

Evidence and Truth in Lanzmann's Shoah

KEYNOTE ADDRESS AT THE SCREENING OF *SHOAH* (C. Lanzmann)

AT CINEMATHEQUE QUEBECOISE,

27 JANUARY 2020.

by Erin Corber

Many thanks to the Goethe Institute and the Cinematheque Quebecoise for inviting me to be part of the screening of this very special and important film this week. Thank you all for being here. Before the opening of the film, I wanted to share some of my thoughts on it, on its importance in the field of Holocaust studies, and on the significance of evidence and truth.

Exactly seventy-five years ago today, January 27, 1945, the Soviet Red army marched into Auschwitz-Birkenau and liberated the camp, which had been in operation since 1941. Between 1941 and 1945, more than 1.1 million people were murdered there. Auschwitz – the place and the word - is synonymous with the Holocaust. In the aftermath of the war, it has become a glaring symbol of the Nazi genocide of the Jews.

In many ways, how we think about the Holocaust has been shaped by what we know about Auschwitz, the biggest and most comprehensive of the Nazi concentration and extermination camps in German-occupied Poland. Auschwitz offers us a window onto the history of one of the most destructive and horrific events in human history, but also is the setting for some of the most heroic attempts at resistance, revolt, and survival. Physical and human evidence – what structures remained and who survived – have helped illuminate a central location and component of the industrialized killing program run by the Nazis.

We know a lot about Auschwitz because of the existence of two important bodies of evidence. First, the physical evidence. During the war, the Allies took aerial surveillance imagery that showed precisely what was going on at Auschwitz from above. When the Red Army marched into Auschwitz, much of the camp, its various installations, most of the crematoria, remained intact. They took photographs and film footage of it. Remnants of barracks, gas chambers, and crematoria still stand today, open to visitors to the site.

Second, the human evidence. In January 1945, the SS rapidly evacuated approximately 60,000 prisoners westward after having killed thousands and left the camp. They left much more behind: these death marches, now considered a distinct phase of genocide by historians, in fact abandoned more than 7,000 ill prisoners for dead.¹ While many perished in the aftermath of the camp's liberation, due to sheer numbers and the expansiveness and range of the camp's installations, Auschwitz survivors were far more numerous than those of many of the other camps in the Nazi system. Many of survivors have told their stories afterward: in writing, through oral testimony, during war crimes trials, and to their families, communities, inside classrooms, and to the world, for posterity. Some survivors remained silent for years, but many others told their stories again and again, and will continue until they are no longer able to tell stories.

For decades after the Holocaust, Auschwitz functioned as a symbol, overshadowing what historians have since come to understand as a complex system of ghettos, camps, slave labour installations, and open-air massacre sites stretching from Western to Southern Europe, to the Balkans, to even North Africa, and deep into Eastern Europe and the former lands of the Soviet Union. Documentary evidence made available by the opening of German, Eastern European, and Soviet archives over the second half of the twentieth century has allowed historians to reconstruct a more accurate but infinitely more complicated story of genocide that implicates many more local collaborators and bystanders.

Yet the archives – incomplete and imperfect, either deliberately or naturally – cannot account alone for a full understanding of the historical and human dimensions of the Holocaust. Killing centres like Treblinka and Sobibor, massacre sites like the Ponary forest in Lithuania, dismantled, abandoned, and replanted over before the Soviet advance, left very little in terms of the physical evidence, especially when compared to the standing barracks, gas chambers, and crematoria of Auschwitz. There are very few descriptions of these sites in the historical record.

Those that do remain are haunting. One of them, Soviet Jewish journalist Vasily Grossman's 1944 account was one of the first articles ever written about a death camp. Traveling with the Red Army and writing for a Soviet journal about the Soviet advance, he described what

¹ Data and statistics through the Liberating Auschwitz online exhibition at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, see link here: <https://www.ushmm.org/information/exhibitions/online-exhibitions/special-focus/liberation-of-auschwitz> (last accessed April 7, 2020). The literature on Auschwitz and the broader concentration camp system is extensive. See for instance, Nikolaus Wachsmann, *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camp System* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015); Saul Friedlander, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008). On the death marches, see Daniel Blatman, transl. Chaya Galai, *The Death Marches: The Final Phase of Nazi Genocide* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011). On the liberation see Dan Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps: The End of the Holocaust and its Aftermath* (New York: Yale University Press, 2015).

he saw remaining at Treblinka after the camp had been dismantled and tried to reconstruct what had gone on there from conversations with locals. “The earth is casting up fragments of bone, teeth, sheets of paper, clothes, things of all kinds,” he wrote. “The earth does not want to keep secrets.”² This extraordinary piece was used as testimonial evidence at the Nuremberg War Crimes Trial in 1945-46.

Where the physical evidence on many of these locations was lacking, human survivors were also few and far between. In terms of human evidence, while almost one million were murdered at Treblinka, the survivors numbered an estimated sixty-seven.³ At Sobibor and Belzec, even fewer survived. At Ponary, eighty Jews survived the massacre of at least 70,000 between 1941-44 by digging underground tunnels from the extermination pit.⁴ Twenty-nine people survived the massacres at Babi Yar, during which over the course of two days in 1941, more than 33,000 Jews were shot to death in a ravine outside of Kiev, one of the biggest mass killings of the war.⁵ Meanwhile, thousands survived Auschwitz.

How can we account for this disparity? With further investigation into sources of all kinds, and comparatively, researchers now understand that there were different phases of the Final Solution. The Auschwitz model evolved into more concentrated killing operations between 1941-1943 in the eastern reaches of Nazi occupied Poland, close to the border of what had been, in 1939, Soviet territory. As the Nazis expanded their “living space”, invading the Soviet Union in 1941, they encountered enormous numbers of Jewish communities in these lands. The killing program was kicked into high gear with smaller killing centres as an alternative to building enormous complexes like Auschwitz. In recent years historians have also come to recognize a

² Vasily Grossman, “The Hell of Treblinka,” 1944.

³ More detail on the Operation Reinhard camps – extermination camps set up in the General Government in Nazi-Occupied Poland between 1941-43 (a group of camps including Treblinka, Sobibor, and Belzec) can be found in Yitzhak Arad, *The Operation Reinhard Death Camps, Revised and Expanded Edition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018).

⁴ Data and statistics provided by Yad Vashem World Holocaust Remembrance Centre, see “Mass Murder in USSR,” at: <https://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/about/final-solution-beginning/mass-murder-in-ussr.html> (last accessed April 7, 2020). For an extraordinary account of the killings at Ponary and the role of both German occupiers and local Lithuanian collaborators in the massacres of Jews from the Vilna (Vilnius) ghetto, see Kazimierz Sakowicz, *Ponary Diary: 1941-43: A Bystander’s Account of a Mass Murder* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

⁵ Ibid.

“Holocaust by Bullets,” occurring far beyond the camp system.⁶ This term refers to a range of massacres of Jews, either carried out by local communities, local auxiliary volunteers, German land army battalions, Nazi SS mobile killing units, and collaborating local police units in Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania and elsewhere across the east. These, too, experienced upticks after 1941, as units were brutalized by the realities of war and genocide, Nazi propaganda against Jews and others proved successful in riling up local longstanding antipathies and prejudices, and deprivations of war allowed locals to imagine benefits in collaborating with the Nazis and eventually participating in the killings on the ground.

The German and Soviet archival records offer valuable insight into many of the spaces that were introduced in depth for the first time – and to the public – in Lanzmann’s *Shoah*. The film screened here tonight is a crucial piece for the development of Holocaust studies as an academic field over the course of the last half a century. Survivors’ testimony emerged as key evidence for the prosecution of war criminals beginning with the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961. In earlier war crimes trials, both the defense and prosecution relied heavily on documentary evidence. However, at Eichmann’s trial, the prosecution put survivors on the stand, setting a precedent for future trials by bringing the voices of victims to the fore of the critical historical work of reconstructing the past. European Jews were given the opportunity to recount what they had seen and how they had suffered at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators. By offering testimony of victims to the court, that testimony was open to the scrutiny of Eichmann’s legal counsel, who summarily attacked the coherence, credibility and character of both the witnesses and the court. This attack on witness credibility caused some to break down on the stand as they relieved their trauma, consequently allowing the defense to question their objectivity. The trial, itself, was framed by critics as a “show trial,” with the defense arguing Eichmann was not directly responsible for what the witnesses had gone through, attempting to discredit personal testimony as a legitimate piece of evidence.⁷

In spite of the complex nature of human evidence in the context of these trials, oral testimony, also known as oral history, has become a vital part of popular perceptions the

⁶ See contributions made by Father Patrick Desbois, *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest’s Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008); and Desbois, Transl. Hilary Reyl and Calvert Barksdale, *In Broad Daylight: The Secret Procedures behind the Holocaust by Bullets* (New York: Arcade Publishing), 2018). Recent work by Waitman Wade Beorn examines case studies of Wehrmacht complicity in the killings in the USSR. See Beorn, *Marching into Darkness: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belarus* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

⁷ On the trial of Adolf Eichmann, see Hannah Arendt’s essays that first appeared in *The New Yorker*, published together as *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (latest edition: New York: Penguin Group, 2006); also see Deborah Lipstadt, *The Eichmann Trial* (New York: Schocken, 2011).

Holocaust, and indispensable to academic research on genocide.⁸ Testimony is now considered a crucial part of the historical record. Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation, now housed by the University of Southern California, has, to date, collected more than 55,000 testimonies, including testimonies of survivors of the Armenian genocide in 1915, the Guatemalan genocide in the 1980s, the Rwandan genocide in 1994, and most recently, the genocide of the Rohingya Muslims still ongoing.⁹ The USC Shoah Foundation is one of many organisations across the world collecting personal testimony among their local communities, including the Montreal Holocaust Museum, to make available to their communities and to researchers.¹⁰ There is also a tradition of live, in-person witness testimonial through storytelling, with many survivors enjoying interacting with schoolchildren, high school students, and the public. While memory and accuracy continue to be critical issues in assessing the content and context of a survivor's testimony, witnesses have become essential voices in our conversations on genocide. *Shoah* was one of the very first films to allow these voices bearing witness to stand alone, front and centre.

In many ways, *Shoah* is an unusual documentary. It uses no historical footage, no maps or images, and no documents. There is neither a narrative voice, nor a guiding chronology. There is no background music, and there are no special effects. It is, quite simply, a series of detailed interviews and testimonials set against both real and evoked places, spaces, and landscapes: an exploration of both human evidence and physical evidence.

Shoah links the experiences of extermination camps like Treblinka, Chelmno, and Sobibor to those of Auschwitz, the one concentration and extermination camp that has come to dominate popular perceptions of Nazi genocide. *Shoah* blends images of contemporary lands together, allowing us to imagine the expansiveness and mundane nature of the landscapes of killing. The film spans the recognizable Auschwitz site with its wrought iron gates. We also see rather seemingly ordinary sleepy railroads, lush green fields and forests over which killing centres once operated and under which mass graves lie. We see ordinary Polish villages and dirt roads seemingly unchanged, fixed in time. These geographies are part of the story, and help us feel closer to the past than would an archival image of the same place from the 1940s.

Shoah is also a remarkable film about the lived experiences of persecution and survival. The testimonies of many survivors are simply unforgettable. Lanzmann's questions cut deep,

⁸ See for instance Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Jurgen Matthaeus, ed., *Approaching an Auschwitz Survivor: Holocaust Testimony and its Transformations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁹ For further information on the USC Shoah Foundation, see: <https://sfi.usc.edu/> (last accessed on April 7, 2020).

¹⁰ For further information on the Montreal Holocaust Museum, see: <https://museeholocauste.ca/en/> (last accessed on April 7, 2020).

forcing many of them to reckon with traumatic and brutal details one can sense at times they would prefer not to explore. In an attempt to get the closest and most intimate transmission of the experience of the camps, Lanzmann often makes use of the environment – built, natural, situational – to evoke many of the oral histories from his interviewees. Scholars and critics have criticized some of his interviewing methods as too harsh, yet they have produced some of the most unique and remarkable testimonials ever captured on film. Many continue to be used by teachers in classrooms and by researchers in their written work. These interviews highlight Lanzmann’s harnessing of both physical and human evidence, and the power of both to produce an account of truth and to bring viewers closer to it. We hear their words, listen to their songs, see their tears, watch their children react. Their stories are not pretty, and their own reflections, while many are understandable, are often unsettling. Lanzmann captures it all.

Yet in including interviews with perpetrators in the film, Lanzmann’s story becomes at once more complete, more complex, and more disturbing. His interview with Franz Suchomel, an SS officer at Treblinka, filmed with a hidden camera, is one of the most astonishing pieces of the film. His conversations with local Poles about their responses to the ghettoization and eventual disappearance of Jews from their towns, their memories of the deportation trains passing through their local railway stations (and the gestures locals would make to those on the train cars - a forefinger across the neck), and their impressions of the camps run by Ukrainian auxiliaries within eyesight and earshot are nothing short of chilling.

This film was a mission for Lanzmann, whose family survived deportation from France by going underground, who participated as a young man in the Resistance, and who fought tooth and nail against state oppression and violence during the Algerian wars of independence. Lanzmann collected over 350 hours of footage over twelve years for this project that one reviewer called “a total immersion into another reality.”¹¹ Nine and a half hours was ultimately not enough time to explore every dimension of experience and truth revealed in this trove of footage. After completing *Shoah*, Lanzmann went on to produce a film about Jan Karski, one of the interviewees from *Shoah*, a member of the Polish underground who heroically brought intelligence of the Warsaw ghetto to the US. In 2013 he released a film about one of the three Jewish Elders of the Theresienstadt Jewish Council taken from interviews he had done in the 1970s, exploring the complicated moral dilemmas of Jewish community leaders within the complex and brutal Nazi system of internment. His last film, which was released shortly before he died in 2018, focused on extant *Shoah* interviews of four women survivors.¹² The hundreds of hours of unused film are now owned by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

¹¹ Patricia Ehrens, Review in *Film Quarterly* Vol 39, no 4 (Summer 1986).

¹² *Le Rapport Jan Karski* (2010); *The Last of the Unjust* (2013), *Shoah: Four Sisters* (2017).

(Washington DC) and Yad Vashem (Jerusalem, Israel), invaluable sources now available to Holocaust researchers as essential evidence for even more uncharted stories of the genocide. Today, thanks to the committed efforts of these researchers, Auschwitz is understood as one part of a much broader and more complex camp system involving many of the sites explored in *Shoah*, and one that demonstrates how the system evolved over the years of the Holocaust.

Evidence and truth. Living today in an era in which truths are commonly concealed and disputed, and evidence is routinely manipulated and questioned, Claude Lanzmann's enterprise offers us an opportunity to reflect on the importance of both. "*Shoah* is not an easy movie to talk about."¹³ These are the words used by Simone de Beauvoir, Lanzmann's partner and intellectual companion throughout most of the 1950s, in her preface of the published transcript of the film. It is a film with no plot, only stories. No argument, but hundreds of questions. No characters, but through a handful of survivors, bystanders, and perpetrators, millions upon millions of individuals. It reminds us that the past is much more than a mark on a timeline, more than a picture in a book, and brings us closer to it via a thorough collection and navigation of both physical and human evidence. That *Shoah* retains its importance today attests to the power of this project. It reveals the considerable impact Lanzmann's work has had on our understanding of the Holocaust, and of the past in general.

I also think that film empowers its audience, particularly today, when so many Holocaust survivors are no longer able to bear witness and tell their stories. Ours may be the last generation to meet someone who lived through these days, to sit down with a person who can tell their story in whatever detail they can remember, and answer questions about a time increasingly removed from our present moment. Lanzmann's work brings us closer to these events, even as we lose our witnesses. In an age in which right wing nationalism, racism, xenophobia, and antisemitism are re-emerging, spreading again across the globe, a film that collapses the timeline of history and pulls us back into the experiences of those who lived in and survived the past may also help us understand and resist in our own time. Perhaps this is the film's most powerful gift of all.

¹³ Simone de Beauvoir, preface to *Shoah: The Complete Text of the Acclaimed Holocaust Film* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995).