Different Ways of Remembering, Different Names
Introductory talk for a final screening of *Shoah*

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I want to acknowledge, first, that you are in the midst of a difficult project – that is, your decision to view all or at least a large part of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*. We all bring particular strengths and blind spots to the challenge: I am from a family, which on one side has a story of escape from Europe in the middle thirties, alongside the fact of the majority of its ancestral line murdered in ghettos and camps in Poland. In my professional and writerly life, I've taken up travel to Poland, and I've come to know the kind of byways and village squares and forestlands that Lanzmann's camera captures. I've written and thought a lot about such places, and I intend to return to them in the coming years. I am also a fairly rusty Yiddish speaker, who was schooled as a youth in old world contexts, with appreciation for the culture of prewar eastern Europe. At my Yiddish day school in Calgary our culture hero was Janusz Korczak, the Polish doctor, author, and children's rights pioneer who stayed by his children in the orphanage he ran in the Warsaw Ghetto.

The first thing I'd like to raise by way of introduction to tonight's screening is a consideration of names and their importance for what we know about the Holocaust. When the events of the war were taking place, Jews who were experiencing them did not use the words we use now to describe what was happening. Rather, anyone who spoke Yiddish – and a large number of the victims did – recognized they were confronting a *churbn*, a Yiddish word with Hebrew roots, which refers to a calamity or catastrophe. In its traditional usage, the word refers to a long line of historical catastrophes, reaching back to the destruction of the biblical Temple. When I wanted to know how the word circulated in daily life before the war, I asked my Polish-born, Yiddish-speaking mother if she had heard her own Polish-born Yiddish-speaking mother use it. Oh, yes, she said, if a child was killed in a house fire, *es is geven a churbn*. It was a catastrophe.

After the war this word was the coinage of choice for a number of years at Holocaust commemorative events and in the newly founded Israeli Knesset. When figures like Menachem Begin argued against receiving reparations from the postwar German government, this was the word he used to describe the events that destroyed his youthful homeland. In a booklet I collected from my grandmother's bookshelf, published in 1968 as part of a commemoration of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, which took place in Manhattan*, churbn* is the word writers use twenty-five years after the war's end.

Of course, in English-language and especially in mainstream, non-Jewish contexts, this was not the word of choice. Rather, the word Holocaust named the German destruction of European Jews, their culture and communities. Its use can be attributed to wartime developments, and in this, in some way, one could say it circulated alongside *churbn* while the events of the war raged. Its use can be attributed to English parliamentarians and journalists of the early 1940s who were literate in their King James Bible, who knew the Greek-inspired word for the Temple sacrifice that was to be *wholly burnt*, and who used it to describe what was being done in German camps in Poland to the bodies of Jewish and non-Jewish inmates.

The shift to Shoah – a Hebrew word one finds in the Bible, as well as in modern Hebrew dictionaries, which means utter destruction – is the outcome of a number of influences on Holocaust commemoration and education, which were motivated by Israeli scholarship and modern Hebrew discourse in the late 1960s and after. As Lanzmann embarked on his filming, interviewing some of his subjects in Israel where they had emigrated after the war, he must have felt this shift taking place in the broader culture. One could add, too, that the Yiddish word, *churbn*, would have had no place in his imagination.

So, names. You have noticed, of course, that as Lanzmann tours Poland, filming it in the 1970s and early eighties, that his interviews reveal how the German occupation and decimation of Polish society included an unflagging project of renaming. Lodz, the major manufacturing centre near to one of the killing sites that Lanzmann returns to again and again, became Litzmannstadt. Mlawa, a small cosmopolitan city on the western front where my family lived until the outbreak of war, became Millau. The German Kulmhof became the name of the village of Chelmno, on the outskirts of Lodz, where Lanzmann visits a terrible killing site.

This aspect of wartime Poland – the obliteration of its names, names of people, names of places – leads me to raise an aspect of Shoah that I view as one of its challenges. In its cinematic portrayals, Lanzmann has decided to forego the usual documentarian's use of archival film and photographs, of which, you must know, there is a great deal, much of it taken by Germans in the process of the activities being described in the film. In Mlawa, in the early fall of 1939, with the invading Wehrmacht, came Leni Riefenstahl, along with her most reliable film crew and cameras. They inadvertently captured the earliest atrocities leveled against Jews on Polish lands. Such documents, along with a host of prewar materials, are capable of recovering the people and places as they existed before the destruction. This material portrays not just the victims themselves, but the character of the places they had lived in all their lives. There is a notable exception to Lanzmann's decision not to use such material in the scenes filmed on Corfu, where a survivor of Birkenau is shown holding the photographs he retains of his family, children and elderly, as they were before the war.

In place of familiar documentary materials, Lanzmann makes use of dramatic footage of the Polish countryside, villages, roadways, house-fronts, their inhabitants, all empty of Jews. One cannot, from these portrayals, even begin to be aware, to acknowledge the character of the victims' prewar Polish lives. And in this we are at great distance from the victims themselves, who are repeatedly introduced to us via survivors' accounts as miserable train loads, as blocks of basalt tumbling from an opened gas chamber door, as the contents of fire and ash pits that must be stirred or carried to a disposal site. The effect of this strategy, one would have to say, is to obscure our sense of the meaningfulness, specialness, Europeanness, Polishness, Jewishness of the victims' lives. Against such outcomes, Lanzmann places revealing portraits of survivors: Filip Müller of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando, who sits, almost unmoving, as he recalls his camp experience in great detail; Simon Srebnik, who sang as a boy from a skiff as it coasted the Narew near Chelmno, and who re-enacts this activity with great introspective calm; and Abraham Bomba, who methodically trims a man's thick grey hair as he recalls the work he did as part of the barber detail in the anteroom of the gas chamber at Treblinka.

One only considers, far into the film, when there erupts a lovely Sephardic liturgical chant in a Corfu synagogue, that these men and the Polish countryside that frames them have not been marked by a single Jewish thing. In a few instances we see a derelict synagogue building on a sad Polish back road. Viewers without a feel for prewar Polish Jewish architecture – and the postwar repurposing of these buildings – might miss these.

The presentation of Germans in the film also demands consideration. The absence of Germans is an issue in much Holocaust response, even by those we value most in the field. It's a bitter fact that Elie Wiesel, and Primo Levi to a lesser extent, interacted in Auschwitz with an international population that included few Germans. The SS who ran the camp acted upon inmates through a hierarchy of kapos, incarcerated in the camps for any number of reasons, drawn at times from a Polish prisoner population. Non-Jewish prisoners, like the non-Jewish French Charlotte Delbo and Pole, Tadeusz Borowski, had greater access to their German persecutors, and wrote about them with greater attentiveness. One reads that Max Ophuls, the French-German filmmaker, approved of the presentation of Germans in *Shoah*, but I cannot say I'm with Ophuls on this. We have in the film a few lengthy interviews, which have a kind of science fiction flavour. To get his subjects to sit for these, Lanzmann issued promises not to film, which he did not intend to keep, resulting in surreptitious footage. Often, while listening to Franz Suchomel, who details his role in the killing at Treblinka, we are shown the inside of a film tech van, or the back of the head of the technician who runs Lanzmann's recording equipment. Whatever the reasons that lead to this, the outcome is one of distance, of estrangement – the grey scale image, rolling and washed out like something from early television, keeps the killer at remove. The stance Lanzmann has decided he must take toward these men is worth noting, too. He and Suchomel sit together calmly, on a set that has been outfitted with teaching tools – illustrations and a wooden pointer. Lanzmann asks questions in a modulated, professional, almost ostentatiously courteous tone. Chelmno is called Kulmhof, so the place under discussion has become, again, a German killing site instead of a Polish agricultural village.

By comparison, consider one of the lengthy, truly bizarre presentations of rural Poles in the film. This is in Chelmno, near Lodz. It follows a visit to a lesser place, Grabow. I might add to what is learned from these scenes in the film that Jews first settled in Grabow in the 1500s. In the nineteenth century they sat on the city council. And by the end of the nineteenth century they were owners of mills, bakeries, inns and saloons. Some owned farmland and meadows and were part of the agricultural economy. A decimated graveyard exists today in Grabow, with a single standing gravestone and fragments of the cemetery wall.

You will recall the scene in the Chelmno village square, with the open doors of the large church behind the substantial crowd that has gathered to face Lanzmann's camera. The scene opens with one of Lanzmann's leading questions: "So, it's a holiday today in Chelmno?" One does not see but hears the interviewer, along with the voice of his interpreter. The camera frames the village crowd with Simon Srebnik at its centre, a soft smile on his face. What has gathered for Lanzmann's camera is a kind of Sunday rabble – mute kids, a few moderately well-dressed adults, old timers in the rough costumes of late-Communist rural Poland. Questions are thrown to the crowd, almost the way one throws food to dogs. Answers are tossed back, for the most part by those in the crowd who are older. One notably theatrical performance is offered by a man who is not old enough to have adult memories or experiences of the wartime. He has heard things, and he carries on at some length, offering a kind of sinister parable. I view him in contrast with the calmly speechifying Treblinka guard, Suchomel. Both men take the opportunity to talk, to make their ugly impact while the camera rolls. One would like to hear from those on the square in Chelmno who remain silent, considering that those who speak up prove to be foolish and thoughtless. They get caught up in the staged chaos created by the arrival of the film crew. They become part of Lanzmann's narrative. As he traveled the Polish countryside this seems to have been one of the things his camera was looking for. Finally, the crew rolls out of town with a long shot of the snow-covered village road, leaving the impression that one has learned something bout Poles and the Holocaust.

I raise these scenes to suggest, as you complete the film screening, that two of the three kinds of tableaux that you see in *Shoah* are under great pressure as we view them: the denatured portraits of German killers and the erratic depiction of Poles in their rural landscape. Watching these is different in character and in impact from the scenes with which the film opens, with Simon Srebnik in his skiff, singing the German song he was commanded to serenade the Narew River with as he coasted its surface; or bending down as he does in the vicinity of Chelmno to take a handful of earth, which he knows contains remnants of the dead. In these scenes the viewer is brought closer to the time of war, when Jews spoke to each other of the new German-made *churbn* that was encompassing them. These scenes return us to the heart of the matter at hand.