on the occupied Polish territories, an additional comment about Oświęcim is helpful. Oświęcim is a small town in southern Poland located on the Sola River, 31 miles (50 kilometers) west of the old Polish capital Kraków and 17 miles (27 kilometers) southeast of Katowice, the capital of the Upper Silesia region. The history of Oświęcim dates back to the thirteenth century.¹⁸ After the outbreak of World War II, the town was annexed in October 1939 into the Third Reich and renamed Auschwitz. During and after the war, the Polish name Oświęcim became synonymous not so much with the city as with the camp, *Konzentrationslager* Auschwitz, which was established there in May 1940. Given the strong anti-German feelings after World War II, hatred toward everything reminiscent of the occupation, and a strong local linguistic tradition of Polonizing foreign names, the Polish names Oświęcim and Brzezinka (Birkenau) were commonly used in historical accounts as well as in literature and cinema. The state museum commemorating the history of the camp, which opened on June 14, 1947 (the seventh anniversary of the first transport of Polish political prisoners), was referred to as the State Museum Oświęcim-Brzezinka. Later, in order to avoid incorrect, albeit all-too-frequent references to the Polishness of the camp (such as “the Polish camp” or “the camp in Poland”), the name of the museum was officially changed in May 1999 to Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oświęcim. In this work, I use the name “Oświęcim” when I refer to the Polish town of Oświęcim, and “Auschwitz” when I discuss the camp located in its vicinity.

Auschwitz today is in the center of Holocaust memory. Out of about 1.1 million people who were killed there, 1 million were Jewish.¹⁹ Two other concentration camps built by Nazi Germany on occupied Polish territories that also became extermination centers—Majdanek and

Stutthof—and several German extermination camps built on Polish soil (Treblinka, Belzec [Bełżec], Kulmhof [Chełmno], and Sobibor [Sobibór]) are known only to a relatively narrow circle of specialists, although they were arguably more frightening and also claimed innumerable lives. This selective memory certainly has to do with the fact that there were not many survivors to testify about these death camps (there were only two survivors of Belzec, three of Kulmhof, and between forty and fifty of Treblinka),²⁰ compared to a relatively large number of Auschwitz survivors of different nationalities (including Jewish survivors), who provided their testimonies after the war. Several accounts published by Auschwitz survivors—such as those of Primo Levi and Tadeusz Borowski—now belong to the group of classic, universally known works about the horror of Nazi German concentration and extermination camps. Apart from many survivors, published testimonies, and its international character, Auschwitz also housed a significant resistance group, an aspect that turned out to be the focus of Jakubowska’s film.

When Auschwitz became the main extermination center, the majority of Polish and Soviet Jews were already being murdered by *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing units) or killed at Treblinka and other death factories located in the occupied Polish territories, a part of Europe labeled by Timothy Snyder as the “bloodlands.”²¹ The term refers to east-central Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, western Russia, and the Baltic States, where the Nazi and Soviet totalitarian regimes murdered approximately 14 million civilians between 1933 and 1945. Snyder emphasizes that these were not casualties of war, but victims of Stalin’s and Hitler’s deliberately brutal policies.²² Snyder writes that “Auschwitz is the most familiar killing site of the bloodlands. Today Auschwitz stands for the Holocaust, and the Holocaust for the evil of a century.”²³

In *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning*, Snyder’s new, groundbreaking interpretation of the Holocaust, he convincingly argues:

Auschwitz symbolizes the intention to murder all Jews under German control, and Jews from every corner of the German empire were murdered in its gas chambers. Some Jews survived Auschwitz because it remained, to the end, a set of camps as well as a death facility, where Jews were selected for labor as they entered. Thus story of survival at Auschwitz can enter collective

memory. . . . The word “Auschwitz” has become a metonym for the Holocaust as a whole. Yet the vast majority of Jews had already been murdered, further east, by the time that Auschwitz became a major killing facility. Yet while Auschwitz has been remembered, most of the Holocaust has been largely forgotten.²⁴

The emphasis on Auschwitz as the killing center may thus have had some unwanted consequences since, as Snyder observes elsewhere, Auschwitz “is only an introduction to the Holocaust, the Holocaust only a suggestion of Hitler’s final aims.”²⁵ He continues: “Soviet repressions are identified with the Gulag, much as Nazi repressions are identified with Auschwitz. . . . Yet, as Auschwitz draws attention away from the still greater horrors of Treblinka, the Gulag distracts us from the Soviet policies that killed people directly and purposefully, by starvation and bullets.”²⁶

The present book’s first chapter, “The Auschwitz-Birkenau Number 43513,” discusses Jakubowska’s life and career before *The Last Stage*, including her prewar involvement in the activities of the left-leaning START group (Society for the Promotion of Film Art), and her imprisonment at Auschwitz-Birkenau and Ravensbrück during the war. The discussion of Jakubowska’s prewar experiences and her wartime story of survival will enable us to more fully see the context of the film—its pro-communist dimensions, antifascist messages—and its limitations as well.

Chapter 2, “‘Stalin Was Moved to Tears’: The Script” discusses the prominent role that Jakubowska played in the nationalized postwar Polish cinema, which was dominated by the former START members who, thanks to their high-ranking political connections with communist authorities, tried to perpetuate their own vision of cinema. Despite her high-profile connections, however, Jakubowska (along with her coscriptwriter Gerda Schneider) faced several problems during the script stage, among them the fact that the communist authorities in Poland were reluctant to produce a film about the German concentration/extermination camp that for Polish viewers had some obvious references to the Soviet gulags.

Chapter 3, “Return to Auschwitz: The Making of the Holocaust Classic,” introduces the unusual circumstances that surrounded the production of the film, which was made on location at Auschwitz-Birkenau, with the participation of Auschwitz survivors, the local population (the

inhabitants of the town of Oświęcim), and Red Army personnel, as well as some German prisoners of war as extras. Several supporting roles were played by the camp's former inmates, and the film crew also numbered survivors of various concentration camps. These factors certainly contributed to the often-cited documentary appeal of the film.

Chapter 4, "The Film and Its Reception," introduces the film itself and summarizes critical debates surrounding its release and the praise Jakubowska received in Poland and in the communist bloc for its social usefulness and adherence to the communist ideology, as well as the sometimes harsh criticism voiced mostly by former Auschwitz inmates who saw history being distorted by the heroic version of the camp. The release of *The Last Stage* also coincided with the intense debate regarding the future of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. This debate ranged from proposals to close the grounds and use the land for profitable agricultural projects, to voices—some of them belonging to ex-prisoners now part of the new political elite, such as Józef Cyrankiewicz—who were interested in cultivating the image of Auschwitz as a place of Polish martyrdom and of the struggle with fascism led by the communist camp resistance.

Chapter 5, "Fighting Auschwitz: The Heroic Account of the Camp," deals with the political context of commemorating Auschwitz in postwar Poland. The attempts by the communist authorities to internationalize the camp, and to make it a symbol of Polish suffering and a victory over fascism, are cinematically represented in *The Last Stage*. In order to represent truthfully the reality of the camp while following the tenets of the communist ideology, Jakubowska's film focuses on the heroic aspect of Auschwitz ("Fighting Auschwitz"), and highlights the communist resistance.

Chapter 6, "Representation of the Holocaust in *The Last Stage*," discusses how the efforts to internationalize Auschwitz, and to make it a memorial to those who fought against fascism, led to the marginalization of the camp's largest group of victims, the Jews. This was despite the fact that the leading character in the film, Marta Weiss, is herself Jewish and based on the well-known historical figure Mala Zimetbaum. With its stress on the victims' country of origin, rather than on their respective ethnicity, *The Last Stage* mirrors the status of postwar debates about Auschwitz-Birkenau. The Soviet method of classifying those killed in

Auschwitz according to their state affiliations led to the absence of the category “Jew,” and this had an impact on subsequent Polish documentations of Auschwitz.

Chapter 7, “The Legacy of Wanda Jakubowska,” discusses the continuing influence of *The Last Stage*. The work began to serve as a semi-documentary in several films to follow, and its images were appropriated by other filmmakers for use in both documentary and fictional accounts. The discussion also takes into account Jakubowska’s three later camp films, which are less well known than *The Last Stage* and are often overlooked in discussions of the screen representation of Auschwitz and the Holocaust.

CHAPTER 1

The Auschwitz-Birkenau Number 43513

“I was always in the epicenter of whatever was going on.”

—WANDA JAKUBOWSKA

Wanda Jakubowska was born November 10, 1907, to a prosperous upper-middle-class family in Warsaw, then part of the Russian empire.¹ With the outbreak of the Great War, her father Waclaw Jakubowski, an accomplished engineer, began his service in the tsarist army and moved the family to Moscow. As both her parents were film buffs who often took her to movies, Wanda spent her childhood and early teenage years attending the theaters as well as the schools of Moscow, where in 1917 she witnessed the turbulent period of the Bolshevik Revolution. Her father, although not a communist, remained in the Soviet Union after the revolution and took up a managerial position in a factory.

The START Years

In 1922, Jakubowska returned to independent Poland with her father alone; her mother Zofia had died in 1917. She completed her high school education in 1928 and attended the University of Warsaw, graduating with a degree in art history in 1931. During her university years, she became involved in film activities through a friend, Eugeniusz Cękaliski, a filmmaker and ardent promoter of art cinema.² In 1930, Jakubowska



Wanda Jakubowska with her parents.
Courtesy Katarzyna Rudomino.

and Cękałski cofounded the Society for the Promotion of Film Art (Stowarzyszenie Miłośników Filmu Artystycznego, or START), which played a pivotal role in the Polish critical and filmmaking scene.³ Its members came mostly from upper-middle-class families with left-wing sympathies; they included Jerzy Toeplitz, who later became a famous film historian and teacher at the Łódź Film School, and future filmmakers Jerzy Zarzycki and Stanisław Wohl. Later, other filmmakers and cinematographers joined the START group, including Aleksander Ford, Jerzy Bossak, Ludwik Perski, and Adolf Forbert.

START was a dynamic cine-club that promoted ambitious art cinema through screenings, lectures, and seminars, as well as through a series of articles published in almost all major Polish periodicals. Jakubowska and

other young members of the START group were primarily cultural educators who were interested in changing the landscape of film production in Poland. In an article published in Warsaw in 1932, the society's board explicitly pointed out that the main task of the group was to "popularize and propagate a few valuable films, to discredit and boycott worthless cultural productions, and to awaken interest in film as a first-class educational component."⁴

For Jakubowska and other START members, cinema was more than just entertainment. They were united by "the struggle for films for the public good," which was the START slogan from 1932. Under the influence of Soviet filmmakers (chiefly Sergei Eisenstein and Vsevolod Pudovkin), the START activists considered film to be a socially useful art. In an extensive press campaign, they addressed several fundamental problems concerning Polish cinema and also provided some suggestions for improving the situation. They believed that the only chance to have an artistic cinema was to have an enlightened audience. By educating the public, they hoped to limit the production of mediocre films and to create audiences ready to accept truly creative, even experimental, cinematic works.

The only member of START with some filmmaking experience was Aleksander Ford (1908–1980), who, as a communist, was hailed by the leftist press in particular as the most promising Polish director. After the war—which he survived in the Soviet Union—Ford returned to Poland as an officer in the Polish division fighting alongside the Red Army. He became the most important figure in the Polish film industry—the head of Film Polski (the National Board of Polish Film), the sole body producing, distributing, and exhibiting films in Poland.

In addition to her educational activities, between 1932 and 1934 Jakubowska was also involved in the production of three short documentary films (or "social reportages") made together with other members of START. In 1934, she was credited as artistic director on Aleksander Ford and Jan Nowina-Przybylski's film *Awakening* (*Przebudzenie*, aka *Miłość maturzystki*), which was lost during the war. In 1937, she produced her first independent short, *Edison's Street* (*Ulica Edisona*).⁵

Although *The Last Stage* is usually listed as Jakubowska's first theatrically released work, she actually was able to produce one full-length film before the outbreak of World War II. Her much-anticipated prewar adap-

tation of Eliza Orzeszkowa's canonical novel *On the Niemen River* (aka *On the Banks of the Niemen; Nad Niemnem*, 1939) was finished shortly before the war, but never had its premiere, which had been scheduled for September 5, 1939, in the Colosseum, the biggest cinema theater in Warsaw. The film was produced by the leading prewar Polish studio, Falanga, coscripted by Jakubowska and Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz (a prominent postwar writer), and codirected by Jakubowska and Karol Szołowski. Interestingly, given the context of *The Last Stage*, Jakubowska's *On the Niemen River* was also shot on location in a place called Bohatyrowicze, the authentic setting described in Orzeszkowa's novel. The actors—among them stars of Polish prewar cinema such as Elżbieta Barszczewska, Stanisława Wysocka, Jerzy Pichelski, Mieczysława Ćwiklińska, and Wiktor Biegański—wore authentic period dress.

Jakubowska explained in several interviews that, during the occupation, she learned from Stefan Dękierowski—one of the cofounders of Falanga in 1923 who was still in charge of its laboratory during the war and also active in the Polish underground resistance—that the Germans had decided to reedit the film as a picture about German settlers in the East who were persecuted by their Polish neighbors. Afraid that their film might be used for propaganda purposes, Jakubowska and Szołowski decided to hide the film's negative. The prints of *On the Niemen River* were removed by their friends from the Falanga laboratory and hidden in two different locations. To minimize the danger in case of being interrogated, the filmmakers were not informed of the hiding places. Unfortunately, the friends of Szołowski and Jakubowska perished without a trace during the war; the copies of the film never resurfaced and most likely were destroyed.⁶

Imprisonment at Pawiak

After the September campaign of 1939 and the occupation of Poland by Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, Jakubowska became an activist in the Warsaw section of the Workers' Party of Polish Socialists (RPPS, Robotnicza Partia Polskich Socjalistów). She was arrested by the Gestapo on October 30, 1942, and detained in the infamous Pawiak prison in Warsaw. According to Jakubowska, the Germans did not know of her role in the Polish underground and only learned about it later, during her time

at Pawiak. Jakubowska was arrested with a group of people, including several of her friends, because (unknown to her) someone had hidden weapons in one of the cooperative gardens where she and her circle of friends grew vegetables.

She commented that when the Germans came for her, she was ironing her eight-year-old son Andrzej's clothes and listening to Ludwig van Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. She later stated that, as she believed this piece to be one of Hitler's personal favorites, she was treated fairly well, without the customary beating.⁷ Furthermore, the Gestapo did not find some illegal materials that she hastily concealed in her apartment.

For the following six months, Jakubowska was held at Pawiak, the central Warsaw prison and for Poles one of the symbols of the horrors of the occupation. According to the Polish historians Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak, during its operation between October 2, 1939, and August 21, 1945, "about 60,000–65,000 people passed through Pawiak and other prisons of Warsaw (of whom about 32,000 were shot at public or secret executions, more than 23,000 were sent to concentration camps, and a few thousand were released)."⁸ In an interview with Stuart Liebman, Jakubowska described the personnel of Pawiak in the following way: "Most of those who served there were drunks and drug addicts. When I was brought to the Chief of the prison it was a strange meeting. He was lying with his head on a table, drunk, smashed. He was the 'flower of the German nation' — an alcoholic and drug addict!"⁹

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising started on April 19, 1943, when Jakubowska was still being held by the Gestapo at the Pawiak prison (which itself was situated inside the ghetto, and was used as an attack base for the Germans). Jakubowska recalled that period in an interview conducted shortly before her death in 1998:

The Germans were burning the Ghetto, and they kept pouring water on us. The smoldering pieces were falling through the window into our prison cell. Through the window we could see the burning flames; in the prison cell—high temperatures, terrible stench. When, after half a year of my stay at Pawiak, they were taking us to Auschwitz, I have to tell you that the very fact of leaving this inferno gave us a sense of relief, despite our knowledge of where we were going.¹⁰

Transport to Auschwitz

On April 28, 1943, Jakubowska was sent on a train transport from Warsaw to Auschwitz with a group of 400 male prisoners and 107 female prisoners. On April 29, they arrived at Auschwitz and were assigned numbers 119127–119526 (for males) and 43488–43593 (for females).¹¹ According to incomplete records displayed in the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum online database, 40 female prisoners from Jakubowska’s transport perished in the camp.¹² Jakubowska was tattooed with the camp serial number 43513.¹³ At the time of her arrival, the women’s camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau had 18,659 prisoners. Figures from April 30, 1943, show that 6,119 female prisoners were “incapable of working”; 6,968 were working (that number includes 242 prisoners subjected to sterilization experiments on Block 10, conducted by Dr. Carl Clauberg); and 5,572 had no assignments.¹⁴

Jakubowska was housed for almost six weeks in Block 9 where, like other new prisoners, she went through a period of “quarantine” (adjusting to camp life) and later worked with different *kommandos* (work details). Since the camp resistance group knew in advance about her being sent to Auschwitz, she was contacted by fellow socialist and communist prisoners in the camp, who immediately offered her assistance; one of them, Kazimierz Szewberg, stated that he knew about Jakubowska’s imminent arrival before she was even transported to Auschwitz. Konstanty (Kostek) Jagiełło—a prominent member of the Polish Socialist Party (*Polska Partia Socjalistyczna*, PPS) and resistance leader of the camp¹⁵—asked Szewberg to take care of Jakubowska by providing her with necessary clothing and food.¹⁶ Following the advice provided by her political friends inside the camp, Jakubowska registered herself as a photographer.¹⁷ On June 12, 1943, she was transferred permanently to work at an auxiliary camp at Rajsko (aka Raisko), the agricultural section of the Auschwitz camp located in a village 2 miles from Birkenau.¹⁸

Rajsko—The Green Garden of Auschwitz

Beginning in the summer of 1940, the Polish inhabitants of the village of Rajsko, totaling 1,500 people, were forcibly evicted along with the residents of other villages in the vicinity of the Auschwitz camp.¹⁹ The

Rajsko subcamp was created under the management of SS *Obersturmbannführer* (Lieutenant Colonel) Dr. Joachim Caesar. An agronomist by training, Caesar was in charge of the research unit at Auschwitz. After his appointment, he began recruiting female prisoners with appropriate scientific degrees (chiefly in chemistry, agriculture, and botany) to work for him.

Due to its proximity to the main camp and its good soil, Rajsko became the green garden of Auschwitz, known for its cultivation of vegetables and flowers. Thanks to its constantly expanding greenhouses and slave work by female prisoners, “the flowers from Rajsko were known across the Reich,” writes Anna Zięba, the author of the first study on Rajsko.²⁰ In his memoirs, Caesar also emphasized that “chrysanthemums and cyclamens were the species most commonly known. Sales of cut flowers and wreaths were a ‘major source of income.’”²¹

At Rajsko, Jakubowska was in charge of the small photographic laboratory and worked together with another prisoner, a German Jew named Inge Schlesinger. The task of this photography unit was to document different stages of the cultivation of *Taraxacum kok-saghyz* (rubber root), a perennial plant belonging to the family of dandelions that was planned for the production of rubber. Since 1931, the plant had been used by the Soviet Union to produce rubber, and during the war it was seriously considered by the Nazi German war machine as an emergency supply source for military purposes. The few preserved photographs from Rajsko (featuring kok-saghyz) were taken by Jakubowska.²²

There were two work squads at Rajsko. The first one, the *Gaertnerei* (the gardening unit), which mostly employed Polish, Russian, and (later) Yugoslav women, grew vegetables and flowers for the SS personnel. The second unit, the *Pflanzenzucht* (the plant breeding unit), cultivated the kok-saghyz. In addition to female prisoners, the latter unit also employed German civilian workers as well as Russians who collaborated with the Nazi German regime.

The prisoners from both *kommandos* lived together. Initially, each unit had 150 prisoners who represented many nationalities, though most were Polish, French, and German. A significant number of the Rajsko prisoners were highly trained scientists and researchers, experts in their fields.²³ Interestingly, in both units at Rajsko the communists were visibly overrepresented. Anna Zięba writes that Caesar asked the prisoners

to find him more inmates in Birkenau who had professional experience needed for his research:

Caesar gave authorization to recruit these inmates to prisoner Wanda Dutczyńska, who in turn approached another prisoner, Hanna Laskowa. With the help of her friends working in Birkenau's *Politische Abteilung* (political department) and *Arbeitseinsatz* (labor section), Laskowa employed and sent to Pflanzenzucht those prisoners who, in the eyes of the Gestapo, were heavily incriminated and regarded as dangerous for the German state. In Rajsko they had a better chance of surviving the camp, and by moving out of the view of the Birkenau camp authorities, they partly protected themselves against the ever-present danger.²⁴

Despite her work at Rajsko, Jakubowska was still housed in Block 7 at Birkenau, where the infamous *Kapo* Stenia (Stanisława/Stefania Starostka)—a woman known for her brutality toward fellow prisoners—was in charge. She was later described by Jakubowska as “the most horrifying creature among all of the Birkenau torturers.”²⁵ Starostka was a Polish underground fighter who had been captured by the Gestapo and sent to Auschwitz in April 1942 (camp number 6865). Due to her knowledge of German, she was made the *Blockälteste* (block/barrack leader) and later, in August 1943, she was appointed the only Polish *Lagerälteste* (camp senior). After the evacuation of Auschwitz in January 1945, she was sent to Bergen-Belsen.

Starostka was arrested by the British Army in April 1945 and sentenced to ten years in prison in the “Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty Four Others” (the Belsen Trial, September 17–November 17, 1945). During the trial, several fellow prisoners defended her, claiming that she had behaved well in the camp and that she had saved a group of women from the gas chamber.²⁶

Jakubowska and other prisoners working for Dr. Caesar walked daily to the Rajsko subcamp and returned to their quarters for the night—a difficult trek for several prisoners who were recovering from typhus. In June 1943, they were moved to Rajsko, mostly to avoid the danger of another typhus epidemic (the most terrifying outbreak occurred at Birkenau in



Birkenau on screen. Work details leaving the camp. Author's collection

April and May of 1943, with *Kapo* Stenia among those struck down by the disease). A French inmate at Rajsko, Charlotte Delbo, provided the following account:

On the first of July 1943, Dr. Caesar's entire team moved into a new, clean, wooden barracks where there were showers, straw mattresses on individual beds, and toilets. Not to have to smell the stench from the crematoria was a deliverance. We saw the smoke that formed a thick cloud above the fourteen chimneys across one side of the horizon. We sometimes got hold of the *Volkischer Beobachter*. Reading this communiqué raised our spirits and our courage. The women at Rajsko could also write and receive parcels.²⁷

The SS *Kommandant* of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höss, wrote in his memoirs that because Caesar was goodhearted, he "overlooked a lot concerning the prisoners and let them do what they wanted, especially the women prisoners . . . Among these prisoners there were many women, mostly French Jewesses, who were academically trained. He treated them almost as colleagues. As a natural consequence, this led to the worst cases

of lack of discipline. When the necessary punishments were carried out, Caesar took it very personally.”²⁸

The living conditions at Rajsko were better than those at other Auschwitz subcamps, due to the importance of the kok-saghyz research for the Nazi German war effort. After Dr. Caesar’s first wife died in August 1942, during the typhus epidemic that also nearly killed him, he tried to improve the hygiene conditions at Rajsko. By doing so, he also wanted to reduce the danger of infection for the SS guards and the German scientists. In addition, since Rajsko gradually became a place often visited by scientists and military personnel, he “asked that the women working in Rajsko be supplied with clothing that belonged to Hungarian Jews who had been deported to Auschwitz and murdered there.”²⁹

The prisoners were allowed to change clothes and to have showers. There was also a small, ten-bed camp hospital. Jakubowska recalled in an interview with Stuart Liebman: “On the plantations the living conditions were better—there were even some prominent French Jewish scientists working there! There were barracks with windows, beds, and pillows, and the risk of typhus that was killing everybody in the camps was less. Not thirteen on each level; everyone had their own bed. There were showers and the place was disinfected.”³⁰

The Rajsko historian Anna Zięba emphasized that prisoners were able not only to maintain contacts with inmates from other parts of Auschwitz-Birkenau, but also to have some “rudimentary cultural events” (discussions, readings, performances) to commemorate different holidays.³¹ Testifying to the prominence of communists at Rajsko, prisoner Eva Tichauer, who was deported in 1942 from France and joined the Communist Party in the camp, recalled that at the beginning of 1944 there was even a ceremony commemorating the anniversary of Lenin’s death.³²

Another prisoner at Rajsko who was active in the underground, Jewish-French Marie-Elisa Cohen, testified that male prisoners smuggled papers and provided information to Rajsko: “These men brought us the *Voelkischer Beobachter* and the *Oberschlesische Zeitung* which they hid in a predetermined place, from where we fetched them at propitious moments. One of us translated the news into French and we followed the Nazi defeat at the Eastern front and later the progress of the Allies after the invasion of Normandy on a small atlas, which these same comrades had given to us.”³³

Several testimonial accounts emphasize Jakubowska's involvement in the camp's resistance as a member of the *Kampfgruppe Auschwitz* (the Auschwitz Combat Group; *Grupa Bojowa Oświęcim*). The Auschwitz prisoner Zygmunt Gaudasiński testified that Jakubowska was responsible for maintaining contacts with the outside world; likewise, Józef Garliński, in his book *Fighting Auschwitz*, stated that Jakubowska was “the liaison officer between women and the men's underground movement in the central camp.”³⁴ The Russian prisoner Nina Gusiewa, who was active in the Auschwitz resistance, wrote that Jakubowska was getting information about the progress of the Red Army directly from the Soviets.³⁵ Another former Auschwitz inmate, Natalia Tołłoczko (who had met Jakubowska at the Pawiak prison and was later transported with her to Auschwitz), testified that Jakubowska maintained close contacts with members of several nationalities—Russian, French (she spoke Russian and French fluently), Czech, and German—who were close to her intellectually and ideologically.³⁶

Interestingly, given the portrayal of Poles in *The Last Stage*, Jakubowska did not mingle much with the Polish inmates. They by and large did not appreciate her close contacts with foreigners, in particular the German communist (and the coscriptwriter of *The Last Stage*) Gerda Schneider, who, as Natalia Tołłoczko stated, was “hostile toward Poles.”³⁷ Similar sentiments were expressed after the war by other former Polish prisoners at Rajsko, who were unhappy with Jakubowska's friendship with the former *Blockälteste* Schneider.

Nina Wegierska, however, praised Jakubowska in her testimony as an “internationalist communist.” Another prisoner, Jadwiga Łampisz, emphasized that Jakubowska was a communist at heart who befriended inmates who were close to her ideological worldview, mostly foreign communists such as Schneider.³⁸ This was anathema, given the anti-communist attitude of the majority of Poles before and during the war.

Gerda Schneider

An extended comment on Gerda (Gertrud, Gertrude) Schneider is now in order. Born March 27, 1900, Schneider was imprisoned by the Nazi German regime beginning in 1933. From 1937 to 1939, she was a political prisoner at the Lichtenburg concentration camp—the training

ground for several future *Aufseherinnen* (female overseers) in Ravensbrück and Auschwitz, including Johanna Langefeld and Maria Mandel. On May 26, 1939, she was among 900 women transported from Lichtenburg to Ravensbrück.³⁹ Schneider was then transferred to Auschwitz on March 26, 1942, with the first transport of female prisoners from the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Danuta Czech included the following comment in her indispensable book, *Auschwitz Chronicle, 1939–1945*: “In the transport are 999 German women classified as asocial, criminal, and a few as political prisoners. They receive Nos. 1–999 and are lodged in the part of the main camp separated by the wall along Block 1 to 10. German criminal and asocial female prisoners, the founders of the camp as it were, are to take over the functions of Block Seniors and capos.”⁴⁰

Schneider received the camp number 586 and became a *Blockälteste*.⁴¹ The information about her imprisonment held at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum is brief and fragmentary. Prisoners’ testimonies stress her role as an active member of the resistance and her work as *Blockälteste* in the camp “infirmary” (*Revier*, abbreviation for *Krankenrevier*—quarters for the sick). In a conversation with Liebman, Jakubowska stated that although Schneider was sent to Auschwitz to “organize a camp for women,” she was nevertheless “still a decent person. She organized what was best for women.”⁴² Many former inmates supported this claim and gave evidence that Schneider used her position courageously to help fellow sufferers. For example, Genowefa Ulan testified that she owed her life to a brave action of Schneider, who defended her before an SS doctor when she was ill and was accused of simulating illness by a Polish prisoner in charge (later depicted in the film as Lalunia).⁴³

Anna Palarczyk, who knew Schneider very well, confirmed this, but added the following: “She had been imprisoned since 1933 and was no longer normal, for she beat people.”⁴⁴ A number of other former prisoners also commented that Schneider was beating fellow inmates. In her memoirs, titled “Life, Death, and Struggle,” Antonina (“Tośka”) Piątkowska praised German female political prisoners working in the *Revier*, but had the following to say about Schneider:

I remember one political prisoner, German Gerda Schneider.
I came into contact with her in person several times, and each



Gerda Schneider: postwar portrait. Wanda Jakubowska archive. Courtesy Katarzyna Rudomino.

time I was beaten by her. She beat healthy prisoners for trying to get to the *Revier* in order to bring patients there some rags to cover themselves (the sick in the *Revier* lay down naked, without underthings if someone from the outside did not provide any clothing), or medicinal herbs to drink, the most desired by fevered women. What hurt even more than Gerda's beating was that her greatest satisfaction was pouring out the herbs so hard-won for the sick, the ones that they so desperately needed.⁴⁵

Another inmate, Józefa Kiwalowa, commented about block elders at Rajsko: "In 1943 came Gerda Schneider, who liked to hit everybody in the face. In 1944 she was sent to Birkenau for punishment."⁴⁶

Understandably, unlike some of the other prisoners, Jakubowska preserved different camp images of Gerda Schneider: "We became friends. I learned German from her because she never knew any other language. When I left the camp, I therefore spoke German. We left the camp together and she remained in Poland for a while. We had to write a script. She knew much more than I did."⁴⁷

Birkenau, Auschwitz, and Ravensbrück

In October 1944, suspected of political activities, Jakubowska was moved by the camp authorities from Rajsko to Birkenau and housed in Block 27, where she awaited transfer to Ravensbrück.⁴⁸ After four weeks, however, thanks to the network of the Auschwitz Combat Group, she managed to move and hide in the women's camp of Auschwitz I (*Stamm-lager*), and thus avoided the transport. The former prisoner Stanisław Kłodziński (camp number 20019) wrote that Jakubowska was helped by a prisoner-doctor at Auschwitz, Dr. Dorota Lorska (Sława Klein in the camp, number 52325), a Polish-Jewish communist woman who distinguished herself in the French Resistance and as a physician in the camp where she had been interned since August 1943.⁴⁹ Kłodziński writes:

Among the many colleagues in the camp who owe their lives to Lorska was also Wanda Jakubowska. She was transferred from the *Gärtnerei* to the punishment company (*Strafkompanie*) in Birkenau. Passing through the camp at Auschwitz, Jakubowska pretended that she had sprained her leg. Lorska bravely pulled her out of the row of prisoners, bandaged her “sick” leg, and reported to the guard that Jakubowska needed to be transferred to the camp hospital. It was done at the behest of Józef Cyran-kiewicz, who also initiated the plan to save this camp resistance activist from impending death.⁵⁰

In the women's camp in Auschwitz I, Jakubowska was assigned to different work details and also worked briefly in the camp infirmary as a nurse until January 18, 1945.⁵¹ Between January 17 and 21, with the Red Army advancing toward the Vistula River, approximately 56,000 prisoners were forcibly evacuated in a “death march,” during which almost 15,000 prisoners died of cold and exhaustion or were shot by the SS guards.⁵² Jakubowska marched with 25,000 other prisoners to the city of Wodzisław Śląski, 35 miles to the west, which they reached three days later. At the destination they were put on freight trains—open cars heading for different concentration camps located inside Germany. Jakubowska was transported to Ravensbrück.⁵³

Jakubowska always emphasized the importance of solidarity among prisoners in the camp, which helped them to survive. In bitter cold,

Jakubowska remembered, “we held each other in our arms and successively slept during the long march.”⁵⁴ In the same interview, conducted by Barbara Mruklik in 1985, Jakubowska stated: “Almost certainly we could have frozen to death if not for the fact that somewhere along the way we passed a standing German army train heading for the front. Seeing what was going on, the Wehrmacht soldiers began to toss straw into our wagons. This helped us. I wanted to introduce this scene in my new film, but it turned out that it would be too expensive.”⁵⁵ Jakubowska arrived at Ravensbrück most probably on January 23, 1945, with the first transport from Auschwitz. She was imprisoned in Ravensbrück for the remaining months of the war.

On January 28, 1945, ten days after Jakubowska and other Auschwitz prisoners were evacuated by the SS, the first Soviet detachment appeared on the grounds of Auschwitz-Birkenau, part of the 59th Army of the 1st Ukrainian Front led by Colonel Winogradow. The Soviet soldiers encountered the remaining sick and starving prisoners, approximately 1,200 at Auschwitz, 5,800 at Birkenau, and 600 at another subcamp, Monowitz. Despite medical assistance, many of them did not survive.⁵⁶

Adolf Forbert, who photographed Auschwitz-Birkenau after it was captured by the Red Army, described what he saw after entering the liberated infirmary of Birkenau, the eventual setting of Jakubowska’s film:

Long rows of lifeless barracks; sticking from the piles of snow are limbs of corpses. Dead silence around us. An emaciated female prisoner grabs me by the hand, says something unintelligible to me, and pulls me in the direction of the nearest large barrack. Now I can see the smoke coming out of the chimneys from some of them. I follow my guide and enter the barrack. The monstrous sensation chokes my throat. Seriously ill women lie on two-story bunks, two or three on each bunk. Stuffiness. The commotion begins; the sick wave to me with their hands, some of them get up from a long brick oven that is running along in the middle of the barrack. . . . Between shouts of joy at the sight of the first Polish uniform, information: I am at one of the wards of the women’s hospital in Birkenau.⁵⁷

In Ravensbrück, Jakubowska experienced another “death march” before this camp was liberated by the Red Army detachments on April 30,

1945. She was evacuated with 20,000 other healthy prisoners, leaving behind about 2,000 ailing inmates in the camp. Following Himmler's orders, several columns of prisoners marched westward, guarded by the SS men with their dogs. In a documentary produced by Andrzej Czekalski, Jakubowska recalled her first day of freedom on April 28, 1945, when she and her fellow inmates were liberated by the Soviet soldiers. She was in a column of 500 prisoners guarded by the remaining SS men. One night, when they slept in a barn, she put her head on somebody else's belly and fell asleep. In the morning she realized that she had slept on the SS guard. Realizing what had happened, they both rushed in different directions, and the guard left his gun behind. She took the gun and wandered around the place in search of food—armed, but still wearing a striped prisoner's uniform.⁵⁸

After the liberation, Jakubowska and Schneider spent several months in the Soviet Zone in Berlin (“this city seemed then fascinating to me,” she recalled in 1998),⁵⁹ where they looked for materials related to their film project and also helped the Soviets with Russian-German translations. Jakubowska returned to Warsaw in December 1945 with the first draft of her script and immediately contacted the communist party, Polish Workers' Party (Polska Partia Robotnicza, PPR), “my beloved party,” as she put it in the 1998 interview with Alina Madej.⁶⁰ Following the film-making community in postwar Poland, she then moved to the city of Łódź, relatively undamaged during the war, where many government institutions, including Film Polski, had established their centers.

CHAPTER 2

“Stalin Was Moved to Tears”

The Script

Wanda Jakubowska decided to make a film about Auschwitz-Birkenau as soon as she crossed the camp's gate.¹ On several occasions Jakubowska stated that she was actively thinking about making a film to document her Auschwitz ordeal while still a prisoner. In a letter sent to Film Polski on January 5, 1946, she wrote: “I started to work on the script right from the day of my arrival at Birkenau and continued throughout the duration of my stay there. Some fellow comrades helped me by telling their own stories of survival as well as those they witnessed. I promised over three hundred women working in the same work detail that if I get out of the camp, the film will be made.”²

Producing a film about Auschwitz was a personal duty for Jakubowska, both as a camp survivor and as a filmmaker who wanted to bear witness to history and register the enormity of evil.³ In addition, the making of this film became an almost therapeutic endeavor on Jakubowska's part, as was revealed in the very title of an interview with her that was published after the film's premiere: “I remained in the camp until 1948.”⁴

With her fellow Auschwitz survivor, Gerda Schneider, Jakubowska began working on the script in June 1945 in Berlin and finished a first draft titled *Oświęcim* (*Auschwitz*), approximately 500 pages long, in early December 1945.⁵ Alina Madej argues (and I share this view) that it was Schneider who wrote the first version of the script in German. Considering the postwar political sensitivities, Madej appropriately remarks that

penning the first version of the script in the language reminiscent of the occupation almost bordered on provocation.⁶

In addition, during the same time Jakubowska participated with Gerda Schneider in the unmasking of several SS men who, according to her, were getting tattoos with fake concentration camp numbers and pretending to be former camp inmates. As Jakubowska recalled, the hiding SS men were also denouncing some German communists—former prisoners—as alleged members of the SS.⁷

In all likelihood, although it is impossible today to verify it in light of the remaining documents, Jakubowska and Schneider were considering producing their film about Auschwitz outside of Poland, possibly in the Soviet Occupation Zone of Germany. A certificate issued on December 4, 1945, by the Berlin district of the German Communist Party (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*, KPD) and approved by the Red Army headquarters three days later permitted Jakubowska—who, as the letter indicates, became an active member of the KPD (“*unserer Genossin und Partei-Funktionärin*”)—to travel to Warsaw for four weeks. The letter specified that Jakubowska was not returning to Poland after her war ordeal, but instead going to Warsaw to pick up her son Andrzej (then eleven), who survived the war in Poland. She was supposed to return with him to Berlin before the end of December 1945.⁸

On December 31, 1945, Jakubowska submitted in the city of Łódź a shorter version of her script to Jerzy Bossak, one of the top officials of Film Polski. Several days later, she wrote a two-page letter to Aleksander Ford, the head of Film Polski, emphasizing her determination to direct the film. She stressed that her work on the manuscript had begun in June 1945 in Berlin in collaboration with her female comrade who arrived at Auschwitz with one of the first transports and learned “all possible vicissitudes of fate from being a prisoner functionary in the *lager* to the penal *kommando* and the dungeons of the Auschwitz Gestapo. She knows the camp as nobody else.”⁹ Perhaps for political reasons Gerda Schneider’s name and nationality were not revealed in the letter. Jakubowska’s letter to Ford also emphasized that her film project—focusing on seven representatives of six nationalities who became united by their shared ideology and political objectives—introduced characters whose biographies, although not reflecting any specific historical figures, were conglomerates of real characters, situations, and events. The letter to Ford also

specified that in order to finish the shooting script, Jakubowska had to go to Berlin, Paris, several Polish cities, and Czechoslovakia. Her stated goal concerning the research in Berlin was to study the biographical details regarding the Auschwitz SS guards.

Jakubowska's project about Auschwitz-Birkenau was approved by the authorities of Film Polski on January 8, 1946. She received the money to cover her preliminary expenses, including her research trip to Berlin.¹⁰ On January 17, 1946, almost one year after the liberation of Auschwitz, Jakubowska wrote an official letter to Gerda Schneider, who was still in Berlin at that time, to tell her that Film Polski had agreed to produce the film based on their script and that she was seeking permission for Schneider to work in Poland.¹¹ Schneider's visit was approved by the highest echelon of communist authorities; obtaining the approval apparently was not a problem for Jakubowska. "I was on friendly terms with [Bolesław] Bierut and [Władysław] Gomułka," she recalled, "thus I arranged it during one visit to the party's Central Committee."¹² One possible reason for Jakubowska's close collaboration with Schneider and her extensive postwar research may be that she spent "only several weeks" in Birkenau before being moved to the Rajsko subcamp of Auschwitz, which was a relatively privileged experimental agricultural branch.

Jakubowska's goal was to produce a "proper" and "politicized" picture of Auschwitz that was, according to her, "justified by the world postwar political situation."¹³ Not relying exclusively on her camp memories, she was eager to do additional wide-ranging research. She collected testimonies and conducted interviews with both Auschwitz inmates and guards to prove the film's thesis: "the extermination camps are the most cynical rendering of fascism, its inevitable consequence."¹⁴ She was convinced that her version of Auschwitz history, although not representative of the fabric of the camp, would reflect its true nature.

Jerzy Bossak, who was then heading the Artistic Programming Department within Film Polski, issued a memo on February 1, 1946, to the authorities in Poland and the occupied German territories, urging them to help Jakubowska with her research on the film project, which was then titled (in a somewhat military fashion) *The Birkenau Front Reports* (*Front Birkenau melduje*).¹⁵ Following this, Jakubowska left for Germany where, accompanied by Gerda Schneider, she conducted interviews with some SS personnel from Auschwitz. Another reasoning behind this

extensive preparatory work, as Jakubowska explained in an interview with Alina Madej, was to have psychological portraits—flesh-and-blood characters—unlike the one-dimensional caricatures of Soviet films.¹⁶

Jakubowska forcefully pursued her project despite numerous obstacles. On March 3, 1946, she asked Film Polski to begin the production stage. Even though the film authorities praised the project, they were convinced this was not a film for Jakubowska to direct. She often stressed that the powerful head of Film Polski, Aleksander Ford—who was privately on friendly terms with her as they lived in the same apartment building in Łódź—proved to be a major obstacle for her project. She labeled him *Tematenfresser* (meaning perhaps *thema fresser*), a person stealing other people's ideas for his own films.¹⁷ This was confirmed by the Polish film historian and former film producer Edward Zajiček, who knew the postwar film industry firsthand: Ford used his privileged position in the Polish film industry to reserve interesting projects for himself. As a result of his policy, several scripts were abandoned or postponed for years before going into production.¹⁸

Unlike Jakubowska, Ford—and several other filmmakers associated with prewar leftist groups—survived the war in the Soviet Union. In 1943, they created the Polish Army Film Unit Czołówka (Czołówka Filmowa Wojska Polskiego) within the Polish Tadeusz Kościuszko First Division and documented struggles of Polish soldiers fighting alongside the Red Army. Headed by Ford, the Czołówka (Vanguard) members, including Bossak, Stanisław Wohl, and Ludwik Perski (all of them assimilated Polish Jews), returned with the Red Army as officers in the First Polish Army. The former START members immediately seized power, imposed their vision of cinema—which was much in line with that of the communist authorities—and practically controlled the nationalized post-1945 Polish film industry, both as decision makers and filmmakers. From 1945 to 1947, Ford was the head of Film Polski, which operated within the notorious Ministry of Information and Propaganda. He accumulated power and, thanks to his high-ranking political and military connections with the communist leaders, ran the board in an almost dictatorial manner. Jakubowska, the only Polish female filmmaker during the postwar period, commented unflatteringly that Ford's position of power, connections in high places, medals, and cars spoiled her former friend from the START group.¹⁹

Mounting Problems

The Last Stage encountered several problems at the script stage despite Jakubowska's loyalty—which sometimes bordered on devotion—to the communist cause, and despite the theme of international solidarity, antifascist and pacifist messages, and an emphasis on the communist resistance in the camp. One has to stress, however, that although several prominent Polish writers were directly or indirectly involved in working for Film Polski, it was extremely difficult to produce a politically acceptable script. The Polish writers included Czesław Miłosz, Maria Dąbrowska, Adolf Rudnicki, and Seweryna Szmaglewska. Szmaglewska was the author of *Smoke over Birkenau*, published in 1945,²⁰ and at the early stages of Jakubowska's project was also considered a scriptwriter. Alina Madej quotes an annual report from 1946 submitted by Film Polski to the Ministry of Information and Propaganda stating that they had considered 170 projects, rejected 81, and asked for further work on 20 of them.²¹ Many scripts were subjected to harsh criticism on political grounds and never-ending rewrites, causing them to be postponed for many decades. Among these scripts are some of the most prestigious projects in Polish postwar cinema: Władysław Szpilman's story of survival and Janusz Korczak's (Henryk Goldszmit's) biography. Both were proposed in 1945. The former was discussed in June 1945 at the meeting of the Committee for Evaluating Film Scripts, and the latter was submitted by Ludwik Starski in September 1945. Both projects were rejected because of the passivity of the main characters, their apolitical stand, and their Jewishness. Szpilman's story was filmed by Roman Polański fifty-seven years later (*The Pianist*, 2002), and the film about Korczak was made by Andrzej Wajda in 1990 (*Korczak*).

Very few feature films were made in Poland after the war. No full-length fictional film was released between 1945 and 1946, largely due to censorship and the impossibility of dealing with several sensitive, politically incorrect issues, including the 1944 Warsaw Uprising (*Powstanie Warszawskie*, August 1–October 2, 1944) and the plight of the underground nationalist Home Army (AK) that had fought, along with others, to liberate Warsaw from the Nazi German occupation before the advancing Red Army. After 1945, the Home Army fighters, who also opposed the postwar Soviet occupation of Poland, were harshly persecuted.²² It has to

be stressed that the first memorial commemorating the 1944 uprising was built as late as 1989, after the fall of communism. Made in 1957, Andrzej Wajda's breakthrough *Kanal* (*Kanal*) became the first narrative film to portray the legendary event. Set during the final stages of the uprising, it narrated the story of a Home Army unit that tried to escape the German encirclement via the only route left—the city sewers, in which the majority of the fighters met their deaths. The release of *Kanal* sparked emotional debates in Poland; Wajda neither glorified the uprising, as was expected by the majority of his countrymen in 1957, nor did he criticize the official communist stand on the 1945 “liberation” of Warsaw by the Soviet troops. Instead, he stressed the patriotism of the Home Army soldiers, their sense of duty, and their heroic yet futile efforts.²³

The graphic nature of *The Last Stage* is also often cited as a major obstacle for Jakubowska's project. Film Polski was convinced that, given the postwar climate and the proximity of the war, nobody was going to want to see such a gloomy film. Contrary to popular wisdom that the postwar Polish viewers yearned for lighthearted entertainment films, however, the opposite proved true: Postwar audiences were eager to see their wartime experiences on screen. According to the poll conducted in mid-November 1946 by the Polish biweekly *Film*, 36 percent of 10,000 responders opted for broadly understood war movies, some dealing with topics silenced by the communist authorities after the war, such as the Warsaw Uprising and the participation of the Polish Armed Forces in the West in the 1944 Battle of Monte Cassino.²⁴

It is sometimes suggested that one of the biggest obstacles to the film being made was that the communist authorities in Poland were afraid of similarities between the Soviet gulags and German concentration camps, and preferred not to touch on this sensitive topic.²⁵ Plausibly, Ford and other Film Polski decision makers who survived the war in the Soviet Union (where some of them were involved in communist propaganda) knew firsthand the dangers of dealing with forbidden or ideologically murky themes and were reluctant to proceed with Jakubowska's project without an explicit Soviet blessing. However, as Timothy Snyder argues in “The Auschwitz Paradox,” a chapter in his *Black Earth*:

Auschwitz was a convenient symbol in the postwar Soviet Union and today in post-communist Russia. If the Holocaust is reduced

to Auschwitz, then it can easily be forgotten that the German mass killing of Jews began in places that the Soviet Union had just conquered. Everyone in the western Soviet Union knew about the mass murder of the Jews, for the same reason that the Germans did. In the East the method of mass murder required tens of thousands of people. The Germans left, but their death pits remained. If the Holocaust is identified only with Auschwitz, this experience, too, can be excluded from history and commemoration.²⁶

Even though, as Snyder argues, Auschwitz became a “convenient symbol in the postwar Soviet Union,” it has to be noted that at the beginning of 1945 the Soviet authorities did not pay an expected attention to Auschwitz, although six months earlier they had focused extensively on the first liberated camp at Majdanek. Jeremy Hicks attributes this shift to the Soviets’ uneasiness regarding the politically correct representation of Auschwitz, more specifically to the issue of dealing with the representation of war atrocities (Jewish, and not Soviet, suffering being in the center).²⁷ Similarly, David Stone writes that after liberating Auschwitz and documenting its liberation on film, the camp that is now synonymous with the Holocaust “disappeared from the Soviet press and official reports and the genocide of the Jews became a subject best avoided.”²⁸

As mentioned earlier, Jakubowska and Schneider tried to produce the script in an environment of strong, politically well-connected men who ruled the Polish film industry. Despite their shared prewar history with the START group and, essentially, the same limited filmmaking experience (with the exception of Ford), the men did not trust Jakubowska’s directorial skills. They delayed the project and discouraged Jakubowska by multiplying requirements. During the meeting of the Artistic Council (Rada Artystyczna) of Film Polski, production director Juliusz Turbowicz suggested that the German scriptwriter Georg C. Klaren (“the Hitlerite scriptwriter,” according to Jakubowska) should be involved in writing the script to achieve its desired artistic level.²⁹ Jakubowska stressed that although Jerzy Bossak—another well-connected friend of hers—liked her script, he considered it to be more appropriate for the giants of cinema, such as Fritz Lang, Wilhelm Pabst, or John Ford.³⁰ Facing continuous

resistance, Jakubowska listened to practical advice given by Stanisław Wohl—whom she wanted at first to hire as a camera operator on *The Last Stage*—who suggested going directly to Moscow to secure Soviet cooperation and provision of actresses and a cinematographer.³¹

In late 1946, Jakubowska went to Moscow with a forty-page filmic novella translated into Russian and retyped on a Russian typewriter using the Cyrillic alphabet at the Polish embassy in Moscow, with the help of the Polish cultural attaché, musicologist, and political activist Zofia Lissa. A report sent from Moscow on December 17, 1946, by the Polish press agency PAP states:

After several weeks of staying in Moscow, Wanda Jakubowska—the Polish film director and the author of the film script about the Auschwitz extermination camp—returns to the country. In an interview with the PAP correspondent, Jakubowska said: “I came to Moscow to receive help from the Soviet film industry for the production of a film about Auschwitz. The deputy minister of cinematography in the Soviet Union—Mr. Kalatozov, Mr. Marianov from the ministry of cinematography, and an excellent Soviet director Mikhail Romm expressed their deep interest in the Polish film project about Auschwitz. After learning about the script, the Soviet cinema officials stated that they consider the matter of making this film important not only for Polish cinema, but also for all democratic states.”³²

Jakubowska met in Moscow with Mikhail Kalatozov (“an absolutely gorgeous Georgian”³³) who was responsible for Soviet cinema as the deputy minister of cinematography between 1945 and 1948. Several years later at the Moscow Film Festival, she learned from Kalatozov that he had wept while reading her text. Afraid, however, to support her—since this was the first film script to deal with the camps (and therefore nobody knew how to tackle the subject)—Kalatozov sent the script to Andrei Zhdanov, who earlier, in 1934, had formulated the principles of Socialist Realist art. He was also deeply affected by the text and passed it on to Stalin. Allegedly, Stalin himself was also moved to tears. His personal approval made it possible for Jakubowska to pursue her project. In several interviews, she hypothesized that Stalin was probably touched by the

scenes in her script “showing that Soviet female prisoners in the camp were almost praying to Stalin. . . . As a result, he realized that the topic was timely.”³⁴ In the documentary *Kino, kino, kino*, Jakubowska stated emphatically: “After Stalin saw this scene, he fell in love with me.”

Jakubowska described her triumphant return to Warsaw from Moscow and meeting with Aleksander Ford in the following way: “Exhilarated, I came to Ford and here follows a scene from a gangster film, or rather a parody of a gangster film. I said that I have the blessing from the Russians. Ford listened to everything poker-faced and asked dryly: ‘Do you have any letter about it? Because, you know, they can talk a lot.’ At this moment the postman comes and brings the message from Moscow. . . . Ford turned green with envy.”³⁵

Despite the Soviet approval, however, Jakubowska’s script had been revised several times, and the Artistic Council of Film Polski also sought opinions from outsiders, including political activists and former Auschwitz prisoners. They also contacted prominent writers, including Adam Ważyk, then the chief ideologue of Film Polski; Tadeusz Hołuj, an Auschwitz survivor who was active in the camp’s resistance group; and Zofia Nalkowska, the author of a classic collection of Holocaust short stories, *Medallions* (1946), and also a member of the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes.³⁶ Although the initial shooting on location had been scheduled for April 1, 1947, the Film Polski authorities made it difficult for Jakubowska to progress with her project.³⁷

Facing endless obstacles created by her male colleagues who controlled the postwar Polish film industry, Jakubowska chose a risky but eventually efficient way of solving the problem and complained directly to the highest political authorities—the Central Committee of the Polish Workers’ Party (PPR). In a letter of March 3, 1947, she asked for their assistance and protested that her script had never been the subject of “constructive criticism,” but instead had been attacked by the Film Polski managers in a “general and destructive way.”³⁸ Fighting for her film, she also complained to Bolesław Bierut, president of the Republic of Poland, whom she knew personally: “I knew Bierut from before the war. Some people say that he was an evil man, but that was not true. He had a heart of gold. But he didn’t like his political opponents and I did not like them either.”³⁹

The atmosphere surrounding Jakubowska’s project changed after

March 1947 when Aleksander Ford, accused of mismanagement and rapidly losing his political footing, was replaced by a young apparatchik, Stanisław Albrecht, as the head of Film Polski. This institution no longer operated within the Ministry of Information and Propaganda but rather came under the supervision of the newly formed Ministry of Culture and Arts.⁴⁰ Albrecht, an ambitious engineer and architect by training and an outsider in the film business, was aptly labeled by Alina Madej a “super-bureaucrat” who faithfully served the communist regime and created the foundations for the Socialist Realist cinema demanded by the communist regime.⁴¹ Addressing the communist Politburo in September 1947, Albrecht stated: “Polish films should be made in the style of socialist realism. We have to separate ourselves from naturalism as well as from the formalist ‘exercises’ and pseudo-psychological inquiries that are fashionable in the West.”⁴²

In April 1947, Albrecht appointed the new Artistic Council that was more appreciative of Jakubowska’s project. Following the council’s advice on April 24, 1947, Jakubowska stated that the production of her film would start on June 1, 1947. She agreed to introduce several changes, including moving the film’s opening to the camp, as well as placing more emphasis on the role of the Auschwitz resistance and the dignified Russian doctor-prisoner Eugenia.⁴³ Her project evolved gradually from a realistic depiction of Auschwitz-Birkenau to an almost Socialist Realist representation of the camp, as expected by the authorities and also in line with her own communist convictions. In a letter sent to Paris, where the film’s composer Roman Palester resided at that time, Jakubowska wrote: “We have a new chief executive who is very to the point. Relations have changed and are changing constantly for the better. There is hope that films will be made and that it will be possible to work.”⁴⁴

Jakubowska worked on numerous revisions of the script with Gerda Schneider. Later, after the refusal by Film Polski to employ German actors and POWs for German-speaking parts, Schneider also worked with actors, especially concerning dialogue in German. Asked if Schneider felt comfortable working in an environment marked by anti-German sentiment, Jakubowska stated: “Gerda Schneider had not suffered the slightest unpleasantness in Poland. She was an extraordinary personality, and everybody really liked her. Straightaway, she won over the entire film crew.”⁴⁵

Jakubowska and Schneider's research resulted in several hundred pages that focused mostly on biographies of both Auschwitz-Birkenau inmates and perpetrators. Jakubowska often stated that with the exception of one negative character—the pseudo-doctor Lalunia—other protagonists were composites of several real characters.⁴⁶ Her commentary on the scriptwriting process is worth quoting at length:

Biographies of about fifty film characters were written during the next stage of our work. The biographies were quite accurate, and not only from the period of their stay in the camp, but from birth to death. Some profiles fared handsomely—with the characteristics of the background, preferences, and talents—some superficially. . . . Some characters who did not make it to the screen lent certain aspects of their features to other characters. For example, in a slightly modified form, the death of Hanka Cegiełka was transferred to Dessa, who in the first version did not have to die. Some protagonists came out badly because they were built from two characters. For example, Helena, who was made up of the two characters, Helena and Zofia, remained incomplete and undefined throughout. Helena was a worker from Wola [the Warsaw neighborhood] and took an active part in the resistance movement. Zofia was a middle-class woman and had a child. In conjunction, Helena lost too much of herself and took too much from the passive Zofia.⁴⁷

The immensity of the project, the multitude of developed characters, and the need to match their biographies with the chronology of the camp—as well as the desire to present a truthful, documentary-like picture of Auschwitz—proved an immense challenge for Jakubowska. In the essay quoted above, she mentioned several characters and subplots that did not make it to the final draft or were marginalized in a desperate attempt to keep the length of the film under two hours. She commented frankly that the whole subplot dealing with children in Auschwitz was reduced to just three brief scenes: the girl with a ball, the children's transport going to the gas, and the image of the girl's toy among other belongings left by the victims. Already at the script stage Jakubowska was shortening or eliminating dialogue, and she was forced to make additional cuts later, during



Publicity still. A scene from Birkenau's *Revier*. Barbara Fijewska as Anielka (*second from the right*) taking care of her sick sister, Urszula (Maria Redlichówna). Author's collection.

the shooting and editing process. For example, in the scene showing the brutal interrogation of the Russian doctor Eugenia, she reduced the dialogue and replaced it with music. Occasionally, scenes planned at the script stage, such as the final scene of the liberation of Auschwitz (and some of the film's protagonists), were abandoned during the shooting. The liberation scene was replaced with a hastily edited—and therefore confusing—ending that is featured in the released version of the film. Interestingly, the script published in 1955 with Jakubowska's introduction also contains scenes and dialogue not present in the released version of the film.⁴⁸

The Birkenau Front Reports

Press reports and the correspondence between Film Polski and Wanda Jakubowska indicate that several differently titled scripts and, later, shooting scripts were developed.⁴⁹ The National Film Archive in Warsaw (Filmoteka Narodowa) is in possession of two early versions of the

script that are not dated and not signed.⁵⁰ Unlike the linear narrative of the released film, the two versions of the script rely on the flashback structure and are also more graphic. The setting of the action (as in the film) is mostly limited to the *Revier* (camp “infirmary”)—the place that, according to Jakubowska, enabled her to “show as many facts as possible.”⁵¹ It was also the place known to Schneider and Jakubowska firsthand. Schneider worked, among other positions, as a *Blockälteste* in the Birkenau *Revier* and Jakubowska briefly as a nurse in Auschwitz I; both also experienced the *Revier* as patients.⁵²

The first, 165-page-long version of the script is titled *The Birkenau Front Reports* (*Odcinek Birkenau melduje*). Its first page lists the names of the protagonists—political prisoners, among them the names that the viewer will find later in the film: Anna, Anielka, Helena, Eugenia, Nadia, Dessa, and Edek. The opening page also provides the actual names of the German perpetrators, the personnel of Auschwitz-Birkenau. The script begins with the scene of a war crime trial in an unnamed German town. Eleven German functionaries from Auschwitz are indicted for war crimes and stand trial, among them characters that will appear later in the released version of the film, including Maria Mandel (who was from October 1942 to November 1944 the *SS-Lagerführerin*, or superintendent of the women’s camp) and Margot Drechsler (*SS-Rapportführerin*, or reporting officer; in historical accounts also spelled Drexler). The Auschwitz female survivor Anielka begins her testimony.⁵³

Jakubowska and Schneider employ in the script the original testimony of Dr. Ada (Hadassah) Bimko from a trial in the German town of Lüneburg (September 17–November 17, 1945). Dr. Bimko, a Jewish-Polish woman from the town of Sosnowiec in southern Poland, was sent to Auschwitz on August 4, 1943. She spent fifteen months in Auschwitz and five months in Belsen. After the war, she served as one of the principal witnesses for the prosecution at the trial of Nazi German war criminals held by the British Military Tribunal in Lüneburg. This was the so-called “Belsen Trial,” or “The Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-Four Others.” Since many of the captured SS staff of Bergen-Belsen had worked in Auschwitz-Birkenau (Kramer was the *Lagerführer* of Birkenau from May to November 1944) before their transfer to Bergen-Belsen, the trial also dealt with the extermination methods at Auschwitz. During their research before making the film, Jakubowska and Schneider interviewed

several former SS guards, including Maria Mandel, and studied the documents related to the Nuremberg and Lüneburg trials and the trial of Rudolf Höss in Poland.⁵⁴

In the script, an attorney for one of the defendants questions Anielka's testimony, which triggers her flashback into the past. The bulk of the remaining script consists of Anielka's story and her return to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The flashback opens with a group of female prisoners entering Birkenau, awaited by the camp commandant Müller, who is accompanied by the senior female overseer Drechsler and the SS guards. Their faces are described in the script as "fat, obstinate, and repulsive" (p. 2). Another scene introduces an image that later appears in the film: a roll call in front of the barracks featuring a terrified multinational crowd of prisoners. As in the final version of the film, some Polish female prisoners are portrayed as negative characters who are not compassionate when another Polish woman, Helena, is giving birth. Only the narrator, Anielka, is ready to help her.

The script also introduces images of a graphic nature, arguably too challenging to be accepted by the Polish authorities or by postwar audiences. These include explicit images of hunger in the camp and depictions that illustrate how Helena's child died at night, killed by rats. This particular situation is described in several historical accounts. For example, Irena Strzelecka in her study about Auschwitz hospitals writes that "hospital rooms were infested with fleas and lice. In Birkenau, the hospitals swarmed with rats. At night they gnawed at the bodies of dead prisoners, even attacking the unconscious and weakest patients."⁵⁵ In *Testimony from the Nazi Camps: French Women's Voices*, Margaret-Anne Hutton tells of a French woman who gave birth to a child who "was hidden from sight but killed by a rat soon after birth, precipitating the suicide of its mother."⁵⁶

The script, however, not only depicts the inhuman conditions at Auschwitz but also (as in the released film) stresses the importance of prisoners' solidarity and the role of the communist resistance in Auschwitz. The prisoners help Helena, who is transferred to the *Revier*. One of the heroic characters, the political prisoner Kostek, helps the prisoners with medications and cigarettes, and he also "summarizes the political news" (pp. 12–13). Another member of the antifascist resistance at Auschwitz, German communist prisoner Anna Koch, distinguishes herself

as a courageous and dignified person whose face and whole demeanor make her unique.

Even though Alina Madej argues that Anna's prototype was communist prisoner Anna Blumauer (killed in December 1943), her camp number 586 indicates clearly that she was modeled on Gerda Schneider. Anna is the camp *Lagerälteste* (senior prisoner in charge of daily operations, implementing the commandant's orders), who defends Polish women tormented by other German female prisoner-functionaries. She is a devoted and fearless communist who is not afraid to ask commandant Müller to improve cleanliness and sanitary conditions in the camp because "the epidemic doesn't ask if one is German and what uniform one is wearing" (p. 21). Asked by Müller why she is in the camp, she proudly answers that she is a communist and has been a prisoner for eight years, which matches Schneider's own biography as well. The Germans treat Anna in a respectful manner; fellow prisoners are fearful of her but they respect her. "I cannot take it anymore. I've been suffering for the whole eight years," says Anna to another prisoner, Steffi (p. 25). Anna is also full of indescribable contempt for Lalunia, a negative Polish character who pretends to be a doctor and is put in charge of the infirmary, thus endangering the lives of fellow prisoners. Because of Lalunia's denunciation, Anna is later arrested and brutally interrogated. Lalunia herself faces camp justice later when she is killed by two German *Kapos* "with faces typical for criminal types" (p. 142).

The character of Jewish-Polish Marta appears late in the script, on page 29. Unlike in the film, in the script she does not translate after the arrival of her transport since the commanding German officer delivers a speech in perfect Polish to the arriving group. She is sent to the "group of life" by the SS guard, whom she addresses in German. Later she learns that her entire family was killed. As in the film, Marta's execution features prominently in the script, although not as the final scene (pp. 159–61). Standing on the gallows, Marta shouts to her fellow prisoners: "Female comrades! Don't fear! They cannot do anything to you. Their rule is nearing the end. Keep going! Don't fear!" She cuts her veins and hits the *Lagerkommandant* in the face. Her heroic last moments are juxtaposed with her dying vision of the incoming planes, the bombing of the camp, and the images of advancing tanks (perhaps the vision of the Soviet offensive?).

Throughout the script there are several references to the Jewish plight: images of selections to the gas (pp. 35, 51–52); the presence of heavy smoke over the crematoria (p. 106); a transport of Jewish children walking toward the crematoria (p. 106); the flames from the chimneys that “lit the whole area” (p. 140). This early version of the script also describes the inhumane conditions in the camp controlled by drunken SS guards, including “the mud that freezes around the legs” (p. 50), and the idea that “the whole camp makes an impression of a madhouse” (p. 48).

The script features many situations and characters present in the film; it includes the heroic ordeal of Dessa and other Yugoslav female partisans (p. 108) but, unlike the film, also depicts Helena’s death as she runs in despair toward the gate and is shot by the guard. The last scene of the script shows the evacuation of prisoners from Auschwitz—the so-called death march—with Anielka in the center. After Anielka’s extended flashback, the script ends with the return to the trial scene. Anielka looks at the accused SS functionaries and addresses the judge: “This is only a fragment of the truth about the women’s concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau” (p. 165), in a way offering Jakubowska and Schneider’s own explanation for making the film, which appears in the film’s opening credits.

Auschwitz-Birkenau

The second preserved version of the script, titled *Auschwitz-Birkenau* (Oświęcim-Brzezinka), is shorter (113 pages) and more compact. The credits feature a multinational aspect of Auschwitz. Listed among the characters are, among others, Marta Weiss who is described as Slovakian-Jewish, another brave German communist Anna (this time Anna Schmidt), a group of Russian prisoners including Eugenia, Nadia, and Marusia, a Czech, Steffi Kudowa, a Yugoslav partisan, Dessa, the Poles Kostek and Edek, and a French woman Mimi.

The story opens with a scene of the evacuation of Auschwitz—a march of female prisoners from the camp. The initial dialogue effectively captures the intentions of Jakubowska and Schneider, and shows how the script evolved and incorporated the politics of the day (pp. 2–3). One of the prisoners says that Birkenau was reportedly liberated this morning and adds: “The SS defend themselves in **our** Auschwitz” (emphasis



The *Revier*. Russian prisoner-doctor Eugenia (Tatiana Górecka), German prisoner Anna (Antonina Górecka), and the SS doctor or *Lagerarzt* (Edward Dziewoński). Author's collection.

added).⁵⁷ A Polish prisoner, Anielka, responds: “Who is going to believe that Auschwitz did exist, since for us, today, it seems to be a nightmarish dream?” The Russian nurse Marusia agrees: “Yes, exactly, who’s going to believe; who’ll be able to listen to us? They will call us crazy.” An anonymous voice from the crowd utters: “But Auschwitz is a fact!” Another Polish woman, Helena, comments: “Auschwitz should teach the world a lesson, because Auschwitz is the most essential truth about fascism. About fascism as it essentially is, plain and without a mask. We already know how to detect Hitler’s helpers not only in the SS uniforms, but also among us” (p. 3). The last comment perhaps is a chilling reminder of the time of show trials within the communist bloc and the search for fascists, imperialist spies, and saboteurs not only among the general population, but also within the communist ranks.

Also on page 3, one of the prisoners asks: “Tell me what shall be done to make them believe?” Marusia’s answer, in a way resembling Jakubowska’s own conviction, is: “First of all one has to make films.” The French woman Mimi and others tell their stories. Anna Schmidt narrates Gerda Schneider’s story about the nine years of incarceration in different prisons and camps: “Barbed wire and iron bars, iron bars and barbed wire until the barbed wire and the gate of Birkenau” (p. 4). Anna has Schneider’s camp number 586 and also came to Birkenau in 1942. With the Russian prisoner-doctor Eugenia she is at the center of the Auschwitz

resistance: heroic, full of disgust for the “Hitlerites,” and not afraid of the *Kommandant*. This is Anna, not Eugenia as is later presented in the film, who is persecuted and suffers in the “bunker”—the punishment cell in Block 11, known as “the death block” (p. 106).

The script once more relies on the flashback structure. It introduces female prisoners of several nationalities, among them the pregnant Helena Ostrowska, a female worker from Warsaw who gives birth to a child in the camp, but loses it during a night battle with rats (p. 8). There is also the Czech, Steffi, a *Blockowa* active in the underground, and Anielka Ciechowska from the Warsaw transport who is assigned 24123 as a number, the first number of the actual November train transport from Warsaw. Once again the Jewish-Polish Marta is introduced later, on page 24, when after being transported to Auschwitz, she is separated by the SS from her family. She also dies tragically. During her execution, she repeats the same words from the first version of the script (p. 108) and has a dying vision of the liberation: the incoming planes and the advancing tanks (p. 109).

The script also offers several comments on different nationalities, some bordering on stereotyping (interestingly, the words “Jews” [Żydzi] or “Jewish women” [Żydówki] are not capitalized, which is the standard practice in Polish language). For example, there is the following comment about French and Russian prisoners: “The French women were physically weak. They were freezing terribly, the marches tired them. But they had developed an instinct and a will to fight. The Russian women were stronger and more resilient, but confused, not understanding the reality” (p. 44).

The last scene of the script returns to the framing story and focuses on female prisoners during the evacuation of the camp—the death march. Anielka, Dessa, Marusia, and other inmates encounter the advancing Soviet tanks, and their wartime nightmare is over (p. 113).

As stated earlier, in light of the remaining documents it is difficult to argue when the two versions of the script were written and, therefore, exactly how the scriptwriting process evolved. Jakubowska submitted two copies of the shooting script to the Production Department of Film Polski on January 13, 1947, and this version had been subjected to numerous revisions as well.⁵⁸

CHAPTER 3

Return to Auschwitz

The Making of the Holocaust Classic

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

—WANDA JAKUBOWSKA

Poland after 1945

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

returned from Germany to Soviet-liberated (and -occupied) Poland, including former concentration camp prisoners, POWs, and slave workers. That number reached 1.6 million before the end of 1947.²

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Screening "Nazis" in Polish Postwar Cinema

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shooting in Auschwitz

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



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

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

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

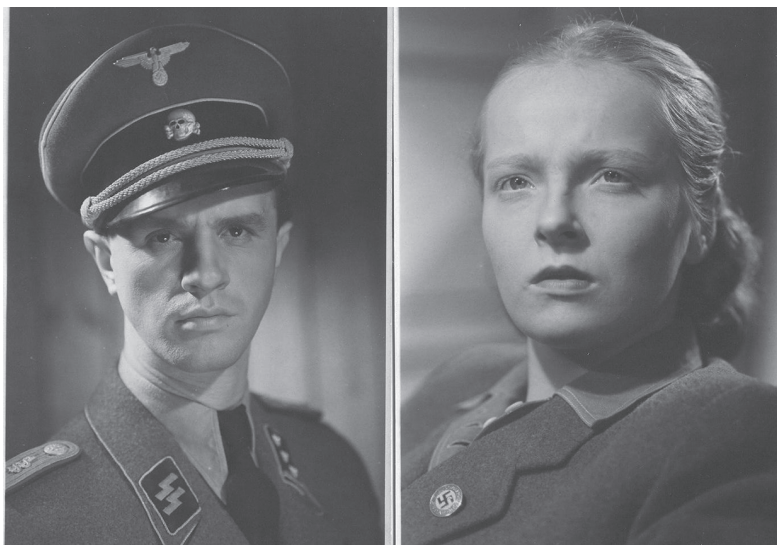
Immediately after the war, Auschwitz served as a POW camp for former German soldiers and as a detention center for ethnic Germans living in Poland (so-called *Volksdeutsche*) and for many Upper Silesians and inhabitants of the Bielsko-Biała region who, in many cases, had been pressured during the war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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

work on location was done between July 5 and 15, 1947; and filming took place from July 7 to September 28, 1947.⁴⁰

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

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

written by Szmaglewska and published toward the end of 1945, was even added as evidence by the International Tribunal in Nuremberg in February 1946. Szmaglewska, who was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1942 and escaped during its evacuation in January 1945 (camp number 22090), also testified during the Nuremberg Trial. Jakubowska undoubtedly was familiar with those renowned and much-publicized books, although given her left-wing sympathies, most probably she did not share their depoliticized—albeit accusatory—view of the camp. In addition, in conducting her research, Jakubowska was arguably also aware of the first historical study on Auschwitz-Birkenau, published by Jan Sehn in 1946.⁴⁴

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

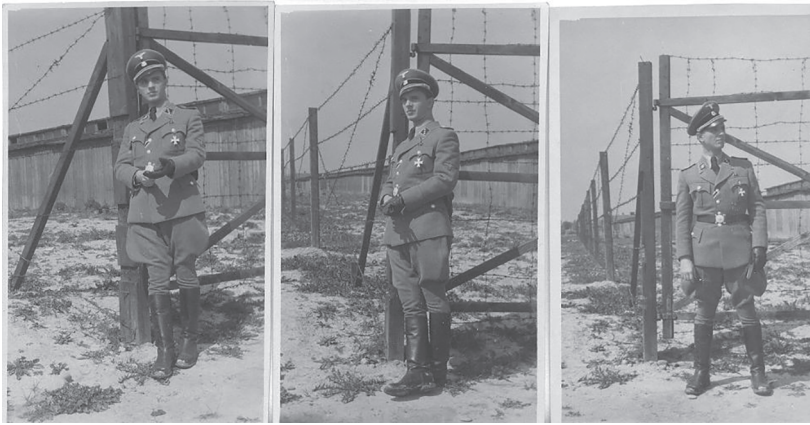


On the film set. From the left: Maria Kaniewska (*Raportführerin*), Edward Dziewoński (*Lagerarzt*), Wanda Jakubowska, Janina Marisówna (*Aufseherin*), Aleksandra Ślaska (*Oberaufseherin*). Edward Dziewoński archive. Courtesy Roman Dziewoński.

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

Working closely with her editor Pstrokońska, Jakubowska cut the film from 3,600 to 2,800 meters.⁸⁸ The released film lasted 104 minutes (2,874 meters) and this version is preserved in the Polish Film Archives (Filmoteka Narodowa). It has been distributed on video and DVD by Polart Video in America. American (and probably Western European) audiences often watched different versions of the film: a 110-minute version (3,011 meters) released in 1949, and a 122-minute version (3,365 meters) shown in 1996.⁸⁹

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

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

CHAPTER 4

The Film and Its Reception

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

hind his desk and talking to nurse Anna. In the next scene the *Lagerarzt* kills Helena's baby by an intracardiac phenol injection, a routine practice with newborn children in Auschwitz until June 1943.¹⁰

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

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

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

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

Aesthetic Issues

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The “Nazis”

To enhance the authenticity of her film, Jakubowska from the start intended to secure German actors to play the Auschwitz personnel. She had already indicated her intention of casting Germans for the German parts in a letter to Film Polski in January 1946.²⁶ Her efforts to cast German actors were definitively rejected in May 1947. Responding to the decision of the Production Department of Film Polski, Jakubowska

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

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

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

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

Interestingly, although for today’s viewers *The Last Stage* arguably offers almost cartoonish images of “the Nazis,”³¹ their representation was

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

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

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

Female Prisoners’ Solidarity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Premiere

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The French and American Premieres

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Former Prisoners Review the Film

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 5

Fighting Auschwitz

The Heroic Account of the Camp

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

—WANDA JAKUBOWSKA

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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 Drapieżka), 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, Belżec, 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 "atrocities 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.

The Legacy of Wanda Jakubowska

After years of critical neglect in her native country, Wanda Jakubowska's films and her role in Polish postwar cinema have been recently reevaluated from a feminist perspective by Monika Talarczyk-Gubała.¹ In books on Polish cinema, Jakubowska's name is almost exclusively associated with *The Last Stage*. The silence over her later films has to do largely with her staunch involvement with communist ideology (she was a dedicated communist throughout her entire life, even after the collapse of communism), which resulted in some painfully didactic and propagandistic films promoting the communist cause.

Some of Jakubowska's films are classic examples of blatant communist propaganda, and as such were praised and awarded prizes immediately after their release, while becoming objects of ridicule for some contemporary viewers. One example, *The Soldier of Victory* (*Żołnierz zwycięstwa*, 1953), the two-part epic film about Soviet-Polish general Karol Świerczewski, covers a span of forty years, beginning with the revolution of 1905; introduces historical figures, including Stalin and the Cheka (Soviet secret police) founder Dzerzhinsky; and portrays a multitude of then current political topics that are unapologetically presented from the Stalinist perspective.

Jakubowska's Later Returns to Auschwitz

It has to be noted that later in her career Jakubowska returned to her camp experiences in three films: *Meetings in the Twilight* (*Spotkania*

w mroku, 1960), *The End of Our World*, and *Invitation* (*Zaproszenie*, 1985).² These films, rarely seen and often neglected in discussions of the filmic representation of the Holocaust, are set in the present and rely on the flashback structure to tell the story of Auschwitz. All three films were scripted by Jakubowska, and they feature familiar characters and situations: concentration camp survivors, mostly communists, strong-willed professionals who are unable to free themselves from the shadow of their wartime experiences. Jakubowska's films also contain explicit denunciation of fascism, praise of human solidarity, as well as criticism of Western-style consumerism and the "tourist" approach to life.

In the Polish–East German production *Meetings in the Twilight*, made at the peak of the Polish School phenomenon and filmed by Kurt Weber, Jakubowska developed a contemporary story with wartime references. Based on *Let Us Shout* (*Pozwólcie nam krzyżeć*), a novel by Stanisława Fleszarowa-Muskat (who also served as coscriptwriter), the film introduces a Polish pianist, Magdalena (Zofia Słaboszowska), who, while performing in West Germany, remembers her imprisonment in a labor camp.

The main character in *Invitation*, Anna Górska, is a successful, self-sacrificing pediatrician. After she meets her first love, Piotr (Kazimierz Witkiewicz), they travel together to places she cannot erase from her memory: Auschwitz, Sachsenhausen, and Ravensbrück. It is not a coincidence that Anna is played by Antonina Gordon-Górecka, who earlier appeared as the German nurse Anna in *The Last Stage*.

The End of Our World is arguably the most accomplished of all Jakubowska's later camp films. She made this film in the mid-1960s, when Auschwitz became widely known in the West as the site of Jewish extermination. The film was made after the capture of Adolf Eichmann by Israeli Mossad agents in Argentina, his historic trial in 1961, and his conviction and execution in Jerusalem. The film also coincided with the much publicized Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial of twenty-two SS guards from Auschwitz (1963–65). Notwithstanding the lack of official diplomatic relations between West Germany and Poland, the Polish authorities assisted the Frankfurt investigation; for example, they allowed the German judge and other officials to inspect the site of the concentration camp at Auschwitz.

For the world, the meaning of Auschwitz had broadened in the 1960s

from that of an Eastern and Central European emblem of German atrocities and a place hidden behind the Iron Curtain and used for propaganda purposes to a site of international significance and the symbol of the Holocaust. Despite the Polish state award for Jakubowska, her film was barely noticed by critics and (particularly) audiences in Poland; it also remained virtually unknown in the West.

The End of Our World is based on the 1958 novel of the same title by writer and communist political activist Tadeusz Hołuj (1916–1985), who is also cast in the film. This was one of Hołuj’s several returns to his own experiences in Auschwitz, where he was imprisoned in 1942 (camp number 62937). Jakubowska and Hołuj, however, were not the only Auschwitz survivors who worked on this film. Assistant to the camera operator Wiesław Kielar and costume designer Marian Kołodziej (camp numbers 290 and 432 respectively) were sent to Auschwitz in May 1940 with the first transport of 728 Polish men, mostly political prisoners, from the Tarnów prison.³

The End of Our World focuses on a former (communist) political prisoner at Auschwitz, Henryk (Lech Skolimowski). Several years after the war, he becomes a reluctant guide at the camp for two American tourists—a young woman named Julia, whose father perished there, and her male companion, who is reduced in the film to an almost cartoonish “Western character” familiar from communist propaganda, thanks to his ignorance and his lack of compassion.

Henryk’s presence at the State Museum in Auschwitz brings back his own camp memories. The film depicts Henryk being captured on the streets of Warsaw for helping a Polish mother and her child who were being mistreated by a German policeman. For this deed, he is sent to Auschwitz.

Unusual for Jakubowska, the initial scenes at Auschwitz resemble the representation of the camp by Borowski.⁴ The stress is on the monstrous aspect of camp life, which would later be more fully developed in Leszek Wosiewicz’s *Kornblumenblau* (1989). *The End of Our World* depicts Henryk’s miraculous survival as a *Muselman*, his brush with death, the help he receives from other inmates (mostly political prisoners), and the change of his camp identity.

The second part of the film is more conventional and utilizes elements of melodrama coupled with the ideology present in *The Last Stage*. Hen-

ryk learns that his wife Maria (Teresa Wicińska), who was convinced of his death, has married his friend Jan Smolik. Later Smolik is imprisoned at Auschwitz, where he quickly perishes. Maria also finds herself in Auschwitz. Despite Henryk's connections and help, Maria dies with a group of children she is taking care of in the Gypsy Family Camp.

Once again, the most important aspect of Jakubowska's film is the protagonist's gradual involvement with the camp's resistance. Henryk becomes a reluctant *Kapo* at the request of other political prisoners. With a hidden camera, he captures images of extermination inside the camp. He even helps the Jewish *Sonderkommando* to destroy the crematoria, and later participates in the *Sonderkommando*'s uprising on October 7, 1944.

Writing about Henryk's heroic exploits, Hanno Loewy rightly states that "Jakubowska is turning the history of the camp's resistance upside down."⁵ The heroic version of the Auschwitz resistance was, however, strongly advocated not only by Jakubowska, but also by scriptwriter Hołuj, for whom "the camp had fought and won the battle. Auschwitz was not only martyrology, but struggle as well."⁶ Hołuj defended this way of representing the camp by saying that "the issue of the camp resistance was shown in the film well, faithfully, and truthfully, albeit sometimes not in line with the fixed ideas [about the camp]." He admitted that the history of the *Sonderkommando* uprising proved to be the most difficult to represent: "We don't have a single witness of the very uprising itself. However, recently uncovered documents from the rubble of the crematoria confirm the whole process of preparations [for the uprising]."⁷ Hołuj emphasized that a framework was needed to link the first scene—Henryk defending a Polish mother—with the scene when the protagonist helps those who "fight alone."⁸ The symbolic image of a communist Pole helping Jewish insurgents in their suicidal fight, although distorting the historical reality, was one the communist state as well as the makers of the film wanted to preserve and to elevate.

Stylistically, Jakubowska utilizes a similar set of images to that which she developed in *The Last Stage*. She cuts from the shot of a Jewish transport to a long shot of smoke over the crematoria. She also portrays the women's orchestra playing classical music near the gate leading to the camp. Furthermore, she stresses the multinational aspect of the camp (several languages are spoken, including Polish, German, Russian, Yid-

dish, Slovak, Roma, and Italian), and portrays the political (mostly communist) prisoners at Auschwitz as heroic members of the resistance.

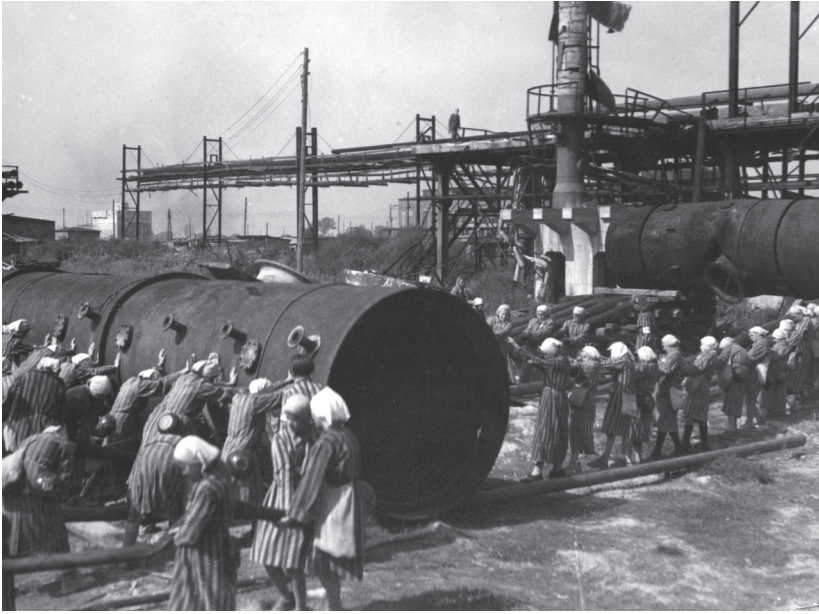
Since the main protagonist is a well-connected *Kapo*, he moves relatively freely within the camp, enabling the viewer to witness the different subcamps of Auschwitz. Jakubowska uses archival footage as well, such as photographs of Jewish transports taken inside the camp. In addition, she models some scenes on remaining documentary photographs.

The Eyewitness Testimony?

Discussing the reception of Jakubowska's film in America, Steven Alan Carr aptly points out that the emphasis on production details, an important part of the publicity machine, added an element that is now a staple in Holocaust cinema. He argues that "such production history lore became part of the discursive practice for Holocaust films such as *Schindler's List* (1993) and *The Pianist* (2002), where the 'making-of' history for these films became history in its own right. Even if the historical factors concerning the making of these films remained subordinate to actual Holocaust history, in its relation to the Holocaust, such details and use of location bestowed added credibility to what might otherwise serve as an ordinary fictional account of the Holocaust."⁹

Jakubowska was aware of the impact of her film on future filmmakers: "Before shooting their films they probably had to watch *The Last Stage* and treat this film as documentation."¹⁰ Without a doubt, Jakubowska's imprisonment at Auschwitz and her postwar on-location shooting with the participation of other Auschwitz survivors granted extra trustworthiness to her portrayal of the camp. Soon after its premiere, *The Last Stage* started to function not only as a para-documentary film, as Jakubowska intended, but as a genuine testimonial document. Increasingly, images from *The Last Stage* became incorporated as quasi-documents into several films to follow. In *Night and Fog*, directed by Alain Resnais, there are two scenes taken without proper acknowledgment from Jakubowska's film: the scene of a train with Jewish prisoners arriving at night to awaiting SS men with their dogs, and the image of a truck transporting victims to the gas chamber.

Another film, George Stevens's classic *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959), incorporates a scene from Jakubowska's film: images of the *Appel*-



The Last Stage: representation of slave work at Auschwitz. Author's collection.

platz showing closeups of women prisoners “waving” during the roll call. This nightmarish dream scene depicting the concentration camp, the only one in the entire film, is uncredited in Stevens’s film. The fragment taken from *The Last Stage* functions in *The Diary of Anne Frank* as documentary footage. According to Steven Alan Carr, this is one of the first scenes in Hollywood cinema with explicit references to a concentration camp. Interestingly, as Carr explains, even in the 2003 DVD edition of the film, which features commentaries by George Stevens, Jr. (the film’s associate producer), and Millie Perkins (who stars as Anne Frank), the origins of the camp scene are never revealed.¹¹

Several scenes and images from Jakubowska’s film influenced numerous Hollywood films, including *The Pawnbroker* (1964, Sydney Lumet), *Sophie’s Choice*, and *Schindler’s List*. Stuart Liebman also points out that “in 1995 Steven Spielberg incorporated shots of the selection and the work brigades in his hour-long promotional television program for his ‘Survivors of the Holocaust’ project without any acknowledgment that these were Jakubowska’s fictional reconstructions and not documentary images.”¹² Jakubowska’s film also had an impact on Zica Mitrovic’s West

German–Yugoslav coproduction *Witness from Hell* (*Die Zeugin aus der Hölle*, 1967), a story about Leah Weiss (played by Irene Papas), a former Auschwitz inmate forced into prostitution and later a victim of medical experiments. Here, once again, images from *The Last Stage* serve as Leah's repressed memories—she, however, refuses to testify in a trial (the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial, 1963–65) and commits suicide.

The Passenger

The impact of Jakubowska's film has also been discernible in Polish films, chiefly in a classic film by Andrzej Munk, *The Passenger* (*Pasażerka*, 1961–63).¹³ The film is based on the story by Zofia Posmysz-Piasecka, who was incarcerated in Auschwitz from 1942 to 1945. Her radio broadcast, *The Passenger from Cabin Number 45* (*Pasażerka z kabiny 45*), aired on Polish radio on August 28, 1959. Munk, who listened to the broadcast, asked Posmysz-Piasecka to write a television play, which he later directed.

At the center of *The Passenger* is the relationship between the German SS woman at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Liza (Aleksandra Śląska), and the Polish inmate, Marta (Anna Ciepiewska). Years after the war, a chance meeting between the two on a luxury liner heading from South America to Europe brings back memories of the suppressed past. Munk decided to abandon the contemporary dimensions of the literary source and to focus on the past, which is revealed in his film in three powerful retrospectives.

The first flashback from Auschwitz, the uncontrolled flow of Liza's repressed memories, includes both moving images and archival stills, among them images of naked female prisoners tormented by SS guards and *Kapos*, Alsatian shepherds sitting as if ready to attack, SS dog handlers walking along an electrified barbed-wire fence, a group of prisoners pulling a road roller, and a female prisoner being tattooed. Liza explains her strange behavior to her new husband Walter by admitting that she was an overseer in Auschwitz, not an inmate. Liza's attempt at explaining the past to her husband, but also to herself, introduces another flashback, this time much longer and stressing her sense of duty: quasi-documentary images of the camp after the gassing of one of the transports (the main gate leading to the camp, the railway, the barbed-wire fence, belongings left by the victims). The panning camera stops in front of the crema-

torium and tilts to reveal heavy black smoke from its chimneys. Liza's commentary describes her duties in the camp, her professionalism and devotion to the cause, and her version of the relationship with Marta, whom she chose to be her clerical help. Liza tries to distance herself from crimes committed in Auschwitz, although she admits being a witness of mass killings. She comments that she only supervised a gigantic storage space, *Effektenkammer*, where goods seized from killed victims were collected and catalogued. The third flashback reveals Liza's true role in the camp. From behind a fence separating the *Effektenkammer* from the crematorium, she watches the newly arrived Jewish transport walking toward the gas chamber, which is covered in black smoke. She observes two SS men on the roof of the gas chamber. One of them, wearing a gas mask, opens a canister with Zyklon B and methodically dumps it into the killing zone through ventilation openings.

Bolesław W. Lewicki—who shared the sentiments of a large group of local critics and scholars—persuasively argued in a 1968 essay that *The Passenger* functions as a polemic with Jakubowska's *The Last Stage*.¹⁴ Undeniably, there are several elements that justify such a comparison. In both films, the perpetrator is played by Aleksandra Śląska; but unlike her *Oberaufseherin* in Jakubowska's film, in *The Passenger* she no longer plays a pathological sadist but a psychologically complex individual, a part of the killing industry. Like Marta Weiss in Jakubowska's film, Munk's Marta is a privileged prisoner who performs a similar function in the camp's structure. Both Martas are also part of the resistance (left-wing in Jakubowska's work, unspecified in Munk's film), and they smuggle information about Auschwitz to the outside world. Both have lovers in the camp named Tadeusz (Tadek). Unlike Marta Weiss, Marta in *The Passenger* is Polish, and there is no indication that it was planned otherwise at an earlier stage despite Munk's Jewish background and story of survival. (Munk survived the occupation in Warsaw where he did not reveal his Jewish ancestry and worked on the "Aryan side.")

Similar to Jakubowska, Munk (in his own words) had to "solve a difficult problem—how to show Auschwitz without depicting its realistic dimension. . . . A realistic portrayal would be unbearable."¹⁵ Like Jakubowska, he does not show the process of killing graphically. Instead, he relies on images that he singled out for emphasis in his last interview, conducted on 18 September 1961, and published after his tragic death:

“masses of female prisoners, groups of naked people, small baby carriages, barbed wires, and posts.”¹⁶ Like Jakubowska, in *The Passenger* Munk deemphasizes the issue of nationality. His film features images of the Jewish transport walking toward gas chambers and the search for a hidden Jewish newborn in Liza’s *kommando*, but its focus is on political prisoners, mostly Poles. Jews are relegated to the role of passive victims.

Unlike Jakubowska, Munk relies on diegetic sounds of the camp and on the almost surreal, yet historically accurate, diegetic music—for example, the march from *Carmen* by Bizet, which is played by the Auschwitz orchestra near the gate leading to the camp. The exception is the framework with still photographs, which is illustrated by Tadeusz Baird’s musical score.

Similar to Jakubowska, Munk decided to shoot his film on location at Auschwitz-Birkenau to enhance verisimilitude (he stayed in the commandant’s office), a decision that had an enormous impact on the film’s crew. Like Jakubowska, he was surrounded by people who had experienced Auschwitz firsthand, for example, coscriptwriter Posmysz-Piasecka and production manager Wilhelm Hollender, who had also worked on *The Last Stage* (credited as executive producer).¹⁷ In Andrzej Brzozowski’s documentary tribute to Munk, *The Last Pictures* (*Ostatnie zdjęcia*, Polish Television 2000), actress Ciepielewska commented on the “unbearable noise of the barbed wire” on the set of the film. “I’m listening to Bach to calm down,” wrote Munk in a letter to his wife. He was also reading Rudolf Höss’s memoirs, which were published for the first time in Polish in 1956, and this certainly contributed to his portrayal of Liza.¹⁸ The horrors of the not-so-distant past were also emphasized in press reports from the film’s set. One of them (published after Munk’s death) had the following fragment: “On the ground, near the crematorium, there was a small metal object. My guide [Wilhelm Hollender] picked it up carefully. This was an authentic key that was used to open tin canisters with Zyklon B.”¹⁹

In addition to the earlier mentioned *Night and Fog* by Alan Resnais, images from Jakubowska’s film are also recycled in other documentary films, such as Leo Hurwitz’s *The Museum and the Fury* (U.S.–Poland, 1956), another essay on memory and the representation of memory that was produced for Film Polski but never distributed in Poland; and Al-

lan Holzman's *Survivors of the Holocaust* (1996), which blends survivor testimonies with archival footage.

Images from Jakubowska's narrative film, such as the arrival of a train, roll calls, the muddy terrain of the camp, the smoke over the crematoria, and barbed wire, have been appropriated as authentic, documentary images. Sometimes, as Hanno Loewy rightly observes, "in many of these films the arrival of the train (and its white steam) is immediately connected with the dark smoke, coming from the crematoria."²⁰ Images from *The Last Stage*, writes Loewy, are used by other directors "to authenticate their own visions, as others did with newsreel material or photographs."²¹

Writing about the adoption of images from Jakubowska's film, Steven Alan Carr points out eloquently:

The subsequent appropriation of the film's iconography, together with the mystification of its provenance, ultimately work to enhance the film's authenticity as a mystical black and white document that somehow managed to emerge from the ashes of Auschwitz so that other films could show us how terrible life was in a concentration camp. Like a dream sequence itself, iconography from *The Last Stage* slips in and out of other Holocaust films, leaving the audience to imagine its footage as actuality, and to wake up to subsequently less authentic and more comfortably fictionalized representations of the Holocaust.²²

The arrival of a train under the cover of night, the roll call in front of the barracks, the smoke above the crematoria chimneys, a prisoner approaching the electrified barbed wire, and several other shots from Jakubowska's film function today as quasi-archival images. Scholars often pose the question of whether these images from *The Last Stage* were employed by Alain Resnais and other filmmakers due to the absence of the original footage or, given Jakubowska's own Auschwitz experience, as actual "testimonial material."²³

Indeed, *The Last Stage* can be taken as Jakubowska's eyewitness account, but also as a testimony to postwar politics and the pressure of communist ideology. Despite Jakubowska's often voiced desire for authenticity and the semi-autobiographical (and quasi-documentary) nature of her film, her fervent embrace of the communist ideology resulted in a

politicized image of Auschwitz—more a testament to postwar politics and Stalinist principles in the arts than to the harsh reality of the camp.

Despite this criticism, I must ultimately agree with Jan Alfred Szczepański, who in 1964 reviewed *The End of Our World* and stated that regardless of their filmic value, the Auschwitz films by Jakubowska would always serve as a point of reference for other camp films.²⁴ Often overlooked but invaluable, *The Last Stage* may, in this sense, be the most important Polish film.

NOTES

Introduction

1. Peter Hayes, "Auschwitz, Capital of the Holocaust," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 17, no. 2 (2003): 330–50.

2. Marek Haltof, *Polish Film and the Holocaust: Politics and Memory* (New York: Berghahn, 2012).

3. Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 20.

4. Wanda Jakubowska, "Kilka wspomnień o powstaniu scenariusza (na marginesie filmu *Ostatni etap*)," *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 1 (1951): 40.

5. Krystyna Żywulska, "Nareszcie film," *Odrodzenie* 12 (21 March 1948): 8. Unless stated otherwise, all the translations from the Polish texts quoted throughout this book are mine.

6. Stuart Liebman, "Pages from the Past: Wanda Jakubowska's *The Last Stop* (*Ostatni etap*)," *Slavic and East European Performance* 16, no. 3 (1996): 62.

7. Bolesław Lewicki, *Wiesz, jak jest* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Łódzkie, 1974), 138.

8. Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows*; Ilan Avisar, *Screening the Holocaust: Cinema's Images of the Unimaginable* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Omer Bartov, *The "Jew" in Cinema: From Golem to Don't Touch My Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

9. For example, Liebman, "Pages from the Past"; Hanno Loewy, "The Mother of All Holocaust Films? Wanda Jakubowska's Auschwitz Trilogy," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 24, no. 2 (2004): 179–204.

10. Monika Talarczyk-Gubała, *Wanda Jakubowska: Od nowa* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2015).

11. For example, Alina Madej, "Wanda Jakubowska: Jak powstawał *Ostatni etap*," *Kino* 5 (1998): 13–17; Tadeusz Lubelski, "Generalissimus płakał," *Film* 18–19 (1990): 3–4.

12. Bartov, *The "Jew" in Cinema*, 169.

13. Béla Balázs, "The Last Stop," in "Béla Balázs on Wanda Jakubowska's *The Last Stop*: Three Texts," trans. Stuart Liebman and Zsuzsa Berger, *Slavic and East European Performance* 16, no. 3 (1996): 64. The unpublished essay is deposited in the Balázs archives, Budapest, Hungary.]

14. Jan Nepomucyn Miller, "Nowy etap polskiego filmu," *Warszawa: Niezależny Dwutygodnik Literacki* 4 (1948): 1; Ryszard Matuszewski, "Martwy punkt polskiego kina—przełamany," *Kuźnica* 15 (1948): 5; and Aleksander Kulisiewicz, "Triumf polskiej kinematografii," *Film* 6 (1948): 10.

15. Marta Wróbel, “*Ostatni etap* Wandy Jakubowskiej jako pierwszy etap polskiego kina ideologicznego,” *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 43 (2003): 7.

16. Krzysztof Kucharski, *Kino plus. Film i dystrybucja kinowa w Polsce w latach 1990–2000* (Toruń: Oficyna Wydawnicza Kucharski, 2002), 388. It is necessary to remember that box-office figures in Poland before 1950 are estimated.

17. Maria Kornatowska, “Kto ratuje jedno życie,” *Kino* 10 (1994): 37; Barbara Holender, “Nie można nikogo nauczyć żyć,” *Rzeczpospolita* 11 (1997): 25.

18. For comments on the history of Oświęcim/Auschwitz, see Debórah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt, *Auschwitz, 1270 to the Present* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996).

19. Franciszek Piper, “Estimating the Number of Deportees to and Victims of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Camp,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 21 (1991): 49–103.

20. Martin Gilbert’s estimates are quoted from Jonathan Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration, 1945–1979* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), 20.

21. Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

22. *Ibid.*, viii. Snyder writes that “of the fourteen million people deliberately murdered in the bloodlands between 1933 and 1945, a third belong in the Soviet account” (x).

23. *Ibid.*, viii.

24. Timothy Snyder, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2015), 207.

25. Timothy Snyder, “Holocaust: The Ignored Reality,” *New York Review of Books* 56, no. 12 (2009): 14.

26. *Ibid.*, 15.

Chapter 1

Epigraph source: Stuart Liebman, “I Was Always in the Epicenter of Whatever Was Going On: An Interview with Wanda Jakubowska,” *Slavic and East European Performance* 17, no. 3 (1997): 16.

1. This chapter draws on information in three biographical films on Wanda Jakubowska and several interviews with her that are listed in the bibliography. Other important sources include the conversation held with Wanda Jakubowska’s granddaughter, Katarzyna Rudomino, on December 3, 2014, in Warsaw, and Jakubowska’s three-page autobiography, held at the Archive of Modern Files (AAN), Zespół 415, Polski Związek b. Więźniów Politycznych, pp. 30–32.

2. Eugeniusz Cękański (1906–1952), writer-director of documentary and feature films, film industry organizer, author of film textbooks, and teacher at the Łódź Film School. Details in Jolanta Lemann’s monograph, *Eugeniusz Cękański* (Łódź: Muzeum Kinematografii, 1996).

3. Stowarzyszenie Propagandy Filmu Artystycznego START. From 1931 officially known as Stowarzyszenie Miłośników Filmu Artystycznego START.

4. “Film polski na bezdrożach,” *Głos Stolicy* 87 (1932): 5. Quoted from Jadwiga Bocheńska, *Polska myśl filmowa do roku 1939* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1974), 174. See my “Film Theory in Poland before World War II,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 40, nos. 1–2 (1998): 67–78. See also Sheila Skaff’s discussion concerning the START group and

the Polish cinema industry in the 1930s in *The Law of the Looking Glass: Cinema in Poland, 1896–1939* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008): 136–84.

5. Details from Polish film database *Filmpolski.pl: Internetowa baza filmu polskiego* (Łódź: Łódź Film School) (<http://filmpolski.pl/fp/index.php?osoba=115927>). Also, Tadeusz Lubelski, “Dwa debiuty oddzielone w czasie. Rozmowa z Wandą Jakubowską,” in *Debiuty polskiego kina*, ed. Marek Hendrykowski (Konin: Wydawnictwo “Przełęcz Koniński,” 1998), 13.

6. Lubelski, “Dwa debiuty,” 15–16; Barbara Mruklik, “Wierność sobie. Rozmowa z Wandą Jakubowską,” *Kino* 5 (1985): 6–7.

7. Andrzej Czekalski, *Notacja—Wanda Jakubowska* (TVP 1, 1993). Polish Television Archives, SK546. Interestingly, writing about Hitler’s artistic preferences, Sherree Owens Zalampas notes that Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony in the Third Reich was “rejected because it had become an allied victory signal.” Sherree Owens Zalampas, *Adolf Hitler: A Psychological Interpretation of His Views on Architecture, Art, and Music* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Popular Press, 1990), 109.

8. Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak, *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), xv.

9. Liebman, “I Was Always in the Epicenter,” 16.

10. Lubelski, “Dwa debiuty,” 17. Similar comment in Mruklik, “Wierność sobie,” 7.

11. Danuta Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle 1939–1945: From the Archives of the Auschwitz Memorial and the German Federal Archives* (New York: Henry Holt, 1990), 386–87.

12. Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum database (Auschwitz Prisoners Search) at http://en.auschwitz.org/m/index.php?option=com_wrapper&Itemid=31. Several prisoners also died later, in the Ravensbrück camp.

13. Jakubowska’s camp number, 43513, can be verified by some existing camp documents. For example, her name is listed three times in a volume of *Röntgen Krankenhau Auschwitz 18 II 43–18 III 43* (pp. 7, 25, 35), Archiwum Państwowego Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau (APMAB), sygn. D–Au II–5/2, no. 29742. Several sources (including, unfortunately, the hardcover edition of my earlier book, *Polish Film and the Holocaust*) provide an incorrect number (43311). The mistake most probably originated with Stuart Liebman’s (translated) interview with Jakubowska in 1997, during which she commented: “You can see my tattoo, Number 43311” (Liebman, “I Was Always in the Epicenter,” 17).

14. Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle*, 386.

15. *Ibid.*, 29. Konstanty Jagiełło had been imprisoned at Auschwitz since September 22, 1940 (camp number 4007). Assisted by the Auschwitz Combat Group and the resistance network outside the camp, Jagiełło escaped from Auschwitz on June 27, 1944, carrying documents and plans of the camp. Later he became the leader of a resistance group that operated in the vicinity of the camp and provided assistance for escaping prisoners. Jagiełło was killed in an ambush on October 27, 1944. Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle*, 653, 740.

16. APMAB, *Oświadczenia*, vol. 49, p. 87, testimony of Kazimierz Sztemberg (ośw./Sztemberg/1055).

17. APMAB, *Oświadczenia*, vol. 47, p. 64, testimony of Zygmunt Gaudasiński (camp number 9907) concerning the resistance in the camp (ośw./Gaudasiński/148460/992).

18. Information about the Rajsko subcamp can be found in the pioneering study by Anna Zięba, "Podobóz Rajsko," *Zeszyty Oświęcimskie* 9 (1965): 71–102. See also Susanne Heim, *Plant Breeding and Agrarian Research in Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institutes 1933–1945: Calories, Caoutchouc, Careers* (Boston: Springer, 2008), 97–154. For prisoners' accounts, consult Lore Shelley, ed., *Criminal Experiments on Human Beings in Auschwitz and War Research Laboratories: Twenty Women Prisoners' Accounts* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1991).

19. Zięba, "Podobóz Rajsko," 71–72.

20. *Ibid.*, 77.

21. Quoted by Heim, *Plant Breeding and Agrarian Research*, 138.

22. Zięba, "Podobóz Rajsko," 82.

23. *Ibid.*, 81.

24. *Ibid.*, 80.

25. Jakubowska, "Kilka wspomnień o powstaniu scenariusza," 41.

26. See the trial transcript at www.mazal.org/OtherTrials/BelsenTrial/C001.htm. Starostka committed suicide in May 1946.

27. Charlotte Delbo, *Convoy to Auschwitz: Women of the French Resistance* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997), 10.

28. Rudolf Höss, *Death Dealer: The Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz*, trans. Andrew Pollinger, ed. Steven Paskuly (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1992), 239.

29. Heim, *Plant Breeding and Agrarian Research*, 143.

30. Liebman, "I Was Always in the Epicenter," 19.

31. Zięba, "Podobóz Rajsko," 87.

32. Quoted in Heim, *Plant Breeding and Agrarian Research*, 139.

33. Quoted in Shelley, *Criminal Experiments*, 180.

34. APMAB, *Oświadczenia*, vol. 47, p. 64, testimony of Zygmunt Gaudasiński (camp number 9907) concerning the resistance in the camp (ośw./Gaudasiński/148460/992); Józef Garliński, *Fighting Auschwitz: The Resistance Movement in the Concentration Camp* (London: Julian Friedmann, 1975), 129.

35. Nina Gusiewa, "O tym zapomnieć nie wolno," *Zeszyty Oświęcimskie* 5 (1961): 135.

36. AAN, zespół 415, Polski Związek b. Więźniów Politycznych, p. 19, "Protokół przesłuchania kol. Tołłoczko Natalji w sprawie Wandy Jakubowskiej" (August 6, 1949). Jakubowska learned French as a child from her mother and a French governess.

37. *Ibid.*

38. AAN, zespół 415, Polski Związek b. Więźniów Politycznych, p. 23, testimonies of Nina Węgierska and Jadwiga Łampisz.

39. See Stefan Hördler, "Before the Holocaust: Concentration Camp Lichtenburg and the Evolution of the Nazi Camp System," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 25, no. 1 (2011): 100–126.

40. Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle*, 148.

41. Irena Strzelecka, "Oddział kobiety w męskim obozie macierzystym," *Zeszyty Oświęcimskie* 20 (1993): 29.

42. Liebman, "I Was Always in the Epicenter," 20.

43. APMAB, Genowefa Ułan, *Wspomnienia*, vol. 159b, pp. 445–47 (Wsp./Ułan/897).

44. Hermann Langbein, *People in Auschwitz* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2004), 73.

45. APMAB, *Wspomnienia*, vol. 124/125, p. 76, recollections of Antonina Piątkowska “Tośka” (Wsp./Piątkowska/730/165174).
46. Shelley, *Criminal Experiments*, 219.
47. Liebman, “I Was Always in the Epicenter,” 21.
48. AAN, Zespół 415, Polski Związek b. Więźniów Politycznych, pp. 31–32.
49. Stanisław Kłodziński, “Dr Dorota Lorska,” in *Okupacja i medycyna. Czwarty wybór artykułów z Przeglądu Lekarskiego — Oświęcim z lat 1963–1978* (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1979), 23–35.
50. *Ibid.*, 29.
51. AAN, Zespół 415, Polski Związek b. Więźniów Politycznych, p. 32.
52. Andrzej Strzelecki, *Ostatnie dni obozu Auschwitz* (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 1995), 18–19.
53. AAN, Zespół 415, Polski Związek b. Więźniów Politycznych, p. 32.
54. Mruklik, “Wierność sobie,” 8.
55. *Ibid.*, 5.
56. Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle*, 805.
57. Adolf Forbert, “W Oświęcimiu po oswobodzeniu obozu,” *Przegląd Lekarski* 37, no. 1 (1980): 182–84.
58. Czekalski, *Notacja — Wanda Jakubowska*.
59. Madej, “Wanda Jakubowska,” 13.
60. *Ibid.*, 13.

Chapter 2

1. Jakubowska, “Kilka wspomnień o powstaniu scenariusza,” 40.
2. Wanda Jakubowska, letter to Aleksander Ford, head of Film Polski, dated January 5, 1946, p. 1; Alina Madej personal archive. Letters and other documents pertaining to the production of *The Last Stage* were given by Wanda Jakubowska to the Polish film historian Alina Madej in 1994. Some of them were republished (in shorter versions) in Madej, “Wanda Jakubowska,” 14.
3. See, for example, Mruklik, “Wierność sobie,” 7.
4. “Tkwiłam w lagrze do 1948 roku. Rozmowa z Wandą Jakubowską po premierze *Ostatniego etapu*,” *Głos Ludu* 91 (1948). Quoted from Alina Madej, *Kino, władza, publiczność. Kinematografia polska w latach 1944–1949* (Bielsko-Biała: Wydawnictwo Prasa Beskidzka, 2002), 157.
5. The first version of the script is most probably lost, not available in Polish archives.
6. Alina Madej, “Wanda Jakubowska wygrywa ostatni etap,” in *Historia kina polskiego*, ed. Tadeusz Lubelski and Konrad Zarebski (Warsaw: Fundacja Kino, 2006), 68.
7. Madej, “Wanda Jakubowska,” 14.
8. An official certificate with seals and illegible signatures issued in German and Russian on December 4, 2014. The certificate includes a handwritten approval in Russian issued on December 7. Wanda Jakubowska archive, owned by her granddaughter, Katarzyna Rudomino.
9. Wanda Jakubowska’s letter to Aleksander Ford, head of Film Polski, dated January 5, 1946, p. 1, Alina Madej archive; also in Madej, “Wanda Jakubowska,” 14.
10. Letter signed by Jerzy Bossak, from the Ministry of Propaganda and Information, Film Department in Łódź, to Wanda Jakubowska, January 8, 1946, Alina Madej archive.

11. An official letter addressed to Gerda Schneider on January 17, 1946, and signed by Wanda Jakubowska, Alina Madej archive.
12. Madej, "Wanda Jakubowska," 15.
13. Wanda Jakubowska, "Twórca o powstaniu dzieła," in *Ostatni etap* [film script] (Warsaw: Filmowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1955), 17.
14. Jakubowska, "Kilka wspomnień o powstaniu scenariusza," 41.
15. Letter issued by Film Polski on February 1, 1946, signed by Jerzy Bossak, Alina Madej archive.
16. Madej, "Wanda Jakubowska," 15.
17. Lubelski, "Dwa debiuty," 19.
18. Edward Zajiček, *Poza ekranem. Kinematografia polska 1918–1991* (Warsaw: FilMOTEKA Narodowa and Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1992), 85.
19. Lubelski, "Dwa debiuty," 19.
20. Seweryna Szmaglewska, *Dymy nad Birkenau* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1945); English version, *Smoke over Birkenau*, trans. Jadwiga Rynas (New York: Henry Holt, 1947).
21. AAN, zesp. MIiP, sygn 172, k. 168; published in Madej, *Kino, władza, publiczność*, 108.
22. See Norman Davies, *Rising '44: The Battle for Warsaw* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2004). For a discussion about memory of the Warsaw Uprising and the Home Army, see Andrzej Waśkiewicz, "The Polish Home Army and the Politics of Memory," *East European Politics and Societies* 24, no. 1 (2010): 44–58.
23. For more information about Wajda's *Kanal* see my discussion in *Polish National Cinema* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002), 83–85; also, Stuart Liebman, "The Art of Memory: Andrzej Wajda's War Trilogy," *Cinéaste* 32, no. 1 (2006): 42–47.
24. *Film* (31 December 1946). Quoted from Piotr Zwierzchowski, *Kino nowej pałmicy: Obraz II wojny światowej z kinie polskim lat 60.* (Bydgoszcz: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego, 2013), 27. The first released Polish film, *Forbidden Songs* (*Zakazane piosenki*, 1947/1948), also dealt with the war and the occupation.
25. For example, Lubelski, "Generalissimus płakał," 3–4.
26. Snyder, *Black Earth*, 208.
27. Jeremy Hicks, *First Films of the Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and the Genocide of the Jews, 1938–1946* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012): 174–77. Hicks argues that the "fact that authorities did not immediately redeploy sound-recording equipment, which was in short supply, suggests that filming Auschwitz was not a priority for the decision makers of Central Documentary Film Studios, just as the camp's liberation was not a priority for the Red Army" (*ibid.*, 175).
28. Dan Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps: The End of the Holocaust and Its Aftermath* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 48; also, Karel C. Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger: Soviet Propaganda during World War II* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 153–61.
29. FN, S-364—*Ostatni etap*, minutes number 2 of the Artistic Council meeting on February 2, 1947. See also Madej, "Wanda Jakubowska," 16; Lubelski, "Dwa debiuty," 19–20. The Austrian-born Georg C. Klaren (1900–1962) was an experienced scriptwriter and film director. After 1945, Klaren became the literary manager at East German studio DEFA. In 1947, he directed *Wozzeck*, a successful adaptation of Büchner's play. In 1951, Klaren also directed *Die Sonnenbrucks*, an adaptation of a Polish play,

Niemcy (The Germans), by Leon Kruczkowski, a World War II drama about Nazism and the issue of Germany's guilt.

30. Madej, "Wanda Jakubowska," 14.

31. Lubelski, "Dwa debiuty," 19–20.

32. "Autorka scenariusza i reżyserka filmu 'Oświęcim' Wanda Jakubowska o swym pobycie w Moskwie," Polska Agencja Prasowa (PAP), December 17, 1946. Alina Madej archive and Katarzyna Rudomino archive.

33. Liebman, "I Was Always in the Epicenter," 22.

34. Lubelski, "Dwa debiuty," 22; also, Lubelski, "Generalissimus płakał," 4; and Madej, "Wanda Jakubowska," 16. Jakubowska tells a similar version of this story to Liebman, "I Was Always in the Epicenter," 22.

35. Lubelski, "Dwa debiuty," 21.

36. FN, S-5934, "Scenopis filmu fabularnego," comments on the script by Tadeusz Hołuj, Adam Ważyk, and Zofia Nałkowska.

37. Letter dated February 24, 1947, from Juliusz Turbowicz, head of Film Polski's Production Department, to Wanda Jakubowska, Alina Madej archive.

38. Madej, "Wanda Jakubowska," 16; letter in Alina Madej and Katarzyna Rudomino archives.

39. Liebman, "I Was Always in the Epicenter," 27. From today's perspective it is shocking indeed to read Jakubowska's comment that Bierut, a staunch Stalinist, "had a heart of gold."

40. See Zajiček, *Poza ekranem*, 62–66; Madej, *Kino, władza, publiczność*, 186–90.

41. Alina Madej, "Socrealizm," *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 6 (1994): 195.

42. *Ibid.*, 198. The word "naturalism" was routinely used during that period as a code word for images incompatible with the Stalinist poetics. Analyzing Soviet films about the Holocaust, Olga Gershenson writes that "in Soviet newspeak it meant unhealthy fixation on the most basic physiological aspects of human nature, something that is entirely incompatible with socialist realism. In this view, any representation of death, dying, decay, or the human body is guilty of 'naturalism'" (Olga Gershenson, *The Phantom Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and Jewish Catastrophe* [New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2013], 85).

43. FN, S-364—*Ostatni etap*, "Wyciąg z protokołu nr 11 z posiedzenia Rady Artystycznej w dniu 24 IV 1947."

44. Letter from Wanda Jakubowska to Roman Palester dated May 30, 1947, Alina Madej and Katarzyna Rudomino archives.

45. Madej, "Wanda Jakubowska," 14.

46. Jakubowska, "Kilka wspomnień o powstaniu scenariusza," 42.

47. *Ibid.*, 42–43.

48. *Ibid.*, 44–45.

49. One of the early script versions of the shooting script (*scenopis* in Polish) was titled *A Letter from Auschwitz (List z Oświęcimia)*. See letter from Wanda Jakubowska to Juliusz Turbowicz, head of the Production Department at Film Polski, January 13, 1947, Katarzyna Rudomino and Alina Madej archives.

50. FN, S-364, "*Ostatni etap*—scenariusz filmu fabularnego," two versions, not dated; also, script in the Russian language, the shooting script (S-5934), and dialogues in the German language (S-24961).

51. Jakubowska, “Kilka wspomnień o powstaniu scenariusza,” 42.

52. APMAB, sygn. D-AuI-5/2, no. 29742 (HKB Rajska), pp. 7, 25, 35 [Jakubowska]; APMAB sygn. D-AuI-5/9, no. 5028, p. 53 and DAuI-5/14, no. 5033, p. 85 [Schneider].

53. It is tempting to see similarities between Jakubowska’s script, *The Birkenau Front Reports*, and André De Toth’s American film, *None Shall Escape*, released in February 1944. *None Shall Escape* opens with a scene set in the nearest future, in postwar Warsaw, of a Nazi German officer on trial for his crimes committed during the war. Several witnesses testify against him in front of the Allied Commission; the story of his life and crimes is shown in flashbacks. It is difficult, however, to tell if Jakubowska was familiar with this film since it was not released in Poland. She could have seen it in the fall of 1945 in Germany, before her return to Poland. For comments on *None Shall Escape*, see M. B. B. Biskupski, *Hollywood’s War with Poland, 1939–1945* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009): 111–18.

54. Madej, “Wanda Jakubowska,” 15; *Law Reports of Trials of War Criminals*, vol. 2, *The Belsen Trial* (London: United Nations War Crimes Commission, 1947), http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/Law-Reports_Vol-2.pdf.

55. Irena Strzelecka, “Hospitals,” in *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, ed. Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 386.

56. Margaret-Anne Hutton, *Testimony from the Nazi Camps: French Women’s Voices* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 138.

57. In the documentary film on Jakubowska, *Jestem babką polskiego kina* (1997, Tomasz Rudomino, TVP Historia), the Polish cultural critic Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz recalls an anecdote about Jakubowska. She told him that she served as Rudolf Höss’s interpreter before the Red Army advanced and liberated the camp. The story goes that when they walked together among the empty barracks of Auschwitz, with no signs of new transports in the vicinity, Höss supposedly told her: “Look, Wanda, our Auschwitz no longer exists” (emphasis added).

58. Wanda Jakubowska’s letter from January 13, 1947, addressed to Juliusz Turbo-wicz, Katarzyna Rudomino archive and Alina Madej archive. The shooting script is available at FN, S-5934.

Chapter 3

Epigraph source: Jakubowska, “Twórca o powstaniu dzieła,” 17.

1. The estimated figures concerning Polish and Jewish losses during World War II differ slightly in various historical accounts. The majority of historians state about 6 million deaths, including 3 million Polish Jews. For example, this is the figure provided by Lucy S. Dawidowicz in her *The Holocaust and the Historians* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 6–7; M. B. Biskupski provides the same figures in his concise *The History of Poland* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000), 108.

2. Marcin Zaremba, *Wielka trwoga. Polska 1944–1947. Ludowa reakcja na kryzys* (Kraków: Znak, ISP PAN, 2012), 357. See also Krystyna Kersten, *Repatriacje ludności polskiej po II wojnie światowej. Studium historyczne* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1974).

3. Alexander V. Prusin, “Poland’s Nuremberg: The Seven Court Cases of the Supreme National Tribunal, 1946–1948,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 24, no. 1 (2010): 5. Prusin writes that during Greiser’s trial in June and July 1946, the “tribunal

hastened to set a precedent in international law regarding war crimes. Ruling that existing legal regulations were ‘powerless’ to deal adequately with Nazi crime, it adopted the term ‘genocide’ (*ludobójstwo*) even before the term was applied in the Nuremberg proceedings” (ibid., 6).

4. Zaremba, *Wielka trwoga*, 561–69.

5. See Jerzy Kochanowski, *Protokoły posiedzeń Prezydium Krajowej Rady Narodowej 1944–1947* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, 1995), 303–4. Henryk Świątkowski was the Polish minister of justice during the Stalinist period (1945–56). During the war, he was arrested by the Gestapo in July 1940, held at the Pawiak prison in Warsaw for a month, and sent to Auschwitz in August 1940. He was released from Auschwitz (as some prisoners were) in October 1941.

6. In the next four paragraphs I use fragments from my book *Polish Film and the Holocaust*, 211–13.

7. Stuart Liebman, “Documenting the Liberation of the Camps: The Case of Aleksander Ford’s *Vernichtungslager Majdanek—Cmentarzysko Europy* (1944),” in *Lessons and Legacies VII: The Holocaust in International Perspective*, ed. Dagmar Herzog (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 334. See also Liebman’s revised and enlarged Polish version of the essay: “Cmentarzysko Europy (1944). Pierwszy film o Holokaucie?” *Zeszyty Majdanka* 25 (2011): 201–25.

8. Stanisław Wohl, “W Chełmie i Lublinie. O historycznych dniach lipca 1944 roku,” *Film* 28–29 (1969): 8–9. The German camp slang word, *Muselmann* (plural *Muselmänner*), literally meaning “Muslim” but with no religious connotation, designates an exhausted prisoner who has lost the will to live. Wohl’s comment stresses that the *Polish Newsreel* crew was the first to enter Majdanek, before the Soviet filmmakers led by Roman Karmen.

9. Stuart Liebman, “The Majdanek Trial: The Holocaust on Trial on Film. Kazimierz Czyński’s *Swastyka i szubienica* (1945),” in *The Scene of the Mass Crime: History, Film, and International Tribunals*, ed. Christian Delage and Peter Goodrich (London: Routledge, 2013), 114.

10. Forbert, “W Oświęcimiu po oswobodzeniu obozu,” 182–84.

11. Ibid. This fragment relies heavily on my discussion of early Polish documentary films in *Polish Film and the Holocaust*, 211–14. For an insightful discussion of Roman Karmen’s documentary about the liberation of Auschwitz, see Hicks, *First Films of the Holocaust*, 174–85.

12. Janina Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust: Interpretations of the Evidence* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 123.

13. Ibid., 123.

14. Zaremba, *Wielka trwoga*, 562.

15. Andrzej Friszke, *Polska. Losy państwa i narodu 1939–1989* (Warsaw: Iskry, 2003), 147.

16. Edmund Dmitrów, *Niemcy i okupacja hitlerowska w oczach Polaków. Poglądy i opinie z lat 1945–1948* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1987), 88–90.

17. Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, 57.

18. Ibid., 183–84.

19. Dmitrów, *Niemcy i okupacja hitlerowska w oczach Polaków*, 184–88.

20. E.g., Ludwik Rajewski, *Oświęcim w systemie RSHA* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Eugeniusza Kuthana, 1946).

21. Leon Bukowiecki, "Pierwszy polski film w produkcji powojennej," *Robotnik* 7 (1947); quoted from Dmitrów, *Niemcy i okupacja hitlerowska w oczach Polaków*, 100.

22. Several subsequent Polish films were also made almost entirely or partly on location at Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. This group includes Andrzej Munk's *Pasenger* (*Pasażerka*, 1963); Jakubowska's *The End of Our World* (*Koniec naszego świata*, 1964); Jerzy Ziarnik's *A Journey into the Unknown* (*Podróż w nieznanie*, 1968); Andrzej Wajda's *Landscape after Battle* (*Krajobraz po bitwie*, 1970); Sergei Kolosov's Polish-Soviet coproduction *Remember Your Name* (*Zapamiętaj imię swoje*, 1974); Jakubowska's *Invitation* (*Zaproszenie*, 1985); and Leszek Wosiewicz's *Kornblumenblau* (1989).

23. The German POWs were also used in the summer of 1946 during the production of the first postwar Polish film, *Forbidden Songs*, released in 1947–48. See, for example, Piotr Śmiałowski, "Pierwszy na zawsze," *Kino* 1 (2007): 56.

24. Strzelecki, *Ostatnie dni obozu Auschwitz*, 14, 23.

25. Several subcamps of Auschwitz, most of them located in Upper Silesia, were used by the communist regime after the war as slave labor centers for, among others, members of the Polish underground that opposed the communist rule.

26. R. M. Douglas, *Orderly and Humane: The Expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 134.

27. Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland and the Politics of Commemoration*, 60–61. Also Strzelecki, *Ostatnie dni obozu Auschwitz*, 57–58; Jacek Lachendro, *Zburzyć i zaorać . . . ? Idea założenia Państwowego Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau w świetle prasy polskiej w latach 1945–1948* (Oświęcim: Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2007), 10–11.

28. Jerzy Kochanowski, *W polskiej niewoli. Niemieccy jeńcy wojenni w Polsce 1945–1950* (Warsaw: Neriton, 2001), 88.

29. *Ibid.*, 246 and 340.

30. Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland and the Politics of Commemoration*, 61.

31. Edward Dziewoński, *W życiu jak w teatrze* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1989), 30.

32. Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, 64–65.

33. "Kopalnie złota w Oświęcimiu," *Echo Krakowa* 47 (27 April 1946): 1; quoted from Lachendro, *Zburzyć i zaorać*, 178.

34. C. Z., "Droga Auschwitz—Birkenau—Budy," *Kurier Szczeciński* 164 (July 23, 1946): 2; quoted from Lachendro, *Zburzyć i zaorać?* 189.

35. Madej, "Wanda Jakubowska," 16.

36. Wanda Kragen, "W dniu otwarcia muzeum w Oświęcimiu. Obóz koncentracyjny przeobraża się w muzeum," *Robotnik* 160 (16 June 1947): 4; quoted from Lachendro, *Zburzyć i zaorać?* 218.

37. "Śmierć Birkenau," *Wolni Ludzie* 6 (1 July 1947): 1; quoted from Lachendro, *Zburzyć i zaorać?* 259–60.

38. *Ibid.*, 260.

39. Kazimierz Smoleń, "Auschwitz Today: The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum," in *Auschwitz: A History in Photographs*, ed. Teresa Świebocka, English edition prepared by Jonathan Webber and Connie Wilsack (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 1993), 261.

40. FN, A-275, "Kartoteka filmów fabularnych lata 1947/54, *Ostatni etap*," p. 48.

41. Madej, "Wanda Jakubowska," 16.

42. Strzelecki, *Ostatnie dni obozu Auschwitz*, 57. One also has to note the controver-

sial actions of the Regional Office for the Liquidation of German Property (Okregowy Urząd Likwidacyjny, OUL) in Kraków, which had operated since March 1946. Its representatives distributed some of the barracks and numerous objects that belonged to the murdered victims. See Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, 65.

43. Szmaglewska, *Smoke over Birkenau* (New York: Henry Holt, 1947), published in Polish as *Dymy nad Birkenau* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1945); Krystyna Żywulska, *I Came Back* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1951), published in Polish as *Przeżyłam Auschwitz* (Warsaw: Wiedza, 1946); Zofia Kossak-Szczuczka, *Z otchłani. Wspomnienia z lagru* (Częstochowa: Wydawnictwo Księgarni Władysława Nagłowskiego, 1946).

44. Jan Sehn, *Obóz koncentracyjny Oświęcim-Brzezinka (Auschwitz-Birkenau), na podstawie dokumentów i źródeł* (Warsaw: Biuletyn I Głównej Komisji Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich w Polsce, 1946).

45. Łukasz Figielski and Bartosz Michalak, *Prywatna historia kina polskiego* (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2006), 20. Jerzy Kawalerowicz (1922–2007) was one of Poland's most accomplished directors. He started his career in 1954 with Socialist Realist dramas. His films made during the Polish School period brought him international recognition, among them *Night Train (Pociąg)*, 1959) and *Mother Joan of the Angels (Matka Joanna od Aniołów)*, 1961). In 1966, Kawalerowicz directed one of the best Polish historical films, *Pharaoh (Faraon)*, nominated for an Oscar in the Best Foreign Film Category in 1967. He also received acclaim for his later works, including *Austeria* (aka *The Inn*, 1983) and *Quo Vadis* (2001). A member of the Communist Party (PZPR) from 1954 to its disbanding in 1989, Kawalerowicz also headed one of the most prominent film units, *Kadr*, which was instrumental in developing the Polish School phenomenon.

46. Jan Rybkowski (1912–1987) was a film director, head of the film Unit Rytm from 1955 to 1968, and a teacher at the Łódź Film School. Following his debut in 1950 with the occupation drama *House in Wilderness (Dom na pustkowiu)*, he worked in a variety of genres, producing war dramas such as *The Hours of Hope (Godziny nadziei)*, 1955) and *When Love Was a Crime (Kiedy miłość była zbrodnią)*, 1968), the Holocaust drama *Ascension Day (Wniebowstąpienie)*, 1969), and several successful comedies. He is also remembered in Poland for his adaptation of *The Peasants (Chłopi)*, 1973), based on the novel written by the Polish Nobel laureate Władysław Stanisław Reymont.

47. Katarzyna Bielas and Jacek Szczerba, "Actors Can Play Even with Their Backs," in *Jerzy Kawalerowicz: Painter of the Tenth Muse* (Łódź: Muzeum Kinematografii, 2012), 212.

48. APMAB, *Oświadczenia*, Oświadczenie Ludwika Lawina, vol. 17, p. 92 (Ośw./Lawin/49672/448).

49. Archiwum Państwowe w Katowicach, Oddział w Oświęcimiu, 16/201/123/387.

50. Ibid.

51. Andrzej Waligórski, "Jak nakręcano film *Ostatni etap*," *Słowo Polskie* (20 April 1948): 7.

52. "Widoki z okien" [Interview with Boris Monastyrski by Siemion Czertok], *Film* 16 (1978): 11.

53. M. Toliński, "Smutno w Oświęcimiu, choć ptaki wesoło świergocą," *Echo Krakowa* 152 (7 June 1947): 2; quoted from Lachendro, *Zburzyć i zaorać*, 207.

54. Zbigniew Krawczykowski, "Zbieg z filmowego Oświęcimia opowiada. Wywiad z Barbarą Fijewską," *Film* 29 (1947): 4.

55. Author's phone conversation with Roman Dziewoński on October 23, 2013. In her published memoirs, Maria Kaniewska (who plays the *Raportführerin*) writes about yet another aspect of the on-location shooting of *The Last Stage*: several marriages, including "the most spectacular" of Antonina (Tosia) Górecka (Anna in the film) and Konstanty (Kostek) Gordon (documentary filmmaker). See Maria Kaniewska, *Utrwalone na czulej kliszy* (Tarnów: Oficyna Wydawnicza "Witek-Druk," 2004), 149. See also interview with Kaniewska published in 1948 by Zbigniew Krawczykowski, "Zeznania obozowej Raportführerin," *Film* 7 (1948): 4.

56. Liebman, "I Was Always in the Epicenter," 17. Interestingly, in an interview from 1968 Jakubowska stated that she had thought of making a film that portrayed some grotesque aspects of the camp life. "In this irrational world," she commented, "there were elements bordering on the humorous." Jakubowska doubted, however, whether she or her audiences were ready to see it. Oskar Sobariński, "Ten temat pozostanie," *Magazyn Filmowy* 13 (1968): 2.

57. Rudomino, *I Am a Grandmother of Polish Cinema (Jestem babką polskiego kina)*.

58. Liebman, "I Was Always in the Epicenter," 22.

59. Madej, "Wanda Jakubowska," 16.

60. Jan Wiktor Lachendro, *Wspomnienia i inne pisma* (Chełmek, 2012), 178.

61. Czekalski, *Notacja—Wanda Jakubowska*.

62. Alina Madej archive, letter issued by the Ministry of Public Security, Department of Prisons. 24 March 1947, No. G.O.516/47; fragment published in Madej, "Wanda Jakubowska," 16.

63. See Łukasz Figielski and Bartosz Michalak, *Prywatna historia kina polskiego* (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2006), 18. Rare images of Gerda Schneider on the set of the film, preserved at Filmoteka Narodowa, may suggest that her role was greater than just scriptwriting and coaching Polish actors playing German parts. One has to take into account, however, the conflict between the young and ambitious assistant director, Jerzy Kawalerowicz, and Jakubowska during the editing stage of the film. The Film Polski authorities encouraged Kawalerowicz to interfere by adding closeups that he shot with Barbara Drapińska (Marta). Jakubowska, however, was able to defend her version. See Lubelski, "Dwa debiuty," 23. See also the documentary films by Andrzej Czekalski, *Kino, kino, kino* and *Notacja—Wanda Jakubowska*.

64. Z. P., "Widma niedawnych lat: Oświęcim na ekranie," *Film* 26 (1947): 8.

65. *Ibid.*, 8. Jakubowska comments on using the German POWs as extras in Madej, "Wanda Jakubowska," 16.

66. Zajiček, *Poza ekranem*, 85. In a private conversation with Hanno Loewy, Jerzy Kawalerowicz confirmed that in order to save some money on costumes, they used reaction shots of some unsuspecting, well-dressed tourists from Western Europe who reacted with horror to what they saw in the camp. Loewy, "The Mother of All Holocaust Films?" 203n43.

67. Dziewoński, *W życiu jak w teatrze*, 30–31.

68. Madej, "Wanda Jakubowska," 17.

69. Liebman, "I Was Always in the Epicenter," 21.

70. "Aleksandra Śląska," Polish Radio Broadcast, December 22, 2011.

71. Czekalski, *Notacja—Wanda Jakubowska*.

72. Piotr Skrzypczak, "Dwie role w esemańskim mundurze: Szkic o aktorstwie Alek-

sandry Śląskiej,” in *Kino polskie wobec II wojny światowej*, ed. Piotr Zwierzchowski, Daria Mazur, and Mariusz Guzek (Bydgoszcz: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego, 2011), 256–70.

73. Quoted in Skrzypczak, “Dwie role w esemańskim mundurze,” 261.

74. Private letter addressed to Edward Dziewoński by Aleksandra Śląska, January 4, 1948; courtesy Roman Dziewoński.

75. Dziewoński, *W życiu jak w teatrze*, 30.

76. Z. P., “Widma niedawnych lat,” 8.

77. Lachendro, *Wspomnienia i inne pisma*, 22. Jan Wiktor Lachendro (born 1934), lived in Oświęcim until April 1941, when his family was forcibly resettled by the Germans. During the shooting of Jakubowska’s film, he was a student at a high school in Oświęcim. I am grateful to Dr. Jacek Lachendro (related to Jan Wiktor), historian at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, for this information.

78. Wohl’s film *Two Hours*, barely noticed by critics and viewers after its delayed premiere in 1957, is rarely discussed in the context of the Holocaust cinema. See my *Polish Film and the Holocaust*, 23–24.

79. Hicks, *First Films of the Holocaust*, 21.

80. *Ibid.*, 101.

81. Jeremy Hicks, “Confronting the Holocaust: Mark Donskoi’s *The Unvanquished*,” *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 3, no. 1 (2009): 35. For a close reading of the film, see also Gershenson, *The Phantom Holocaust*, 40–56.

82. Hicks, *First Films of the Holocaust*, 155. Hicks writes that *The Unvanquished* is the “hitherto unacknowledged progenitor of a genre of Eastern European feature films of the Holocaust made in the late 1940s; this group includes the Czech director Alfred Radok’s *Distant Journey* (*Daleka Cesta* [1948]) and the Polish director Aleksander Ford’s *Border Street* (*Ulica Graniczna* [1949])” (*ibid.*).

83. Ewa Gębicka stresses that Polish audiences wanted to see Polish films above all. The Polish security apparatus reported that Polish audiences whistled, provided ironic comments, and laughed during the screening of several Soviet films, such as *The Vow* (*Pitsi*, 1946), directed by Mikheil Chiaureli, a Socialist Realist biopic of Stalin. Gębicka enumerates Soviet films screened in Poland between 1945 and 1948: 21 in 1945, 39 in 1946, 35 in 1947, and 23 in 1948. Ewa Gębicka, “Nie strzelać do Czapaiewa! Jak po wojnie przyjmowano filmy radzieckie w Polsce,” *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 2 (1993): 96–97, 99, 107. See also Madej, *Kino, władza, publiczność*, 84–91. Between 1945 and 1948, however, films imported from the Soviet Union did not monopolize the Polish market. For example, in 1946, there were 158 films shown on Polish screens, including 53 prewar Polish productions and 84 Soviet, 16 English, and 5 French films. In 1948, there were 99 films in distribution: 33 American, 23 Soviet, 18 French, 16 English, 7 Czechoslovak, and 2 Italian. See my *Polish National Cinema*, 48–49.

84. Madej, “Wanda Jakubowska,” 15.

85. <http://culture.pl/en/artist/roman-palester>. See also Zofia Helman, *Roman Palester: Twórca i dzieło* (Kraków: Kraków Musica Jagiellonica, 1999).

86. Czekalski, *Notacja — Wanda Jakubowska*.

87. Lubelski, “Dwa debiuty,” 23. Also in Czekalski’s documentary films, *Kino, kino, kino* and *Notacja — Wanda Jakubowska*. Jakubowska’s editor, Róża (Lidia) Pstrokońska (1908–1991), started her career in the cinema industry before 1939. After the war she

edited *Forbidden Songs* and worked on several films by Jakubowska, including her films about Auschwitz, such as *Meetings in the Twilight* (1960) and *The End of Our World* (1964).

88. Czekański, *Notacja—Wanda Jakubowska*.

89. Liebman, “Pages from the Past,” 62.

90. Jakubowska, “Kilka wspomnień o powstaniu scenariusza,” 45. Referring to the last scene in the script, Jakubowska stated: “This scene was not filmed, because the film was too long even without it.”

91. *Ibid.*, 45.

92. FN, A-329, poz. A8, p. 4, “Protokół Komisji Kwalifikacyjnej Filmów: *Jasne Łamy*, reż. E. Cękańskiego, *Ostatni etap*, reż. W. Jakubowskiej, *Stalowe serca*, reż. S. Urbanowicza,” April 11, 1948.

Chapter 4

1. The scene portrays Poles, among them Helena, on a street of Warsaw. This is not a roundup of Jews, as indicated by some sources, such as Robert C. Reimer and Carol J. Reimer, *Historical Dictionary of Holocaust Cinema* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 109.

2. Engelking and Leociak, *The Warsaw Ghetto*, xv.

3. After the war there was no consensus regarding the number of Auschwitz victims. Figures provided in 1945 by different sources, ranging from the Red Army to the Polish Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes, were high, usually citing 4 million estimated victims. This was also the number provided by the former commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höss, during his trial. See Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, 42–44. In 1965, Mikhail Romm (acclaimed Soviet director of Jewish origin) made a classic complication documentary, *Ordinary Fascism (Obyknovennyi Fashizm)*, released in the U.S. in 1968 as *Triumph over Violence* that gave the same number for Auschwitz-Birkenau victims. A voiceover commentary (by Mikhail Romm) over the tracking shot of the “death gate” leading to Birkenau proclaims: “Four million people walked through this gate. Four million.” The debates surrounding the number of Auschwitz victims are fittingly summarized by Marek Kucia, *Auschwitz jako fakt społeczny* (Kraków: Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau/ Universitas, 2005), 148–62. See detailed discussion of *Ordinary Fascism* in Gershenson, *The Phantom Holocaust*, 59–70.

4. Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle*, 30–33; Kucia, *Auschwitz jako fakt społeczny*, 124.

5. Jakubowska, “Kilka wspomnień o powstaniu scenariusza,” 43.

6. Strzelecka, “Hospitals,” 383.

7. *Ibid.*, 391.

8. Garliński, *Fighting Auschwitz*, 133.

9. Strzelecka, “Hospitals,” 381.

10. Irena Strzelecka, “Women,” in *Anatomy of Auschwitz Death Camp*, ed. Ysrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 405.

11. Stanisława Leszczyńska, “Raport położnej z Oświęcimia,” in *Okupacja i medycyna*, ed. Jerzy Rawicz (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1971), 164.

12. Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle*, 499. Danuta Czech reports that before October 4, 1943, eleven boys were born in Birkenau and “entered in the register of the men’s camp and are given Nos 155909–155919.” *Ibid.*

13. Jakubowska, "Kilka wspomnień o powstaniu scenariusza," 43–44.
14. For example, as insightfully discussed by Janina Struk, the screening of *Night and Fog* in England encountered several problems with the censor. Some of the graphic shots, including those depicting piles of corpses, were removed by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC). The whole film, with the scenes reintroduced by the BBFC, was released in 1990. Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust*, 168.
15. Lubelski, "Dwa debiuty," 24.
16. Liebman, "I Was Always in the Epicenter," 21.
17. Stuart Liebman and Leonard Quart, "Lost and Found: Wanda Jakubowska's *The Last Stop*," *Cinéaste* 22, no. 4 (1997): 44.
18. Tadeusz Lubelski, *Strategie autorskie w polskim filmie fabularnym 1945–1961* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 1992), 81.
19. Jalu Kurek, "Ostatni etap od strony filmowej," *Warszawa* 4 (1948): 4. This very powerful image of women on the *Appelplatz*, however, was described as far removed from truth by Auschwitz survivor Henryk Korotyński, who stated that prisoners tried to stay warm at all cost and "waving like a field of grain" did not work well. Henryk Korotyński, "Oczyrna Oświęcimia," *Film* 7 (1948): 4.
20. Leon Bukowiecki, "Oświęcim na ekranie," *Film* 6 (1948): 3.
21. Roman Mann (1911–1960) worked on thirty-six films, including such Polish School classics as Andrzej Wajda's war trilogy—*A Generation* (*Pokolenie*, 1955), *Kanał* (*Kanał*, 1957), and *Ashes and Diamonds* (*Popiół i diament*, 1958)—Andrzej Munk's *Man on the Tracks* (*Człowiek na torze*, 1956), Aleksander Ford's *Teutonic Knights* (*Krzyżacy*, 1960), and Jerzy Kawalerowicz's *Mother Joan of the Angels* (*Matka Joanna od Aniołów*, 1960). Czesław Piaskowski (1903–1994) worked as a set designer on several prewar films. The list of his accomplishments includes Joseph Green and Jan Nowina-Przybylski's classic Yiddish comedy, *Yiddle with His Fiddle* (*Yidl mitn fidl*, 1936; as art director—not credited). *Film Polski* database: <http://filmpolski.pl/fp/index.php?osoba=11944>.
22. Lubelski, *Strategie autorskie*, 79.
23. Stephen Prince, *Classical Film Violence: Designing and Regulating Brutality in Hollywood Cinema, 1930–1968* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 208.
24. One could discuss this example in the context of Yasujiro Ozu's use of offscreen space, which is employed to contain some unseen horror.
25. Aaron Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust: New Perspectives on Dramas, Documentaries, and Experimental Films* (London: Continuum, 2011), 20. Kerner later writes that when the child is born, "a light emanates; as if the newly born baby boy signifies some 'ray of hope'" (*ibid.*, 68).
26. Wanda Jakubowska, letter to Jerzy Bossak, head of the Program-Artistic Department of Film Polski, 28 January 1946, Alina Madej archive.
27. Wanda Jakubowska, letter to the Production Department of Film Polski, 14 May 1947, Alina Madej archive.
28. Jakubowska commented that Brochwicz, a follower of Stanislavski's method acting, had a tendency to make blown-up faces. She threatened him that she would shoot him only from behind. "You can always find a way to outsmart a guy," concluded Jakubowska. Czekański, *Notacja—Wanda Jakubowska*.
29. Żywulska, "Nareszcie film," 8.

30. Strzelecka, "Women," 396.
31. Aaron Kerner describes the Nazis in Jakubowska's film as "cookie-cutter Nazis, embodiments of sadistic evil . . . unfeeling robots that blurt out fascist diatribes" (Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 70).
32. B. W., "Patrzac na ekran," *Życie Warszawy* (April 4, 1948).
33. Sabine Hake, *Screen Nazis: Cinema, History, and Democracy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 21.
34. Interestingly, Alina Janowska, who plays the Serbian partisan Dessa, was imprisoned by the Gestapo at the Pawiak prison in Warsaw in 1942 and was kept in its women's wing, known as "Serbia." Alina Janowska, *Jam jest Alina, czyli Janowska story* (Warsaw: Prószyński, 2007), 85–93.
35. See Juliane Brauer, "How Music Can Be Torturous: Music in Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camps," *Music and Politics* 10, no. 1 (2016). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0010.103>.
36. Liebman, "I Was Always in the Epicenter," 27.
37. Madej, "Wanda Jakubowska," 17.
38. Czekalski, *Notacja — Wanda Jakubowska*.
39. Madej, "Wanda Jakubowska," 17.
40. Kulisiewicz, "Triumf polskiej kinematografii," 10.
41. Madej, "Wanda Jakubowska," 17.
42. Kurek, "*Ostatni etap* od strony filmowej," 4.
43. Jakubowska commented that "somebody didn't like the fact that she was German and so they gave her a week to go. She went to Hamburg. It must have been '48 or '49. We used to meet in Berlin, but we couldn't work together anymore." Liebman, "I Was Always in the Epicenter," 21. Most Polish sources provide a different date of the premiere, March 28, 1948 (the screening in Łódź).
44. Czekalski, *Notacja — Wanda Jakubowska*.
45. Mariusz Margal, "Paryski etap *Ostatniego etapu*," *Film* 21 (1948): 4. See also insightful comments on the French release of Jakubowska's *La Dernière Étape* in Annette Wieviorka, *Déportation et génocide: Entre la mémoire et l'oubli* (Paris: Plon, 1992), 307–312.
46. Czekalski, *Notacja — Wanda Jakubowska*.
47. Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, "Fragmenty przemówienia Jarosława Iwaszkiewicza z okazji wręczenia Wandzie Jakubowskiej Nagrody Światowej Rady Pokoju (1950 rok)," in Wanda Jakubowska, *Ostatni etap* (Warsaw: Filmowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1955), 10.
48. AAN, Polski Związek b. Więźniów Politycznych Hitlerowskich Więzień i Obozów Koncentracyjnych, 415/8, "Główny Sąd Koleżeński. Akta sprawy Wandy Jakubowskiej z powodu zniesławienia jej we Francji. Postanowienie sądu, protokoły konferencji i przesłuchań świadków, korespondencja." See also more details about this case in Wieviorka, *Déportation et génocide*, 309–11. Wieviorka writes that the letter attacking Jakubowska's conduct in Auschwitz was published by former Auschwitz prisoner Wanda Ramond on June 23, 1949 (*ibid.*, 309).
49. The authors of the letter and the editorial probably confused Wanda Jakubowska with another Wanda from Rajsko, Wanda Dutczyńska.
50. AAN, 415/8, 4.
51. "Wydawca emigracyjnej gadzinówki skazany za zniesławienie Wandy Jakubowskiej," *Film* 7 (1950), 2; *Narodowiec* 148 (June 23, 1949).

52. Mruklik, “Wierność sobie,” 21.

53. Quoted from Steven Alan Carr, “To Encompass the Unseeable: Foreign Film, Taste Culture, and the American Encounter with the Postwar Holocaust Film,” paper presented at the *Twelfth Lessons and Legacies Conference on the Holocaust* (Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill., November 2, 2012): <http://stevenalancarr.pbworks.com/w/page/51992487/To%20Encompass%20the%20Unseeable>.

54. Bosley Crowther, “The Brutal Truth: Polish Film Dramatizes Nazi Torture Camp,” *New York Times* (27 March 1949).

55. William Friedberg, “Nazi Concentration Camp Reactivated for Film,” *New York Times* (February 20, 1949); quoted from Carr, “To Encompass the Unseeable.”

56. Maria Dąbrowska, *Dzienniki powojenne. T 1: 1945–1949* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1996), 209 (entry of April 13, 1948). Dąbrowska refers to Jerzy Andrzejewski’s novel, *Ashes and Diamonds* (*Popiół i diament*), published in 1948, not to its 1958 adaptation by Andrzej Wajda.

57. Żywulska, “Nareszcie film,” 8; Seweryna Szmaglewska, “Dzieło czy arcydzieło,” *Gazeta Filmowa* 16 (June 1, 1948): 2; Korotyński, “Oczyrna Oświęcimiaka,” 4.

58. Korotyński, “Oczyrna Oświęcimiaka,” 4.

59. H [Halina]. M. Laskowska, “O *Ostatnim etapie*—głos drugi,” *Dziś i Jutro* 18 (2 May 1948).

60. Korotyński, “Oczyrna Oświęcimiaka,” 4.

61. Hanna Tomaszewska, “Czy *Ostatni etap* jest prawdziwy?” *Warszawa: Niezależny Dwutygodnik Literacki* 4 (1948): 3.

62. “Listy do redakcji, *Wieczór* (April 6, 1948).

63. [Krystyna Kobyłecka], “Oświęcim po raz drugi. Więźniarka 44737,” *Głos Ludu* 88 (1948).

64. Kazimierz Truchanowski, “Wyrównanie,” *Warszawa* 4 (14 May 1948): 8.

65. Żywulska, “Nareszcie film,” 8.

66. Karol Pędowski, “Ludzie i zbrodniarze,” *Warszawa* 4 (1948): 1.

67. Madej, “Wanda Jakubowska,” 15.

68. Stanisław Grzelecki, “Realizm i psychologizm *Ostatniego etapu*,” *Warszawa* 4 (1948): 6.

69. Stanisław Helsztyński, “Film wstrząsa, przypomina i ostrzega,” *Warszawa* 4 (1948): 4.

70. Jerzy Putrament, “Notatki o Oświęcimiu,” *Odrodzenie* 23 (1948): 3.

71. Kazimierz Koźniewski, “Drażliwy problem,” *Przekrój* 179 (1949): 3. The debate is fittingly summarized by Jacek Lachendro in his *Zburzyć i zaościć?* 73–101. See also discussion in Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, 86–91.

72. Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, 90.

73. *Ibid.*, 90.

74. *Ibid.*, 90.

75. *Ibid.*, 91.

Chapter 5

Epigraph source: Liebman, “I Was Always in the Epicenter,” 29.

1. Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 121.

2. See my *Polish Film and the Holocaust*, 56–57.

3. Jakubowska, "Twórca o powstaniu dzieła," 17.
4. Żywulska, "Nareszcie film," 8.
5. Matuszewski, "Martyw punkt polskiego filmu — przełamany," 5.
6. Lubelski, "Dwa debiuty," 24.
7. Józef Cyrankiewicz, "Oświęcim walczący," *Naprzód* 18 (June 24, 1946): 1–2.

Wanda Jakubowska was an active participant at the congress uniting the PPR and PPS into the PZPR in December 1949. She delivered a speech outlining the new Stalinist goals for Polish cinema. See "Film Polski na kongresie P.Z.P.R.," *Film* 1 (1949): 2.

8. Lucjan Motyka (1915–1996), imprisoned in Auschwitz in 1943 (camp number 136678), member of the Auschwitz Combat Group, escaped from Auschwitz on July 19, 1944. "The escape was planned and prepared by the camp resistance movement. Motyka spends three days in the storage room of the SS kitchen before he leaves the area of the main camp." Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle*, 667. After the war, Motyka became a prominent politician, serving as minister of culture from 1964 to 1971, among other posts.

9. Józef Garliński's book was first published in Polish in 1974 as *Oświęcim walczący* (London: Odnova). It was translated into English in 1975 as *Fighting Auschwitz*. Garliński was imprisoned in Auschwitz in May 1943 (number 121421). After the war he settled in England.

10. See Konstanty R. Piekarski, *Escaping Hell: The Story of a Polish Underground Officer in Auschwitz and Buchenwald* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1989); Adam Cyra, *Ochotnik do Auschwitz: Witold Pilecki 1901–1948* (Oświęcim: Chrześcijańskie Stowarzyszenie Rodzin Oświęcimskich, 2000); Wincenty Gawron (former Auschwitz inmate), *Ochotnik do Oświęcimia* (Oświęcim: Państwowe Muzeum w Oświęcimiu, 1992). Ryszard Bugajski, of *Interrogation* (1982/1989) fame, directed a television play about the heroics of Pilecki titled *The Death of Cavalry Captain Pilecki* (*Śmierć Rotmistrza Pileckiego*) that was aired on May 15, 2006.

11. Halina Birenbaum, *Hope Is the Last to Die: A Personal Documentation of Nazi Terror* (Oświęcim: State Museum in Oświęcim, 1994), 192.

12. See, for example, Lubelski, *Strategie autorskie*, 82; Wróbel, "Ostatni etap Wandy Jakubowskiej," 13.

13. Eryk Krasucki, "Przepis na nowego bohatera narodowego. Albo o tym, dlaczego Karol Świerczewski nie został gwiazdą kina (perypetie scenariusza *Żołnierza zwycięstwa* Wandy Jakubowskiej z 1953 roku)," *Biuletyn Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej* 7 (2006): 53. Jerzy Borejsza, a postwar organizer of Polish communist publishing empire, was an older brother of the notorious Stalinist interrogator, Józef Różański.

14. Jerzy Toeplitz, "Introduction" in Jakubowska, *Ostatni etap*, 9.

15. Lubelski, *Strategie autorskie*, 80 and 82.

16. APMAB, *Oświadczenia*, vol. 49, p. 87 (Ośw./Szwemberg/1055).

17. APMAB, *Wspomnienia*, vol. 159b, p. 401 (Wsp./Ułan/897/168008/401).

18. AAN, Zespół 415, minutes of the conference from August 9, 1949, organized by the PZbWP, p. 2.

19. Garliński, *Fighting Auschwitz*, 129.

20. Jerzy Ptakowski, *Oświęcim bez cenzury i bez legend* (London: Myśl Polska, 1985), 67.

21. Henryk Świebocki, *The Resistance Movement*, vol. 4 of *Auschwitz 1940–1945: Central Issues in the History of the Camp*, ed. Waclaw Długoborski and Franciszek

Piper, trans. William Brand (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2000), 53–62, 132.

22. Anna Pawełczyńska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz. A Sociological Analysis*, trans. Catherine S. Leach (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 120–21.

23. Quoted from Zofia Wóycicka, *Przerwana żałoba: Polskie spory wokół pamięci nazistowskich obozów koncentracyjnych i zagłady 1944–1950* (Warsaw: TRIO, 2009), 72.

24. *Ibid.*, 72.

25. *Ibid.*, 88–97.

26. Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, 86.

27. “Wytyczne Wydziału Propagandy i Prasy KC PPR do pracy propagandowej Związku b. Więźniów Politycznych,” quoted in Dmitrów, *Niemcy i okupacja hitlerowska w oczach Polaków*, 159.

28. David Bathrick, “Holocaust Film before the Holocaust: DEFA, Antifascism and the Camps,” *Cinemas* 18, no. 1 (2007): 109–34; <http://www.erudit.org/revue/cine/2007/v18/n1/017849ar.html>.

29. Maria Jezierska, “Obrachunek,” *Tygodnik Powszechny* (September 1, 1946); quoted in Wóycicka, *Przerwana żałoba*, 35.

30. Anna Szyller Palarczyk’s Testimony, August 19, 1996, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, RG-50.030*0376.

31. Shelley, *Criminal Experiments*, 163 and 177 (testimonies of Claudette Kennedy and Marie-Elisa Cohen, respectively).

32. Garliński, *Fighting Auschwitz*, 129; also in Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle*, 314.

33. Hutton, *Testimony from the Nazi Camps*, 2. Hutton refers to Serge Klarsfeld’s *Le Mémorial de la déportation des Juifs de France* (New York: Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, 1978).

34. *Ibid.*, 172.

35. Garliński, *Fighting Auschwitz*, 130–31.

36. *Ibid.*, 133.

37. Pawełczyńska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz*, 90–91.

38. Yisrael Gutman, “Auschwitz—An Overview,” in *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, ed. Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 27.

39. Béla Balázs, “Concerning the Great Polish Auschwitz Film,” trans. Zsuzsa Berger and Stuart Liebman, in “Béla Balázs on Wanda Jakubowska’s *The Last Stop*: Three Texts,” 68.

40. Liebman, “Pages from the Past,” 60. Jakubowska mentioned that Marta’s character dominates the screen partly due to bad casting on her part. Barbara Drapińska (Marta) proved to be a much stronger actress than the prewar actress Wanda Bartówna (Helena). Had she, as originally planned, cast the rising Polish postwar star Danuta Szaflarska in the role of Helena, this might have been a film with a different emphasis. Madej, “Wanda Jakubowska,” 17. In a recent interview, Szaflarska stated that she did not appear in the film because she did not want to play a communist. Stanisław Zawisliński and Tadeusz Wijata, *Fabryka snów* (Łódź: TOYA, 2013), 30.

41. Elżbieta Ostrowska, “Filmic Representations of the ‘Polish Mother’ in Post-Second World War Polish Cinema,” *European Journal of Women Studies* 5, no. 3–4 (1998): 424.

42. Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 123. Kerner refers not only to *The Last Stage*,

but also to Andrzej Wajda's *Kanal* (1957) and Gillo Pontecorvo's *Kapo* (1960), films "which trade heavily in the realist aesthetic" (ibid.).

43. Liebman, "I Was Always in the Epicenter," 25.

44. Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle*, 708.

45. Avisar, *Screening the Holocaust*, 37.

46. Béla Balázs, "A Letter to Wanda Jakubowska," trans. Stuart Liebman, in "Béla Balázs on Wanda Jakubowska's *The Last Stop*," 64.

47. Ibid., 65.

48. Balázs, "Concerning the Great Polish Auschwitz Film," 67–69.

49. The book by Borowski is available in English in Barbara Vedder's translation: Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (New York: Penguin, 1992).

50. Zofia Kossak-Szczucka, *Z otchłani. Wspomnienia z lagru* (Częstochowa: Wydawnictwo Księgarni Władysława Nagłowskiego, 1946).

51. Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle*, 500.

52. Tadeusz Borowski, "Alicja w krainie czarów," *Pokolenie* 1 (January 12, 1947).

53. For more details, see Dariusz Kulesza, *Dwie prawdy. Zofia Kossak-Szczucka i Tadeusz Borowski wobec obrazu wojny w polskiej prozie lat 1944–1948* (Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersyteckie Trans Humana, 2006).

54. Tadeusz Borowski, *Alicja w krainie czarów (Utwory zebrane)* (Warsaw: Krytyka Literacka i Artystyczna, 1954), 30.

55. Janusz Nel Siedlecki, Krystyn Olszewski, and Tadeusz Borowski, *Byliśmy w Oświęcimiu* (Munich: Oficyna Warszawska na Obczyźnie, 1946); English translation by Alicia Nitecki, *We Were in Auschwitz* (New York: Welcome Rain Publishers, 2000), 3–4. As stated in the English edition, part of the original 1946 edition in Polish "was bound in concentration camp 'stripes' cut from original prison garments" (p. 197). The title page, apart from authors' names, included their camp numbers: 6643 (Siedlecki), 75817 (Olszewski), and 119198 (Borowski).

56. Anatol Girs, "From the Publisher," in *We Were in Auschwitz*, 1.

57. See discussion in Anna Holian, *Between National Socialism and Soviet Communism: Displaced Persons in Postwar Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 236–43.

58. Lubelski, "Dwa debiuty," 27.

59. Mruklik, "Wierność sobie," 8.

60. Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 68.

61. Andrzej Werner, *Zwyczajna apokalipsa. Tadeusz Borowski i jego wizja świata obozów* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1971), 21.

62. Ibid., 22.

63. Madej, *Kino, władza, publiczność*, 170 and 180.

64. Liebman, "Pages from the Past," 56.

65. B. W., "Patrzac na ekran," *Życie Warszawy* (April 4, 1948); quoted in Wróbel, "Ostatni etap Wandy Jakubowskiej," 10.

66. Quoted in Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland and the Politics of Commemoration*, 33.

67. See Alina Madej, "Zjazd filmowy w Wiśle, czyli dla każdego coś przykrego," *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 18 (1997): 207–14.

68. See my chapter on Socialist Realist films in Poland, "The Poetics of Screen

Stalinism,” in my book *Polish National Cinema*, 56–72. Piotr Zwierzchowski extensively discusses Polish Socialist Realist films in his books: *Zapomniani bohaterowie. O bohaterach filmowych polskiego socrealizmu* (Warsaw: TRIO, 2000); and *Pęknięty monolit. Konteksty polskiego kina socrealistycznego* (Bydgoszcz: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego, 2005).

Chapter 6

1. For example, Andrew Charlesworth, “Contesting Places of Memory: The Case of Auschwitz,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 12 (1994), 579–93; Tim Cole’s chapter on “Auschwitz” in his *Selling the Holocaust: From Auschwitz to Schindler* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 97–120; James E. Young’s chapter on “The Rhetoric of Ruins: The Memorial Camps at Majdanek and Auschwitz” in his *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 119–54; and Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*.

2. Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, xiv.

3. *Ibid.*, xvi.

4. Charlesworth, “Contesting Places of Memory,” 583.

5. *Ibid.*, 584.

6. Kornatowska, “Kto ratuje jedno życie,” 37. See also Madej, “Wanda Jakubowska,” 17.

7. Liebman, “I Was Always in the Epicenter,” 17.

8. Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle*, 383 and 389.

9. Jaff Schatz, *The Generation: The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Communists of Poland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 203.

10. Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 275.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. Marek Kucia, “‘Jews’—The Absence and Presence of a Category in the Representations of Auschwitz in Poland, 1945–1985,” *Studia Judaica* 2 (2006): 328–29.

14. Zofia Nałkowska, *Medallions*, trans. Diana Kuprel (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2000).

15. Żywulska, *I Came Back*. See Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle*, 469.

16. Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 64.

17. Stuart Liebman, “Early Holocaust Cinema: Jews under the Sign of the Cross,” in *The Holocaust: Memories and History*, ed. Victoria Khiterer (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 243.

18. Stuart Liebman, “Historiography/Holocaust Cinema: Challenges and Advances,” in *Cinema and the Shoah: An Arts Confronts the Tragedy of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jean-Michel Frodon (New York: SUNY Press, 2010), 207.

19. *Ibid.*, 214. See also Ira Konigsberg, “Our Children and the Limits of Cinema: Early Jewish Responses to the Holocaust,” *Film Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (1998): 7–19.

20. Wulf Kansteiner, “Sold Globally—Remembered Locally: Holocaust Cinema and the Construction of Collective Identities in Europe and the US,” in *Narrating the Nation: Representations in History, Media, and the Arts*, ed. Stefan Berger, Linas Eriksonas, and Andrew Mycock (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 164.

21. Liebman, “The Majdanek Trial,” 123.

22. Gershenson, *The Phantom Holocaust*, 59.
23. For a close reading, see my *Polish Film and the Holocaust*, 53–73, 76, 78–84, and 97–99.
24. See Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman, eds., *Concentrationary Cinema: Aesthetics as Political Resistance in Alain Resnais's Night and Fog* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011).
25. Cathy S. Gelbin, "Cinematic Representation of the Holocaust," in *Writing the Holocaust*, ed. Jean-Marc Dreyfus and Daniel Langton (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 30.
26. See Małgorzata Tryuk, "You Say Nothing; I Will Interpret': Interpreting in the Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp," in *Translation and Opposition*, ed. Dimitris Asimakoulas and Margaret Rogers (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2011): 223–43.
27. Bartov, *The "Jew" in Cinema*, 173.
28. For example, Liebman, "Pages from the Past," 60.
29. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books, 1988), 154–55.
30. *Ibid.*, 156.
31. Wiesław Kielar, *Anus Mundi: 1,500 Days in Auschwitz/Birkenau*, translated from the German edition by Susanne Flatauer (New York: Times Books, 1980). *Anus Mundi* was written in 1966, published in Polish for the first time in 1972, and since then has been reprinted numerous times. After the war, Kielar studied cinematography at the Łódź Film School, and later worked as a camera operator on, among others, Czesław Petelski's classic film *Damned Roads* (*Baza ludzi umarłych*, 1959). He also worked as an assistant to the camera operator on Jakubowska's later Auschwitz film, *The End of Our World* (1964). Zimetbaum's life and death in Auschwitz is discussed extensively by Lorenz Sichelshmidt in his German monograph *Mala: Ein Lieben und eine Liebe in Auschwitz* (Bremen: Donat, 1995). See also Anne Grynberg, "Mala Zimetbaum, un 'être lumineux' à Auschwitz," *Les Cahiers du judaïsme* 12 (2002): 114–28; and online documentation presented by the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, "Tragic Love of Auschwitz: The Story of Edek Galiński and Mala Zimetbaum," at: <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/exhibit/tragic-love-at-auschwitz/gRatYvcU?position=0%2C2>.
32. *Ibid.*, 255.
33. Żywulska, "Nareszcie film," 8.
34. Henryk Korotyński, "Oczyrna Oświęcimiaka," *Film* 7 (1948): 4.
35. Jakubowska, *Ostatni etap*, 83.
36. APMAB, *Oświadczenia*, vol. 141, testimony of Anna Palarczyk née Szyller, pp. 147–48 (Ośw./Szyller-Palarczyk/3293, no. 176121).
37. APMAB, *Oświadczenia*, vol. 139, testimony of Wanda Marossanyi and Anna Palarczyk Szyller, p. 166 (Ośw./Marossanyi i Palarczyk/3275, no. 175963). The tragic love story of Mala and Edek is the subject of two Polish medium-length documentary films: *An Auschwitz Love Story* (1989), produced by Jacek Bławut and Michał Żarnecki, and part four of *From the Auschwitz Chronicle* (*Z kroniki Auschwitz*, 2005), made by Michał Bukojemski.
38. Elissa Mailänder, *Female SS Guards and Workaday Violence: The Majdanek Concentration Camp, 1942–1944*, trans. Patricia Szobar (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015), 203.
39. Bartov, *The "Jew" in Cinema*, 169.

Chapter 7

1. Talarczyk-Gubała, *Wanda Jakubowska*.
2. The discussion of Jakubowska's later Auschwitz films relies on a fragment from my *Polish Film and the Holocaust*, 45–48.
3. Marian Kołodziej (1921–2009) was a distinguished set designer and painter who survived Auschwitz by adopting the name of a deceased prisoner. He kept this name after the war. This aspect of his life perhaps influenced the story presented by Jakubowska. Among several documentary films about the life and career of Kołodziej is *The Labyrinth: The Testimony of Marian Kołodziej* (2010, Jason A. Schmidt, Polish-American production). In 1944, Kołodziej was evacuated from Auschwitz to Gross Rosen, Buchenwald, and Mauthausen camps, where he was liberated on May 6, 1945. After the war, he studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków and graduated in 1950, specializing in set design. He worked in theater and cinema (with Kazimierz Kutz, among others), and never returned to his Auschwitz experiences until 1995. Fifty years after his Auschwitz ordeal, he presented a series of personal art works (pen and ink drawings) depicting life in a concentration camp.
4. Borowski's influence is discussed by several critics, among them Hanno Loewy in his insightful text, "The Mother of All Holocaust Films?" 199.
5. *Ibid.*, 189.
6. Quoted from Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, 93.
7. Tadeusz Hołuj, "Jak powstawał *Koniec naszego świata*," *Film* 14 (1964): 6.
8. *Ibid.*, 6.
9. Carr, "To Encompass the Unseeable."
10. Lubelski, "Dwa debiuty," 26.
11. Carr, "To Encompass the Unseeable." According to John J. Michalczyk, George Stevens, who had earlier produced the documentary *Nazi Concentration Camps* (1945), "refused to use any gruesome images of corpses filmed during the liberation of the camps since the world had seen enough of these ghastly pictures at the close of the war. Instead he used a montage effect of shots from *The Last Stage*. He had been personally horrified at the scene of frozen bodies at Dachau" (John J. Michalczyk, *Filming the End of the Holocaust: Allied Documentaries, Nuremberg and the Liberation of the Concentration Camps* [London: Bloomsbury, 2014], 188n18).
12. Liebman, "Pages from the Past," 63.
13. This segment on *The Passenger* borrows heavily from my discussion in *Polish Film and the Holocaust*, 99–107. For a close reading of *The Passenger*, see also Maureen Turim, "On the Charge of Memory: Auschwitz, Trauma and Representation," *Arcadia: International Journal for Literary Studies* 45, no. 2 (2011): 297–306; Ewelina Nurczyńska-Fidelska, *Andrzej Munk* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1982); and Paulina Kwiatkowska, "Structures of Memory: The Images of Space-Time in Andrzej Munk's Film *The Passenger*," *Kwartalnik Filmowy* [Special English Edition] (2013): 6–30.
14. Bolesław W. Lewicki, "Temat: Oświęcim," *Kino* 6 (1968): 16–18. Lewicki (1908–1981) was imprisoned at Auschwitz for two years. In June 1942, he was transferred to Gross Rosen and later to other camps, including Dachau. After the war he taught at the University of Łódź from 1959, and was also head of the Łódź Film School from 1968 to 1969. In 1974, he published his Auschwitz memoirs titled *Wiesz, jak jest*.
15. Stefania Beylin, untitled conversation with Munk, *Film* 41 (1961): 11. Munk

was killed in 1961 in a car accident while returning from the set of *The Passenger*. The film was finished by his friend Witold Lesiewicz and premiered on the second anniversary of Munk's death, 20 September 1963.

16. *Ibid.*, 11.

17. Accomplished production manager Wilhelm Hollender (1922–1994) was imprisoned at Auschwitz. In 1994 Włodzimierz Gołaszewski made a documentary film initiated and coscripted by Hollender, *Inspection at the Scene of the Crime—We Shouldn't Be among the Living* (*Wizja lokalna—nie powinno nas być wśród żywych*), which introduced several former Auschwitz prisoners.

18. Nurczyńska-Fidelska, *Andrzej Munk*, 129.

19. Zdzisław Dudzik, "Ostatni film Andrzeja Munka," *Film* 41 (1961): 11.

20. Loewy, "The Mother of All Holocaust Films?" 194.

21. *Ibid.*, 197.

22. Carr, "To Encompass the Unseeable."

23. See Sara Guyer, *Romanticism after Auschwitz* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 200.

24. Jan Alfred Szczepański, "Koniec naszego świata," *Film* 14 (1964): 7.

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Polski Związek byłych Więźniów Politycznych (Polish Association of Former Political Prisoners)

Archiwum Państwowego Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau w Oświęcimiu (APMAB, Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum)

Biuro Informacji o Byłych Więźniach (Office for Information about Former Prisoners)

HKB Rajsko (Sub-Camp Rajsko)

Instytut Higieny Rajsko (Institut of Hygiene at Rajsko)

Oświadczenia (Testimonies)

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Komisja Kolaudacyjna (Commission for Film Approval)

Komisja Ocen Filmów i Scenariuszy (Commission for Film and Script Assessment)

International Tracing Service (ITS), Bad Arolsen

Gerda Schneider

Muzeum Kinematografii, Łódź (Museum of Cinematography in Łódź)

Aleksander Ford

Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Filmowa, Telewizyjna i Teatralna, Łódź (PWSFTviT, Łódź Film School)

Wanda Jakubowska

PRIVATE ARCHIVES

- Alina Madej archive** (copies of documents pertaining to *The Last Stage* given to Alina Madej by Wanda Jakubowska)
- Katarzyna Rudomino archive** (Wanda Jakubowska's granddaughter)
- Roman Dziewoński archive** (Edward Dziewoński's son)

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Polish newsreel (Polska Kronika Filmowa, PKF) about *The Last Stage*:

PKF 15/1948 (film's premiere in Warsaw)

PKF 33/1948 (award at Karlovy Vary IFF)

PKF 47/1948 (film's premiere in France)

DOCUMENTARY FILMS ABOUT WANDA JAKUBOWSKA (BIOGRAPHY, INTERVIEWS)

I Am a Grandmother of Polish Cinema (Jestem babką polskiego kina). Tomasz Rudomino, 1997. TVP Historia, 39'.

Kino, kino, kino. Andrzej Czekalski, 1994. TVP 1, 54'.

Notation: Wanda Jakubowska (Notacja—Wanda Jakubowska). Andrzej Czekalski, 1993. TVP 1, 306'.

THE LAST STAGE: FILM CREDITS

The Last Stage (*The Last Stop, Ostatni etap*; 1948), 104'.

Premiere: April 1, 1948, in Warsaw (most Polish sources refer to the Łódź screening on March 28, 1948). First public screening in Prague (Czechoslovakia), March 5, 1948.

Director: Wanda Jakubowska

First Assistant Director: Jerzy Kawalerowicz

Second Assistant Director: Zbigniew Niemczynowski

Script: Wanda Jakubowska and Gerda Schneider

Cinematography: Boris (Bentsion) Monastyrski

Camera Operator: Karol Chodura and Andrzej Ancuta

Assistant Camera Operator: Marcelli Matraszek (not credited)

Dolly Grip: Marian Kowalczyk

Gaffer: Tadeusz Zajęc

Set Design: Roman Mann, Czesław Piaskowski

Make-Up: Kazimiera Narkiewicz

Special Effects: Marian Lis (not credited)

Sound: Jan Radlicz with the assistance of Leonard Księżak and Adam Sendyk

Music: Roman Palester; performed by Symphony Orchestra of Polish Radio in Katowice, conducted by Zdzisław Górzyski

Editing: Lidia (credited as Róża) Pstrokońska

Art Director: Jan Rybkowski

Production: Mieczysław Wajnberger (credited as Weinberger); Przedsiębiorstwo Filmowe “Film Polski”

Producer’s Assistant: Tadeusz Karwański (not credited)

Executive Producer: Wilhelm Hollender

Cast: Barbara Drapińska (Marta Weiss); Wanda Bartówna (Helena); Tatiana Górecka (Eugenia, the Russian Doctor); Antonina Gordon-Górecka (credited as Antonina Górecka; Anna, German Communist); Maria Winogradowa (Nadia); Barbara Fijewska (Anielka); Aleksandra Śląska (*Oberaufseherin*); Maria Kaniewska (Raportführerin); Maria Redlichówna (aka Anna Lutosławska; Urszula); Stanisław Zaczyk (Tadek); Huguette Faget (Michèle); Alina Janowska (Dessa); Zofia Mrozowska (Gypsy Woman); Stefan Śródka (Bronek); Barbara Rachwalska (*Kapo Elza*); Anna Jaraczówna (*Kapo Frieda*); Halina Drohocka (False Doctor “Lalunia”); Władysław Brochwicz (Lagerkommandant Hans Schmidt); Edward Dziewoński (Lagerarzt, SS doctor; also a German official); Kazimierz Pawłowski (head of Auschwitz SS); Janina Marisówna (credited as Janina Morrisówna; Aufseherin); Elżbieta Łabuńska (prisoner); Jadwiga Chojnacka (prisoner in camp infirmary); Ewa Kunina (prisoner); Roma Rudecka (*Kapo at Sauna*); Zofia Niwińska (*Kapo Laura*); Zygmunt Chmielewski (SS officer); Jerzy Rychter (SS officer; not credited); Tadeusz Bartosik (SS guard shooting a singing Pole; not credited); Bolesław Kamiński (*Oberscharführer* SS; dwarf; not credited); Halina Głuszkówna (aka Eugenia Rychlewska; camp orchestra conductor; not credited); Ryszarda Hanin (prisoner; not credited); Zbigniew Filus (member of International Committee; not credited); Artur Młodnicki (German officer playing with a child; not credited); Zbigniew Skowroński (Gestapo man translating from Russian); Tadeusz Pluciński, Tadeusz Szmidt, Igor Śmiałowski, Jerzy Passendorfer, Jan Rybkowski (all as SS staff; not credited); Krystyna Ciechomska and Janina Jabłonowska (prisoners in first transport); Stefan Rydel and Andrzej Szczepkowski (prisoners; not credited); Krystyna Szner-Mierzejewska (prisoner; not credited). Also, as extras: Polish stage actors and inhabitants of the town of Oświęcim (both groups credited); Red Army soldiers and German POWs (not credited).

**FILMOGRAPHY: WANDA JAKUBOWSKA'S
FEATURE FILMS**

- 1988 *Kolory kochania* (*Colors of Loving*)
1985 *Zaproszenie* (*Invitation*)
1978 *Biały mazur* (*White Mazurka*)
1971 *150 na godzinę* (*150 Kilometers per Hour*)
1965 *Gorąca linia* (*Express Production Line*)
1964 *Koniec naszego świata* (*The End of Our World*)
1960 *Historia współczesna* (*Contemporary Story*)
1960 *Spotkania w mroku* (*Meetings in the Twilight*)
1957 *Król Maciuś I* (*King Matthew the 1st*)
1956 *Pożegnanie z diabłem* (*Farewell to the Devil*)
1954 *Opowieść atlantycka* (*Atlantic Story*)
1953 *Żołnierz zwycięstwa* (*Soldier of Victory*)
1948 *Ostatni etap* (*The Last Stage*)
1939 *Nad Niemnem* (*On the Niemen River* [not released, lost])

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