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Imaginary Witness: Hollywood and the Holocaust

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Hollywood and the Holocaust

Michael Berenbaum

I

This presentation is written with and in memory of my late dear friend and colleague Danny Anker with whom I worked on his wonderful film *Imaginary Witness: Hollywood and the Holocaust*. Because of the press of time we cannot show the film this morning. When given the choice between hearing a presentation on American films on the Holocaust and the richness of what a movie on the identical subject can offer, all I can say is see the film rather than hear the talk, but here goes the second best option.

For over half a century Hollywood films have dealt with Nazism and the Holocaust in complex and contradictory ways, marked by outrage and indifference, compassion and ignorance, the need to understand and the desire to forget. And while these events have taken place far from American shores it has been American films that have shaped so deeply how we – and even the world -- remember these events.

As film historian Annette Insdorf said: “Of all art forms film gives the greatest illusion of authenticity of truth.” Motion pictures take us inside real people doing real things but there is always some degree of manipulation some degree of distortion,” yet when dealing with a historical event of such importance manipulation and distortion are capable of denigrating the history or trivializing its significance.

As the prominent director Sidney Lumet has said: “Unless you are doing a totally abstract movie, the vocabulary is literal.” The task is to take this literal vocabulary and find a representative image of something that is so far outside the realm of human experience.

The Holocaust is perhaps the most difficult story to put on film.

Elie Wiesel, the bard of the Holocaust, suggests paralysis: “only those who were there will ever know and those who were there can never tell.” Were we to accept this admonition without challenge, then there is nothing that could be done to tell the story. And yet, Wiesel himself has time and again violated his own argument and the world is far better off because he has not accepted his own advice. So too with others who dare to confront this event.

Steven Spielberg accepted Wiesel’s admonition -- and then violated it. He said: “The Holocaust is an ineffable experience only understood by those who were there.” And yet like the mystics of old speaking of God and the poets of love appealing to their muses, the filmmaker must accept the challenge and the best of the filmmakers are humbled by that challenge and dare to create precisely because it is a challenge. It is never going to be as bad as it was but that dilemma is should you not do it or not touch it.

II

Long before the Second World War, Hollywood and Germany already had a sustained economic and cultural relationship. In the late 1920s, Germany provided 10% of the receipts of Hollywood movies. It was central to the financial success of a motion picture, an essential part of the foreign market. So as Hitler began his rise to power, Hollywood treated Nazism with kid gloves. Even the newsreels, then an essential form by which Americans were informed and impacted by the news, treated events such as the May 10th 1933 book burnings, highly visual with marches and parades, flames and dramatic settings, as if it were college pranks. "It is a high time in Berlin tonight" is how one such newsreel began.

The visual imagery captivated Hollywood; only a few paid attention to the implicit racism, fewer still to its antisemitism; in part, because racism and antisemitism were so prevalent in American society that accepted segregation and discrimination, in a world populated by Henry Ford and Father Charles Coughlin, among others.

As Nazism took hold within Germany, studios complied with demand to fire their Jewish executives, yet the studio executives were themselves Jews. The Hollywood moguls did not want to identify themselves as Jews, but as Americans and they played a considerable role in shaping the American story. Imagine a Russian Jew wrote the words: "I'm dreaming of a White Christmas just like the one I used to know." Irving Berlin did not grow up in an assimilated German Jewish home with a Christmas tree but more likely with latkes and a Hanukah Menorah. The moguls were afraid of the charges of dual loyalty. They wanted to proclaim their allegiance to America – their allegiance only to America.

A bold engagement with Nazism would have violated the movie industry's economic interests abroad and its self-policing production code which regulated political material as well. The Production Code required that "the institutions and prominent people of all nations shall be represented fairly" -- all nations and prominent people, included Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany.

The 1936 Olympics were portrayed as a defeat for Nazi Germany. Jesse Owens won his four Gold Medals and Hitler's racial divide between the Master Race and "other inferior races," suffered a grave defeat. Much underplayed was the fact that Avery Brundage, the President of the US Olympic Committee, benched two American Jewish runners Marty Glickman and Sam Stoller, over the objections of Owens who said he had won enough Gold and that the other should be given their chance. Brundage did not want offend Hitler by having these Jewish young men defeat the German team, Overlooked as well was the tremendous boost that the Olympics gave to Nazi Germany in terms of foreign currency and international legitimacy.

After the November 9-11th 1938 pogroms in Nazi Germany which by then included Austria, known as Kristallnacht, there was a growing awareness in the United States that something terrible was happening abroad. By 1939 President Franklin Delano Roosevelt understood two things that he was unwilling to tell the American people, at least at that time. He would run for an unprecedented third term in 1940 and that the United States was headed to war, a World War but two decades after the “war to end all wars.”

Some of the Hollywood executives worked to save refugees and their own relatives abroad. Carl Laemele of Universal Studio brought over almost all the Jews from his own German village posting the guarantees that they would not be a burden to the American taxpayer and often complaining of the burdens of paperwork that the State Department was requiring of him, despite his major financial and political resources. David Wyman wrote of *Paper Walls* and even Laemele could not easily overcome these hurdles.

Some Hollywood stars, many of them Jews who had changed their names to appeal to the American mainstream, spoke out against Nazism. They were prominent in the anti-Nazi League. Some advocated an anti-German boycott. But the effort was primarily off screen. Later major Hollywood figures including Paul Muni, Edward G. Robinson and Ben Hecht marshaled their talented colleagues to demonstrate on behalf of the Jews. Still the industry itself was subject to antisemitic threats from the KKK and the Black Legion, from the German Bund, an organization of over 10,000 German Americans who openly supported Hitler.

American isolationism was a powerful force and it had a very prominent advocate in Joseph Kennedy Senior who flew out to Hollywood and warned the Jewish moguls of the dangers of sending American into war and the antisemitic backlash if the war was to be regarded as a Jewish war, a war for the Jews, inspired by the Jews. They, together with the Jewish institutional establishment, had experienced enough antisemitism to take these warnings to heart. Even in the US Congress, the word “kike” could be used and antisemitism – along with other racism – was freely expressed.

Not all the moguls were browbeat into submission. Harry Warner was consumed with the threat of fascism, and Warner Brothers, the studio he headed with his brother Jack, were more political. Their films were taken from the nitty gritty of life. They had attitude. The Warners made films that alluded to the growing threat of fascism in America. To understand the historical ethos of the time, please recall the depiction of that threat made so vivid in Philip Roth’s powerful and frightening novel, *The Plot Against America*.

Confessions of a Nazi Spy (1939) was the first of the anti-Nazis features made in America. It was based on the actual revelation of a domestic Nazi spy ring in the United States. Yet, the fear of reprisal was so great that more than half of the cast requested their names not appear in the final credits and the part of Hitler was dropped when

Warner Brothers could not find a single actor to play the role. Even within the studio itself the film was codenamed *Confessions of Nancy Drew* and the script was handed to actors in sealed envelopes as the gofer was accompanied by studio security. The entire production was kept under wraps until it was released with a fanfare of publicity.

Warner Brothers came under attack and the film was banned in almost in every country in Europe. There were some other exceptions, rare exceptions. *The Mortal Storm* (1940), starring Jimmy Stewart, Margaret Sullivan, Frank Morgan and Robert Young was the story of an assimilated prominent Jewish family, the Roths, the father was a professor, who were confronted with the rise of Hitler and of the prevalence of Nazi thugs on the University campus brazenly challenging the professor who refused to allow racist myths distort his scientific teaching. Its theme contrasted American tolerance with Nazi intolerance. We Americans were the good guys despite our history of segregation and slavery. Yet it failed to address the darkest aspects of Nazi ideology – antisemitism and the “J” word, the word Jew was never uttered. Non-Aryan was used instead.

The producer cut the scene in which Rudy Roth, the son, comes to his father and says I am being persecuted because I am a Jew and the father explains to him patiently, proudly, but also so belatedly, what it means to be a Jew. That scene was being repeated in many places throughout Nazi Germany. Robert Weltsch, the editor of a prominent German Jewish newspaper, was instructing his readers, “wear it with pride that Jewish star.” Martin Buber was leading Adult Jewish Education throughout Germany preparing his people for the ordeal that lay ahead, but that scene could not be played out in theaters throughout the United States.

The Director downplayed the Jewish angle, it was a human interest story set against the backdrop of Nazi Germany. The response to *The Mortal Storm* was swift. The German consulate protested. It warned that those involved in the film would be “remembered after a German victory.” MGM films, the studio was by Louis B. Mayer, were banned from Nazi Germany.

The most notable anti Nazi film to be produced *in* Hollywood before the war was not produced *by* Hollywood; it was produced, directed and financed by the star himself Charlie Chaplain who because of his stature and his wealth could do what he wanted to do. In *The Great Dictator*, (1940) Chaplain played both the Jewish barber and the ranting tyrant, satirizing the great Nazi myth of the blond haired blue eyed Nazi Aryan superman when the country was headed by a short, non-descript dark haired Austrian born corporal with a funny mustache that Chaplain mimicked.

The Great Dictator focused on Hitler not only as land grabbing expansionist tyrant but as a killer persecuting Jews – well before the “Final Solution” became German state policy some eighteen months later.

In the tools of a master -- and Chaplain was a master -- comedy is a weapon that pierces our complacency that forces us to acknowledge the absurdity of Nazism. Many scenes are recalled by those who first saw this film: such as the great ballet scene when the dancing tyrant holds a balloon globe in his hands before it bursts. And young Jews, now old men and women vividly recall, that *The Great Dictator* was one of the first times in which the word Jew was heard on screen.

The Senate was none too pleased with Hollywood. The Nye-Clark Senate Committee set out to investigate the Jewish conspiracy to propel the nation into war. Senator Gerald Nye of North Dakota declared that it was Jews not Hitler who posed the greatest threat to America – sobering words indeed. Jews were engaged in a conspiracy to get America into the war. Chaplain was falsely suspected of being Jewish.

Nonetheless many applauded Chaplain's message

To Be or Not To Be (1942) starring and Jack Benny, Carole Lombard and Robert Stack was American comedy directed by Ernst Lubitsch, about a troupe of actors in German-occupied Warsaw who use their abilities at disguise and acting to fool the occupying troops. Released some two months after Lombard was killed in an airplane crash, it drew considerable attention. Like the *Great Dictator* it was a pointed comedic attack on Nazi Germany and critics criticized it for an appalling lack of taste and not the substance of what was happening in Warsaw. By then the "Final Solution" was the policy of the German government. The Einsatzgruppen were at work and the death camps were being made operational.

III

Much changed when the United States entered World War II after the December 7th, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor and Hollywood geared up to serve the functions of wartime propaganda. Most of the war films focused on the war in the Pacific, courage and valor, American teamwork that would overcome seemingly unbeatable odds.

When the European theater of war was depicted, it was most often in Grade B, often with refugee directors; films launched without the very great Hollywood stars, they often fell off the radar screen. A retrospective on these films detail the innocence of the message. "There is no problem so great that American know-how can't overcome it. "We are just as tough as you." "Just because we play by the rules does not mean that we are not strong. In fact, we are stronger because of it." German values are contrasted with our values. And while information about what was happening was available it was not grasped, not internalized to form the basis for action.

The great filmmakers of the era Frank Capra, John Houston, Billy Wilder, George Stevens joined the Army Signal Corps and captured the war on films. With the liberation of the camps Nazi policies in these camps took center stage. George Stevens took color

footage of Dachau at his own expense, as the Army would only pay for Black and White. These films are featured on the opening floor of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as permanent documentation of what he saw on April 28th and 29th 1945

Combat photographers were allowed inside the camp even before the medical personnel. Eight days later Warner Brothers employees viewed the film. As Malvin Ward recalled. "We sat in the projection room, you could hear a pin drop. I was shocked. It was most horrifying thing I had ever seen." Several of those who viewed the film threw up. Ronald Regan was so taken by what he had seen that he imagined that he had been present at liberation. Years later as President he spoke of those days and the White House had to issue a correction. He had not been there. He merely saw the films. These films of liberation became newsreels that played before and in between the double features in the movie theaters before Americans had television. Susan Sontag, recalled:

Nothing I have seen... ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously.... When I looked at these photographs something broke...I felt irretrievably grieved, wounded, but part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead; something is still crying.

America no longer had information – they had knowledge -- real knowledge. The knowledge was visual, visceral.

Weeks after the war ended, the Hollywood moguls saw the horrors of the camps. Newspaper publishers and politicians, American opinion makers, movie makers foremost among them, were transported in military uniforms to witness first hand what had occurred. Joseph Pulitzer said: I expected to find the terrible reports published in the United States were exaggerations and largely propaganda. But they were understatements."

The late Henry Jackson, then a young Congressman entered Buchenwald. His actions later as a Senator from Washington State, with its miniscule Jewish population, on behalf of Soviet Jewry and in support of Israel were shaped by what he saw that day.

Hollywood historian, Neal Gabler said: Masters of most powerful medium in the world, they were confronted by "the idea that they should now bear witness." Shaken by the experienced, the Hollywood executives vowed to make film that would educate the world.

Jack Warner wrote: "No one who has seen these things can allow themselves to assume responsibility for a screen that depicts only a make believe world."

In the immediate postwar era, Bess Meyerson was chosen Miss America, a dark haired, dark eyed, full figured ethnic Jew with a ethnic Jewish name came to represent the epitome of American beauty and Hank Greenberg, an aging star who before the war was harassed when it seemed as if a Jew might break Babe Ruth's record of 60 home runs became the heroic athlete who had left the game to fight for his nation. Two films encompassed the mainstream efforts to deal with the Jews: *Crossfire* (1947) which openly explored the theme of antisemitism, the first B to receive a best picture Academy Award nomination, and *Gentleman's Agreement*, which actually won the Oscar, in which Gregory Peck plays a Gentile with an ambiguous, possibly Jewish sounding name Mr. Green, who allows himself to be taken for a Jew and experiences the subtle and not so subtle antisemitism of postwar America. American Jewish historians regard these events in popular American culture as muting the antisemitism that had previously characterized the 1930s and early 1940s. Neither film mentioned the Nazis. In American culture virtual silence surrounded the war.

Excuses were plenty. It was too soon. The event – it was not yet called the Holocaust – was incapable of illumination – at least not yet. It might be too cynical but not altogether incorrect to presume, that America was not interested not in refighting the last war but in winning the Cold War and Germany was key to that victory. We had to woo those people not disparage them.

For survivors too it was too soon. Few spoke of their experience, fewer were asked. And survivor had a new language to learn, new careers to begin, new families to build and many of their efforts were forward looking in an America where “progress was our most important product.”

Let's pay attention to the silence: *The Search*, (1948) starring Montgomery Clift featured a 9 year old boy rendered mute by his experience in the concentration camp. *Singing in the Dark* (1956) featured a survivor so traumatized that he was driven into amnesia but in true Hollywood fashion, he is still able to sing, still ready to celebrate life.

In 1953 the popular television show *This is Your Life* starring Ralph Edwards brought the story of Auschwitz survivor Hanna Bloch Kohner to television packaged as typical narrative. It featured surprised reunions with her liberator and fellow concentration camps inmates and then culminated in her seeing her brother, a fellow survivor, for the first time since early in their concentration camp incarceration a decade earlier. It was traditional narrative with a moving love story. The happy ending was paramount. From the ashes of the oven she rebuilt her life with a loving husband and once again saw her brother Dr. Gottfried Bloch. The brutal past is overcome by a promising future. The past is forgotten, the future beckons.

Not until 1959 did Hollywood address the Holocaust with the presentation of the *Diary of Anne Frank*. The *Diary* had sold widely and it had been made into a very successful Broadway play so it was only natural that it found its way into the big screen. The Director George Stevens had shot movies in the camps. He was all too familiar with the concentration camp. The *Diary* was a universal coming of age story of a young teenage girl. The *Diary* ends just as the Holocaust begins for Anne. Literary critics Lawrence Langer and Alvin Rosenfeld do not regard *The Diary of Anne Frank* as a Holocaust story, but that judgment may be too harsh. Most of you are familiar with the controversy over Meyer Levin's screenplay and its rejection by Otto Frank. It is altogether proper to say that Anne as portrayed in the *Diary*, the show and film that followed is deJudaized, universalized. Almost no attention is paid to what happened to her after her arrest. The only Holocaust imagery in the film is presented in a nightmare with scenes from the death camp. Anne's imagination was explored, not what happened to her in Westerbork, Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen where she died on typhus just weeks before liberation.

George Stevens was the most successful director of his era and he assured the audience that his film would not venture into "uncomfortable territory." Anne Frank, he assured them, would be devoid of Nazi horrors. The audience knew her fate; they could imagine what happened. The movie has the typical Hollywood ending. Anne says:

That's the difficulty in these times: ideals, dreams, and cherished hopes rise within us, only to meet the horrible truth and be shattered. It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I still keep them, because in spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death.

By September, Anne was in Auschwitz. Hope died at Auschwitz; so too innocence.

People may be good at heart, but the Holocaust is surely no manifestation of that.

Two months later, television broadcast a harsher look at the reality of the Holocaust when it aired *Judgment at Nuremberg*. The antagonist of the film is, in the words of its writer Abby Mann, patriotism and the terrible things that can happen in the name of patriotism. The film grapples with guilt and the evil that can be fostered by the rule of law, at least certain laws. Were all Germans guilty or merely some? Were the Allies guilty by their indifference and inaction, by not admitting the Jews, by not intervening sooner? The film was compromised by last minute network interference. The sponsor of Playhouse 90, the American Gas Company, objected to the word "gas," which was silenced as the actor said: "___ chamber." And all that could be heard was the word that was not said.

Two years later in 1961 it was made into a movie starring Spencer Tracy and in that film America congratulates himself for its sense of justice and for the values that underscore the judicial process even in judgment of our enemies. Americans are the heroes of that story, Americans and the American way.

The real star of the movie was the film within the film, the documentary film presented in the courtroom, now presented to a new generation fourteen years removed from the newsreels that had shaken Susan Sontag to her core. Until the documentary was played the issues were abstract; we were at a great distance from the crime but with the movie, the crime took center stage.

Two months after *Judgment at Nuremberg* was released as a film, the Eichmann Trial captivated the American public with daily news and special radio reports and yet, the shift was made in an Israeli courtroom from the perpetrator to the victim.

VI

Viktor Frankl wrote of liberation in *Man's Search for Meaning*. "Everything was unreal, unlikely as in a dream. Only later – and for some it was much later or never – was liberation actually liberating." Sidney Lumet's *The Pawnbroker* (1965) explored a survivor who is still haunted by his experience. He lives without passion without pity, without love, dead perhaps even in life. Lumet recreates life in the concentration camp. He grapples with memory, memory that is being fought, by showing flashbacks from this world into the world of the camps. As Annette Insdorf said: "It was the perfect film for the 1960s reflecting the way that America deals with the Holocaust, sputtering, not yet absorbed." In the climactic scene Rod Steiger had a brilliant moment of acting as Sol Nazerman sees his assistant shot on the ground, he starts to scream but no sound comes out. The audience is asked to put their scream in his mouth. We want to scream about the Holocaust but all that comes forth is silence.

By late in the 1960s more was known about the Holocaust and after the upheavals of the 1960s more was permissible. *The Producers* was based on the premise that no audience would tolerate a gross treatment of Hitler and the Nazis, and yet the audience knew enough about America to understand why it might succeed. Brief images of the Holocaust could imply a back story that need not be embellished as when in *Harold and Maude* (1971) Maude shows Harold her tattoo. The Holocaust might serve as a metaphor for something else as in *Cabaret* where the decadence of prewar Berlin resonated in the world of free love, drugs, Vietnam and civil unrest.

VII

In 1977 ABC aired *Roots* and seemingly overnight America became aware of its own shameful past. It had the largest viewership in Network history and thus, suddenly one could consider bringing other projects that until now might appeal to a limited segment

of the audience to television. A year later NBC aired the docu-drama *Holocaust*, which over nine hours attempted to tell the complete story of the Holocaust through the experience of one family, the Weiss family, an assimilated Jewish family and their children. They were similar to Americans, people who had come from somewhere else and assimilated to the larger culture. To incorporate the entire story of the Holocaust, this family was made to be everywhere and to see everything. All was condensed into one narrative linked by one human story. The series was broadcast over four nights; one in two Americans saw the series and suddenly everyone seemed interested in the Holocaust and most especially in its survivors.

Despite its overwhelming popularity the series was controversial. Elie Wiesel attacked it in the *New York Times*. It was, for Wiesel, morally objectionable, even indecent. He was aghast at its trivialization and the commercialization of the Holocaust – once again there were adds for gas -- perhaps even at the audacity of the attempt at representation. His was correct aesthetically – years later when I saw the series again on the History Channel I was surprised by how poor it was – but my tastes had become more refined over the decades. Yet he underestimated its impact and also what was required to bring the Holocaust to the mainstream American public. Its impact in the United States was great, but its impact in Germany even greater where the Parliament lifted the Statue of Limitations on Nazi War Criminals as a result. There was a cynical joke circulating in German: the television had more impact than the original.

And perhaps its greatest impact was on the individuals in whose name Wiesel had spoken: the survivors. Suddenly everyone was interested in hearing their story and just as suddenly they were ready to tell their story. Just in time, the Beta and VHS were invented making it inexpensive and easy to record testimony.

Survivors were talking and American people were listening.

The 1982 film *Sophie's Choice* starring Meryl Streep and Kevin Kline featured a non-Jewish survivor of Auschwitz. Set in Brooklyn in the 1950s, the narrator is an aspiring Southern writer Stingo, a surrogate for the novel's author William Styron. Stingo observes the difficult interaction between Sophie and her Jewish boyfriend. He becomes Sophie's confidant, her contact with innocence. The emotional climax of the movie is Sophie's choice upon her arrival at Auschwitz. It shows bestiality without any graphic imagery. The choice she is forced to make is so bestial that nothing else is required. In his novel Styron backs away from portraying Sophie at that moment or even from depicting the officer who insists that she make the *selektion*. He erects a zone of privacy onto a world he cannot enter and asks philosophically what matter of a man demands that a mother choose between her young son and baby daughter. He allows the reader to imagine Sophie's response. The film offers no such protection.

By the end of the decade, the Holocaust had returned to the screen with the mini-series portrayal of *War and Remembrance* based on Herman Wouk's best selling novel. The director Alan J. Pakula insisted on intense graphic imagery and was given the green light to show material on television that is usually confined to R rated movies. Something had happened between the docu-drama *Holocaust* and the mini-series *War and Remembrance*. It had happened earlier with the experience of Vietnam and the coarsening of American experience

Pakula said: "In order to get attention and to hold attention, you have to show graphic imagery." Allowed to approach Holocaust material the way it must be done. We rebuilt the tracks to show the trains coming in. We rebuilt the crematoria based on the original plans and configurations so we could show the exterior exactly. We have to show it, though we couldn't come close to what actually happened. His critics asked: Are there events that should not be imagined because they cannot be represented? In other words: is representation a desecration or when is representation a desecration?

VIII

Schindler's List (1993) is the most widely seen Holocaust film all time. Made by the most commercially successful director of all time, it had the advantage that it would be seen by everyone. Both Spielberg's admirers and critics feared that it would become the singular image that would define the event.

Spielberg chose an extraordinary, atypical story. Jewish victims were bit players to a heroic Nazi. The hero was a German, a Nazi, an SS man, a war profiteer and a womanizer who uses Jewish money, Jewish labor and Jewish brains to get ahead and who gets rich from Nazism and harsh occupation of Poland for a considerable time. Until ---

Until it is too much and Spielberg is elusive as to when that moment was. His work was pathbreaking; at once the violence was casual but also restrained from a director not known for his restraint. Spielberg made the film in Black and White. For a man of his generation – and mine – the images of the Holocaust were Black and White, though his character is for so long a time, so very gray. Color glamorizes, Spielberg said. He got rid of every arsenal in his tool box and resorted to color only for the girl in the Red Coat.

Spielberg couldn't end the film. His ending was the weakest part of the film; in part, because he could not let go. He has multiple endings, some unreal, some too sentimental. Schindler's last speech, the survivors and crew walking over the hill to visit Schindler's grave as the 1967 song Jerusalem of Gold plays in the background, the survivors and the movie stars who portrayed them and the simple statement that there are 4,000 Jews in Poland today and 6000 survivors of Schindler's List.

Spielberg, who had never before won an Academy Award was awarded one for Best Picture and another for Best Director, two among the 7 Oscars awarded to the film. And it spurred a new wave to Holocaust related films. For Spielberg the project transformed him. The proceeds of the film were used to found the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation which took the testimony of 52,000 survivors in 32 languages and 57 countries and thereby established the largest data base of Holocaust testimonies ever, now being supplemented by testimonies of survivors of other genocides as well.

In the brief time remaining let us consider that survivor testimony itself has become an essential part of documentary film making. Many such documentaries have won Academy Awards including my own *One Survivor Remembers: The Gerda Weisman Klein Story* and *The Last Days* tells the story of five Hungarian Holocaust survivors who were incarcerated in the great Hungarian deportations seventy years ago. *Into the Arms of Strangers*, movingly tells the story of the kindertransport, the Jewish children sent from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia to a new life in England. Built on the axis of the parental child relationship it explores the nature of that bond –parents who brokenheartedly learned that they could not protect their own children and intuited what might happen sent their children to live with strangers; and their children who intellectually understood that they were saved by their parent's wisdom and courage and yet who emotionally felt betrayed and abandoned. It even describes the bittersweet reunions of the few who survived and were reunited with their children, who were no longer children but hardened adults who often viewed their parents as shattered, sad, and pathetic.

Themes were explored. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was a mini-series. Robin Williams used comedy to explore the ghetto in *Jakob the Liar* for which he undeservedly won the Razzie award for the worst actor. The ghetto was also explored in Roman Polanski's Academy Award Film, *The Pianist*, the Wannsee Conference became a 94 minute reenactment in *Conspiracy*, Kenneth Branagh, Stanley Tucci and Colin Firth among others.

Resistance was portrayed in *Defiance* starring Daniel Craig so well known for his portrayal of heroic James Bond playing Tuvia Bielski. Anne Frank again presented on television, she was more overly Jewish and we saw her fate in the camps.

Sometimes, a film fails because it is too faithful to history. *The Grey Zone* tells the story of the Sonderkommando, those Jews who worked in the vicinity of the gas chambers and who rose in armed resistance on October 7, 1944 when the crematoria was set aflame. Sonderkommando survivors speak of themselves as automatons who had to dull their own humanity and constrain their range of emotions in order to deal with the ordeal of their circumstances. The film fails because it accurately presents the dullness of their humanity, their loss of personality and the radical evil that they faced without introducing false drama or intense human feelings. It is not the stuff of Hollywood.

IX

The Holocaust has become ingrained in American culture. It has become the negative absolute in our society: we do not know what is good, we do not know what is bad but the one thing we can agree upon is that this is absolute evil. And thus it has become the standard by which we judge evil and the standard by which we judge values

Part of its attraction to filmmakers, part of its attraction to audience is that one is touching the absolute as you come closer to the Holocaust, and part of the failure of a Holocaust film -- if it fails -- is not to go to that absolute. As people who approach me who want to work on the Holocaust in film, I offer them one piece of advice: don't add to the drama, let the drama come forth from the event.

America dominates world culture. We make it: they consume it and because of that we have to be more careful not to dilute it, not to trivialize it, not to falsify it.

Permit me to conclude with a very brief discussion of Holocaust fiction in film: *Inglorious Bastards*, which is so obviously fiction and yet.

It is so obviously fiction because Hitler unfortunately was not assassinated and certainly not by Jews. He visited Paris in 1940 when Germany conquered Paris but never again. He died in a bunker and of his own hand. Yet, if we know the story of the Allied military, there were a group of German Jewish refugees in the United States and in England who, after being considered enemy aliens, were recruited by the Allied Armies to serve in advance intelligence units, to work as translators and interrogators and to serve often as mayors and police commissioners in German towns during the postwar Allied occupation. Their story was told in *About Face* and also the *The Ritchie Boys*, named after Fort Ritchie where they were trained.

And yet the power of the narrative story is such that when I saw *Inglorious Bastards* at an LA pre-screening I found myself cheering, albeit quietly the assassination and realizing that almost every Jewish boy I knew grew up dreaming of killing Hitler, of reversing history. I was sitting near Professor Sheldon Ross the renowned Harvard psychiatrist and psychoanalyst whose son Eli Roth was a co-author with Quentin Tarantino of the film and who reserved for himself the honor of killing Hitler. Professor Roth was equally startled by his own reaction, which was one of joy and pride not in his son's acting achievements but in the fact that "my son killed Hitler," the title of an essay he published. Such is the power of the narrative of film to tell a story and make it real even if a Holocaust scholar and an eminent psychiatrist know it didn't happen. I will leave it to others to assess the impact on a new generation whose Holocaust film is fiction, "counter history" an event that never happened.

Suffice it to say that for generations the Holocaust will be probed in film by artists great and not so great, because the power of the event and its ultimacy demands such confrontation.

Inglorious Bastards+