



The Last Stage

Film Screening with Marek Haltof

April 14, 2021

37 minutes, 22 seconds

Speaker: Marek Haltof

Transcribed by: Rachel E Lieu

[Holocaust Living History Workshop](#)

UC San Diego Library Digital Collections

<https://library.ucsd.edu/dc/object/bb1373265d>

Copyright: Under copyright (US)

Rights Holder: UC Regents

Use: This work is available from the UC San Diego Library. This digital copy of the work is intended to support research, teaching, and private study.

Constraint(s) on Use: This work is protected by the U.S. Copyright Law (Title 17, U.S.C.). Use of this work beyond that allowed by "fair use" requires written permission of the UC Regents. Responsibility for obtaining permissions and any use and distribution of this work rests exclusively with the user and not the UC San Diego Library. Inquiries can be made to the UC San Diego Library program having custody of the work.

Time Transcription

Slide Transcription

00:00 [Read Write Think Dream The Library UC San Diego Channel / www.uctv.tv/librarychannel]

00:09 Susanne Hillman: Welcome to today's Holocaust Living History Workshop featuring the distinguished film scholar Marek Haltof who joins us from Marquette Michigan. Before I introduce our speaker and program, I would like to thank the UC [University of California] San Diego Library and the Jewish Studies Program, as well as Yekta Mohammady and Marci Bretts for their support. My biggest gratitude however is reserved for Laurayne Ratner, the person who made today's event possible. For a number of years, Laurayne has been one of our most loyal sponsors and we appreciate her enthusiasm and generosity tremendously. I am looking forward to the day I will see you again Laurayne in person on campus. Thank you for everything you do for the workshop. On that note, I would also like to extend a warm thank you to all our audience. Despite the ongoing pandemic and widespread zoom fatigue, you have stuck with us in impressive numbers. Thank you all. I am also glad that my students from History 150, Why History Matters, are attending uh, today's event.

01:18 Susanne Hillman: And now it is my very great pleasure to introduce professor Marek Haltof, today's honored guest. Professor Haltof obtained an MA [Master of Arts] from the University of Silesia in Poland, and another one from Flinders University in South Australia. After earning his Ph.D. from the University of Alberta, Canada he was

habilitated and, at the - and now I massacred the word -
Jagiellonian University?

01:44 Marek Haltof: Jagiellonian University.

01:47 Susanne Hillman: Thank you. In 2001 he joined the faculty of Northern Michigan University and has since become one of the most prolific scholars on Polish cinema. The author of several books in English and Polish on the cultural histories of Central European as well as Australian film, his recent books include *Screening Auschwitz: Wanda Jakubowska's The Last Stage and the Politics of Commemoration* published in 2018, *Historical Dictionary of Polish Cinema: Second Edition, Polish Film, and the Holocaust: Politics and Memory*, and *Polish National Cinema*. In addition to his scholarly works Professor Haltof has also published two short novels, *Max is Great* and *Duo Nowak*. His works have been translated into several languages including Chinese, Japanese, Czech, Polish, and Spanish. And now please welcome, unfortunately without the clapping, Marek Haltof.

02:45 Marek Haltof: Thank you very much. Thank you for your kind words. Thank you very much for inviting me. Let me start by mentioning again that in 2018 I published a book on this very film, on *The Last Stage, Ostatni etap*, directed by Wanda Jakubowska in 1948. The book discusses various uh, aspects of the film, Jakubowska's career, her imprisonment at Auschwitz-Birkenau during the war, problems she faced uh, during the script stage. It also discusses the unusual circumstances that surrounded the production of the film on location at Auschwitz-Birkenau,

Screening Auschwitz: Table of Contents

Introduction

1. The Auschwitz-Birkenau Number 43513
2. “Stalin Was Moved to Tears”: The Script
3. Return to Auschwitz: The Making of the Holocaust classic
4. The Film and Its Reception
5. Fighting Auschwitz: The Heroic Account of the Camp
6. Representation of the Holocaust in *The Last Stage*
7. The Legacy of Wanda Jakubowska

Notes

and I pay a lot of attention to the political context of commemorating Auschwitz in post-war Poland.

- 03:41 Marek Haltof: But if you look at the history of Polish cinema, you'll see a number of works about the Holocaust, about the war, that you may call pioneering. For example this one *Majdanek - The Cemetery of Europe* by Aleksander Ford. This is the first documentary film about the liberation of concentration extermination camps, Majdanek in this case.
- 04:04 Marek Haltof: Another film should be also mentioned, Kazimierz Czyński's *Swastika and Gallows* made in 1944. This is the first, first film that documents the post-war trials.
- 04:16 Marek Haltof: This was not the only film, there are numerous other films about postwar trials, executions. In this case, what you are seeing are, these are just photographs of the trial and hanging of Rudolph Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz.
- 04:34 Marek Haltof: This film also has to be mentioned, *Unzere Kinder, Our Children*, made in 1948. This is the post-war, the first post-war narrative film in Yiddish about the Holocaust directed by Natan Gross.

Bibliography

Screening Auschwitz Wanda Jakubowska's The Last Stage and the Politics of Commemoration / Marek Haltof

Aleksander Ford, *Majdanek - The Cemetery of Europe* (Majdanek - Cmentarzysko Europe, 1944)

“The first film to develop visual and narrational strategies to dramatize the unprecedented story of German brutality in a camp.” Stuart Liebman

Swastika and Gallows (Swatyka i szubienica, 1944), Kazimierz Czyński (editor Waclaw Kazmierczak)

“...arguably has the distinction of being the first cinematic portrayal of a trial concerning what we would call today the Holocaust or Shoah” - Stuart Liebman

Post-war trials and executions

Trial (in Warsaw) and hanging (in Auschwitz) on April 16, 1947 of Rudolph Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz.

Our Children (Unzere Kinder, 1948), the first postwar narrative film in Yiddish made in Poland about the Holocaust.

“The Last Stage” Film Screening with Marek Haltof (2021)
Holocaust Living History Workshop

Saul Goskind (producer) Natan Gross (director) starring two comic actors: Shimon Dzigan and Israel Szumacher. / How do you know children? Were you in the ghetto?

04:49 Marek Haltof: And the last film that I have to mention *Ulica Graniczna, Border Street*, by Aleksander Ford made in 1949. This is the first filmic representation of the Warsaw ghetto uprising.

Border Street (Ulica Graniczna, 1949 Aleksander Ford). The first filmic representation of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising)

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising / Heroic Jewish fighter Natan (Stefan Śródka) [Polish flag behind him]

05:06 Marek Haltof: *The Last Stage* is definitely a pioneering work. Jakubowska depicted Auschwitz-Birkenau for the first time in a narrative film. She drew on her first-hand camp experiences and made her film with the significant participation of other Auschwitz survivors, including the German communist Gerda Schneider who co-scripted the film.

The Last Stage (1948) by Jakubowska: “The mother of all Holocaust films”

The arrival of transport train in Birkenau. Barbara Drapińska as Marta (in the middle) / Publicity still. Prisoner committing suicide by throwing herself against the electrified fence.

05:32 Marek Haltof: We'll be watching a film that shaped the future representation of Nazi German concentration camps. This is the film that introduced several images that are now archetypal in numerous films about the Holocaust, morning and evening roll calls on the Appellplatz, the arrival of transport trains, the separation of families, tracking shots over the belongings left by the camp victims. Just to give you an idea, this is the arrival of a train in an image from *The Last Stage* and a shot from *Schindler's List*.

The Last Stage (1948) Transport train arriving at Birkenau

Schindler's List (1993) *Schindler's List*



06:09 Marek Haltof: Another example, on the left an image from *The Last Stage*, and on the right [Gillo] Pontecorvo's classic film *Kapo* from 1959. *The Last Stage* reinforced definitely the depiction of Nazi German concentration camps. Its impact is visible in a number of films, not only *Kapo*, not only *Schindler's List*, the list is enormous.

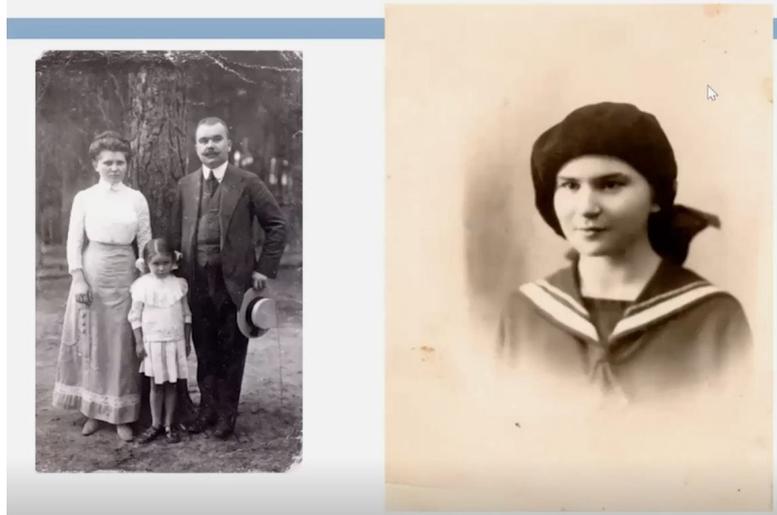
The Last Stage (1948) / Kapo (1959, Gillo Pontecorvo)



06:39 Marek Haltof: Let me comment now on Wanda Jakubowska, the maker of this seminal film. She was born in Warsaw in 1907, then part of the Russian Empire. She spent her childhood however in Moscow. She moved there with her father who got a job there; he was an engineer. And in Moscow, she witnessed the Bolshevik revolution in 1917. She returned to Poland in 1922 and was very active in a, in the START [Society of the Devotees of the Artistic Film (Stowarzenie Milosnikow Filmu Artystycznego)] group. This was a film society that promoted art cinema. In 1939, shortly before the war, she directed her first film, a lavish adaptation called *On the [Banks of the] Niemen River*. Its premiere was scheduled for September 5th. The war started just couple of years, a couple of days earlier. All prints are lost so technically we'll be watching Jakubowska's debut on a big screen, *The Last Stage* from 1948.

Wanda Jakubowska (1907 - 1998)

Wanda Jakubowska (1907-1998)



07:43 Marek Haltof: During the war, Jakubowska was active in the underground. She was arrested by the Gestapo in October 1942, detained in the infamous Pawiak prison in Warsaw for

Wanda Jakubowska in Auschwitz (1947) on the set of *The Last Stage* (1948). Russian Cinematographer Borys Monastyrski (center)

six months. The Pawiak prison was inside the ghetto and she was sent on a transport train from Warsaw to Auschwitz-Birkenau with a group of 107 Polish female prisoners. Forty of them perished in the camp. She was imprisoned in Birkenau and then at the agricultural subcamp Rajsko. Rajsko, frequently labeled as the green garden of Auschwitz, the agricultural subcamp of Auschwitz. She was working there as a photographer documenting agricultural experiments. In October 1944, suspected of political activities, she was moved by the camp authorities from Rajsko to Birkenau, and in January 1945 she was transferred. This was the so-called death march to Ravensbrück; 56,000 prisoners were forcibly evacuated, almost 15,000 prisoners died of cold and exhaustion or were shot by the SS guards. In Ravensbrück Jakubowska experienced another death march before this camp was liberated by the Red Army detachments.

09:03 Marek Haltof: She always wanted to produce a film about her Auschwitz experiences. This was a personal duty for Jakubowska, both as a camp survivor and as a filmmaker who wanted to bear witness to history.

Jakubowska was captured by the Gestapo in 1942, spent six months in Warsaw, and then, from 28 April to 18 January 1945, was incarcerated in the women’s concentration camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau (Rajsko sub-camp). Her camp number was 43513. For the remaining months of the war, she was imprisoned at Ravensbrück.



Wanda Jakubowska on the set of her film (1947)

Jakubowska: “The decision to make a film about Auschwitz originated as soon as I crossed the camp’s gate.”

“The Last Stage” Film Screening with Marek Haltof (2021)
Holocaust Living History Workshop



09:18 Marek Haltof: She wanted to make this film with Gerda Schneider an intriguing person, a political prisoner at Auschwitz a political prisoner in Nazi Germany since 1934. Uh with Schneider, who's rarely debated, rarely discussed in Polish history books, Jakubowska produced several versions of the script. Two early versions survived at the FilMOTEKA Narodowa Archives, National Film Archives in Warsaw. From the start, Jakubowska faced a number of problems during the um, during the early script stage.

Wanda Jakubowska and co-scriptwriter Gerda Schneider (right) on the set of *The Last Stage* (sitting on a bunk bed inside the women's barrack at Birkenau, 1947)

Gerda Schneider (1904-1986?). German Communist, imprisoned since 1934. Prisoner at the Lichtenburg KL (from 1937 to 1939), transported to Ravensbrück in May 1939. Transferred to Auschwitz on March 26, 1942, with the first transport of German female prisoners from Ravensbrück. Auschwitz KL number 586.



10:06 Marek Haltof: I would like to list just some of them. First of all, it was extremely difficult to produce a film uh, after the war. It was almost impossible to produce a politically acceptable script. Many scripts were rejected by the authorities, subjected to harsh criticism - mostly on political grounds. They were sometimes shelved for decades. Just to give you one idea, one of the earliest projects in the history of Polish cinema is uh, about Władysław Szpilman's miraculous survival in Warsaw. This project has had to wait for several decades before Roman Polanski made his film *The Pianist* in 2002.

10:53 Marek Haltof: Sometimes the graphic nature of *The Last Stage* is quoted as a major obstacle for Jakubowska's project but I would like to say that Polish audiences after the war wanted to see war movies, films dealing with topics silenced by the communist, communist authorities in particular. Another important problem Jakubowska was the only female filmmaker in Poland in the post-war years, a woman surrounded by powerful men, her friends, and fellow filmmakers from the START group. Aleksander Ford was in charge of Polish cinema and he proved to be an obstacle, the main obstacle for Jakubowska's project. In other words, he wanted to do it himself. And one of the biggest obstacles, however, was that the communist authorities in Poland were afraid of similarities between the Soviet gulags and German concentration camps. They preferred not to touch this

Co-scriptwriter Gerda Schneider (right) Barrack in Birkenau



The Holocaust. The arrival of a Jewish Transport in *The Last Stage*

A Jewish girl (shot edited out) / Publicity still. SS-man (Artur Młodnicki) and a girl from the Jewish transport



sensitive topic. Led by Aleksander Ford, who survived the war in the Soviet Union, they knew firsthand the dangers of dealing with forbidden or ideologically dangerous themes and they were reluctant to proceed with Jakubowska's project without an explicit Soviet blessing which Jakubowska got.

12:10 Marek Haltof: She went to Moscow with *Novella*, filming *Novella* that was translated into Russian. She met in Moscow with director Mikhail Kalatozov. I'm sure you know his later film the beautiful *The Cranes Are Flying* but at that time he was responsible for the Soviet cinema as the Deputy Minister of Cinematography. Uh, Kalatozov was afraid, although he liked the film, he was afraid to accept this project and he sent the script to Andrei Zhdanov, the one who formulated the tenets of socialist realist art in the [19]30s. He was also, according to Jakubowska, deeply affected by the text and passed it on to Stalin and Stalin loved this project. His personal approval - allegedly he was also moved to tears - made it possible for Jakubowska to pursue her project. In the documentary called *Kino, kino, kino* Jakubowska stated emphatically quote, after Stalin read the script he fell in love with me, end of quote. So Jakubowska is back in Poland with the Stalin's personal approval and she started to make her film in the summer of 1947.

13:27 Marek Haltof: However the post-war appearance of Auschwitz-Birkenau had little to do with the images that Jakubowska carefully preserved in her memory and the images that she wanted to portray on the screen. After the war, the former camp Auschwitz-Birkenau was administered

- In late 1946 Jakubowska went to Moscow with a forty-page-long filmic novella translated into Russian.
- She met in Moscow with director Mikhail Kalatozov (later known for *The Cranes are Flying*) who was the Deputy Minister of Cinematography.
- Several years later she learned from Kalatozov that he cried while reading her text. Afraid, however, to deal with the camps (and therefore nobody knew how to tackle them) - Kalatozov send the script to Andrei Zhdanov who earlier, in 1934, formulated the tenets for socialist realist art.
- Zhdanov was also deeply affected by the text and passed it on to Stalin.
- Stalin's personal approval (allegedly, he was also moved to tears) enabled Jakubowska to pursue her project.

1947 - on the set of *The Last Stage* at Auschwitz-Birkenau

Wanda Jakubowska commented after visiting the former camp in 1946: “I was shocked because I saw daisies of monstrous proportions and exuberant, indescribable

by a group of Polish former prisoners. The place was underfunded, routinely vandalized, the rumors about hidden valuables attracted plunderers from outside.

vegetation on the soil that was fertilized by blood and sweat.”



On the set of *The Last Stage*. 1947, Birkenau.

13:58 Marek Haltof: A lesser known aspect of Auschwitz, only recently documented by historians but important for the preservation of the site, was the fact that parts of it were used by the Soviet troops, NKVD [People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs], and then by the Polish Army for at least a year as a concentration camp for German POWs [Prisoners of War], Volksdeutsche and civilians from Silesia. The decree issued by the Polish Parliament on July 2nd, 1947 declared the site of the former concentration camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau and uh, to be under state control serving quote, as a monument to the martyrdom and struggle of the Polish and other peoples. That's how it is formulated. So Jakubowska was shooting her film soon after the museum was officially founded and her project was certainly in line with the official stance. She was a communist, a devoted communist, I have to emphasize.

From the left: Camera operator Andrzej Ancuta (left) Carare operator Karol Chodura (behind the camera) Producer Mieczyslaw Gajnberger (white shirt)



“The Last Stage” Film Screening with Marek Haltof (2021)
Holocaust Living History Workshop

14:57 Marek Haltof: To reflect the reality of the camp appropriately, she decided to produce her film on location in Auschwitz with the participation of the local population, inhabitants of the town of Oświęcim, the Red Army personnel, and also a small group of German prisoners of war as extras.

Filming in Auschwitz (1947). Standing behind the camera (from the left): Chodura, Jakubowska, and Monastyrski



15:16 Marek Haltof: She started shooting her film with, with the scene of a roll call on the Appelplatz, and the scene that you are now seeing, with a Kommando leaving the camp for work. The extras in those scenes - masses of female prisoners - were interestingly played by Soviet soldiers.

July 1947. First days of filming: a scene featuring a kommando (work detail) leaving the camp for work



15:37 Marek Haltof: You can see them on this image. The last rows, these are Soviet soldiers and Jakubowska always emphasized this aspect saying for example, because the Russian army participated it was as cheap as a red borscht, end of quote. So the Soviet soldiers appear on this picture

Shooting in Birkenau. 1947. Extras, among them Auschwitz survivors, inhabitants of Oświęcim [Auschwitz]. And Soviet soldiers.

as female prisoners in scenes requiring thousands of extras, extras. Jakubowska always wanted to produce a realistic film. Striving for authenticity, she insisted on hiring Auschwitz survivors to work, work on her film.



16:15 Marek Haltof: Apart from serving as extras, several episodic roles were played by the camp's former inmates who, in a sense, were forced to relive their Auschwitz experiences. On this image, I included a quote uh, from Jerzy Kawalerowicz - the future famous Polish director but he was serving, at that time, as an assistant director on Jakubowska's film - and that's how he phrases it. We had to control up to 400 women, former Auschwitz prisoners. They were almost impossible to direct according to the Kawalerowicz, “they would run, line up, do everything automatically. It was scary to us.”

Wladyslaw Brochwicz as the Birkenau *Lagerkommandant* Hans Schmidt (modeled on the commandant of Birkenau, SS-*Hauptsturmführer* Josef Kramer). Episodic roles played by the camp's former prisoners.

Jerzy Kawalerowicz: “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.”

“The Last Stage” Film Screening with Marek Haltof (2021)
Holocaust Living History Workshop



16:58 Marek Haltof: Speaking of realism of *The Last Stage* - this is Jakubowska surrounded by her actors - several documents at Polish State Archives confirmed that Jakubowska used authentic goods that belonged to Auschwitz victims and former Auschwitz prisoners.

On the set of *The Last Stage* at Auschwitz-Birkenau. (Photo courtesy of Roman Dziewonski.)

From the left: Maria Kaniewska (Raport Fuhrerin) Edward Dziewoński (Lagerarzt, SS Doctor) Wanda Jakubowska, Janina Marisowna (credited as Janina Marrosowna; Aufseherin) Aleksandra Ślaska (Oberaufseherin)



17:18 Marek Haltof: For example, SS uniforms were ordered, according to Jakubowska, from the same Jewish tailors who were making SS uniforms in the Litzmannstadt (Łódź) ghetto. This photograph and other photographs - this is publicity test photograph - were taken exactly in the same studio where images of prisoners as well as of SS personnel were taken.

The Last Stage. Actors Edward Dziewoński and Aleksandra Ślaska. (Courtesy of Katarzyna Rudmino)

From interviews with Jakubowska: * SS uniforms were ordered from the same Jewish tailors who were making the SS uniforms in the Litzmannstadt (Łódź) Ghetto. * Photographs taken in the same studio where images of prisoners as well as of SS Personnel were taken.



17:45 Marek Haltof: The idea of shooting the film on location in Auschwitz-Birkenau of course had an enormous impact on the film's crew. For example actress Anna Lutosławska - she's on the left on this picture - stated that during the making of *The Last Stage* the actor, the actors lived in the authentic barracks of Auschwitz and wore authentic prisoners' clothing. Our clothes were the authentic striped clothing of prisoners, she writes, that still contained blood stains. The air was filled with a characteristic unpleasant smell. But if you look at press reports published in 1947, several of them emphasized that this was still the kingdom of death, perhaps the largest cemetery in the history of

Birkenau Revier (“hospital”). From the left Anna Lutosławska, Maria Winogradowa, Barbara Fijewska.

Actress A. Lutosławska (Urszulka): “Our clothes were the authentic striped clothing of prisoners that, although disinfected, still contained blood stains...The air was filled with characteristic unpleasant smell that had a depressing effect on us.”

mankind. I'm quoting one of the reporters, everywhere on the ground there are visible small white fragments of human bones. Everywhere, we are walking on human remains.



18:47 Marek Haltof: But for the communist authorities, this was not a story about martyrdom. This was not a story about Auschwitz victims. For them, the concentration camp was a battlefield where the struggle with fascism and the struggle for the new political system was fought. Political prisoners, according to the Polish authorities, were no longer victims but returning home fighters for independent communist Poland and builders of the new system. Therefore, this film *The Last Stage* emphasizes the heroic aspect of Auschwitz, the so-called fighting Auschwitz. In other words, Jakubowska strives for the impossible goal of representing a truthful reality of the camp, while faithfully following the tenets of communist ideology. But she was a communist. She was a member of the communist party and she was always interested in promoting the prisoner as fighter image.

Auschwitz resistance (The Revier - camp's "hospital"). German Anna (Antonia 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 (communist) prisoners.



“The Last Stage” Film Screening with Marek Haltof (2021)
Holocaust Living History Workshop

19:55 Marek Haltof: For her, the camp - Auschwitz in this case - was not only the site of international martyrdom but above all the site of international resistance. I think I should stop at this stage and invite you to see *The Last Stage* and I'll be happy to answer any questions after the screening.

The fighting Auschwitz in *The Last Stage*. An ideologically correct version suited to the times: stressing the role of the communist resistance in Auschwitz.

German Communist prisoner Anna (Antonia Górecka), modeled on Gerda Schnieder, and SS Doctor (Edward Dziewoński) Communist Russian Doctor (Tatiana Górecka)



20:24 Susanne Hillman: What a film. So I got a few questions that people post. Uh, Deborah noticed at the two languages that were spoken mostly were Polish and German with a little French um, and she was wondering why no Yiddish.

20:40 Marek Haltof: Um, it's an interesting comment. Several languages by the way are spoken in the film. No Yiddish, you're right but it has to do with the fabric of the camp. The majority of Polish Jews, those who spoke Yiddish, were killed at other uh, concentration or extermination camps, Treblinka in particular. Auschwitz was an international camp, so I think this is quite accurate. And although this was used against the film by, by several uh, critics, but Yiddish is the language of central European Jews. But, but the Jews from uh, for example, Greece, Hungary uh, were uh, transported to Auschwitz and this is something that that

Jakubowska, by the way, witnessed when she was in, in Birkenau.

- 21:38 Susanne Hillman: Yes it is certainly interesting that the multiple languages. And Ray also commented on that what a challenge it must have been for the filmmakers to um, include all these languages. But Ray, and I myself too, consider it one of the great strengths of the films. And it reminded me of Primo Levi who in *Survival in Auschwitz* or *If This Is a Man* talks about that, this confusion of languages. So I think that's definitely unique about this film.
- 22:07 Marek Haltof: It is and the Jakubowska by the way spoke several languages. She was a communist but she was from a privileged family. She, she had a governess as a child. She spoke French, then she was in Moscow so she spoke fluent Russian. She learned German because she was, she wanted to communicate with Gerda Schneider. Gerda Schneider only spoke German. Uh, so this was not that difficult for Jakubowska uh, to direct actors from different countries. And there are Russian actors, French. She also wanted to cast German actors to play German characters in the film but this was rejected by the Polish authorities. They stated, and perhaps they were right, that in the post-war years this would be almost offensive to have German actors appearing in a film about Auschwitz-Birkenau.
- 23:05 Susanne Hillman: Interesting. I also would like to say that we had somebody present who is an Auschwitz survivor um, himself. And this gentleman is over 90 years old, and he has actually gone back to Auschwitz on the March of the Living several times. But he mentioned that he was really

struck by the stark, as he puts, it the stark authenticity of the film. And this authenticity reminded him of uh, Auschwitz and brought back things he had, as he uh, communicated, tried to um, repress. Uh, is this - I assume but I don't know, you're the expert - is this sort of a common reaction even by people who are not survivors, that they really stress the authenticity?

23:49 Marek Haltof: This was stressed by reviewers, and this was also stressed by former prisoners. And this is the statement at the beginning of the film, quote, the film is based on authentic events. And, and everything in this film is accurate, either eyewitnessed by Jakubowska, or other prisoners. She also, after the war, did thorough research. For example, she interviewed former Nazi guards including Maria Mandl, the chief SS-Helferin in Auschwitz. So, so this is, this is quite accurate. Though one may question, for example, that figure at the beginning of the film - about four million Auschwitz victims - but this is with the knowledge of the day. So this is not a propagandist on the part of Jakubowska. This is something that is present in so many accounts. For example, Rudolph Hess also testified during his trial and provided this number, not 1.1. The number that we mean, victims that we now know but, but this is, this is something that was present in so many accounts and statements.

25:01 Susanne Hillman: Yes, for me the film was really haunting because I knew it was actually filmed in Auschwitz, and so soon after the war. Uh, this is probably the closest we can get to that experience. I don't want to say we can get close to it, but because it was on the grounds of Auschwitz. One

other comment or issue that I was pondering was that um, I was struck by the depiction, repeated depiction of female sociability - if we can use this term in the context of Auschwitz - and solidarity. And that reminded me of the prevalence of camp sisters and camp families. And I was wondering how would the film have been different if uh, the group of prisoners filmed had been men. If this had been in uh, another part of the camp, Auschwitz I? Do you have any um, thoughts about the feminist approach that, if you would call it feminist, at Jakubowska?

26:03 Marek Haltof: It's interesting. This is an interesting question. But, for example, Jakubowska returned twice to her Auschwitz experiences later, and in a film called *The End of our World* - this is, this is a slightly different perspective - the the focus is on male prisoners. Um in, in this film it's, it's all about female solidarity, not only female resistance because, because there are also um, male fighters uh, members of the underground within Auschwitz. And this is an interesting topic. So many books, articles were published on this subject, which was heavily promoted by the way during the communist period. One of the members of the uh, of that underground was the the future Polish Prime Minister Józef Cyrankiewicz, who was a prisoner at Auschwitz and, and he was also a member of the underground. And this was the image that also he wanted to promote, and did quite, did promote quite successfully.

27:12 Susanne Hillman: Interesting. Uh somebody, or Randall - I should mention the name - Randall was wondering something very different. Um, in the film he noticed buildings at Birkenau that aren't there today. And as he

described it, to the right side on the way to the gas chambers. Is that the case? Um, are there buildings in the film that would be subsequently um, demolished?

- 27:38 Marek Haltof: Oh yes. As I mentioned in my brief introduction uh, Birkenau in particular looked very much different around 1946, [19]47. Several barracks were reassembled and, and sent elsewhere, sold to the local population, sent to Warsaw uh, for example, and Jakubowska had to recreate part of the camp. This was that part of Auschwitz-Birkenau complex that was neglected. Um, the museum was founded in 1947, in the summer of 1947, and this was in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Although this was not only their place of extermination but there were also other sub-camps within Birkenau. This was a neglected uh, place and there were talks, are even articles published, about abandoning the place, uh using it for agricultural purposes. That would be one of the main um, voices and this was seriously debated around 1947 - the future, the future of Birkenau in particular.
- 28:48 Susanne Hillman: Interesting. Yeah, I noticed on one of your slides there was a comment by, I don't know if it was Jakubowska herself, who noticed that there were the huge daisy flowers in Birkenau and that was kind of um, sinister knowing that they dumped all the ashes there and now you're mentioning the agricultural.
- 29:08 Marek Haltof: Yes and then she did preliminary research in 1946 and, and that's what she discovered. She knew that she, she will have to recreate part of that Birkenau that she remembers, or other prisoners remember. And there were

some uh, um not only Auschwitz survivors working with her of course the co-scriptwriter Gerda Schneider but also, if you look at the crew, there are Jewish people. For example um the the producer of the film Weinberger, the Russian cinematographer. Um, and they, what they wanted to portray uh, the Holocaust the way it was, although the very term is not present there. Although you may, one may argue that this is somewhere in the background but, but um, given the context of the day I think that this is quite pioneering too that, that aspect of the film.

- 30:09 Susanne Hillman: Uh, Emma was wondering uh, where the POWs [prisoners of war] in the film came from? Um, I don't quite recall if you touched on that. Were they female fighters, she asked.
- 30:20 Marek Haltof: There were German POWs and, and Jakubowska wanted to use uh, a lot of them but there were some objections so they, they helped 20, more than 20 of them were employed by the Film Polski, the body that was in charge of Polish cinema - Polish film literally uh, translating. So, so they were employed and they were helping with the production of the film but I, I cannot point them on the, on the screen. I can do it with, with say Russian or Soviet soldiers because it's so easy on that shot that I presented during my introduction.
- 31:11 Susanne Hillman: Um, what do you consider the film's greatest strengths?
- 31:18 Marek Haltof: I would say it's a semi-documentary dimension. This is, this is after all an eyewitness testimony.

Jakubowska was there, yes. And that's how this film was later perceived by other filmmaker. And interestingly uh, fragments of *The Last Stage* one may find in several films. If you look at the film about Anne Frank, George Stevens' film, there is only one scene in that film that refers to the reality of the concentration camp and this is the image, women on the Appelplatz, that is taken directly from *The Last Stage*, as, as a documentary footage. Obviously, George Stevens knew the reality very well. He documented the liberation of Nazi German camps but, but he used it and this was, I understand, the practice of the day. For example uh in *Night and Fog* the celebrated documentary film by Alain Resnais there are two shots from *The Last Stage* without acknowledgment, for example, the arrival of a train at night, or the tracks heading for the crematorium, and Alain Resnais obviously knew that this is a - I don't want to use the term fictional material - but recreated material. Was, when he did research in Poland Wanda Jakubowska was helping him and, and there are several documents about their encounter but, but this speaks uh, volumes of the power, impact of this film. And then everybody wanted to make films about Auschwitz, about the Holocaust, on location and this was for example the idea that - if I um, remember correctly - Steven Spielberg had, yes. He wanted to shoot not only a film, in black and white but also on location. This was, the production was just too big and and this, his um, application was, was rejected. But there are other films like *The Passenger* by Andrzej Munk. The classic unfinished film from 1963 that was made also on location and with some of the actors that appear in *The Last*

Stage. Um Aleksandra Slaska the Aufseherin, the sinister female guard, reappears in that film from 1963.

33:53 Susanne Hillman: That is fascinating and especially one of the comments that we received was one by Ray who works or was, or is associated with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and she was talking about an attempt to uh - Ray forgive me if I don't get it exactly correctly - but to exhibit a picture and uh, they were going to take a shot from the film, at *The Last Stage*. But luckily they realized in time, but it comes across as so immensely authentic. Uh, we have time for one last question. Um, how - given the recent um, controversies in Poland surrounding the Holocaust and the Polish touchiness when it comes to that topic - how is the film viewed today? Are people proud that um, Jakubowska was one of the first to make this uh, impactful film? Or what can you say about that?

34:51 Marek Haltof: It's a very good question because this film was neglected for years uh, marginalized, and not that many people were interested in Jakubowska's depiction of Auschwitz. Not that many people were interested in Jakubowska and her other films. She was a communist. She died in 1998 and always commented on her belief in the communist party. When I was researching my book and writing the book, I contacted the Polish studios asking about the reconstruction, reconstruction of the film because the only available version was quite mutilated with substandard subtitles. Um, I was told that that, this film had, has to wait. This is not the right climate. There are other more important films um, and you know. I'm very happy to see this reconstructed version. Uh, I thought that this will never

happen frankly because it took years. And in my opinion, I'm going to repeat myself, in my opinion, this is perhaps the most important Polish film, perhaps not the best in terms of its quality but certainly the most important. In 20-30 years this will be even more um, obvious.

36:16 Susanne Hillman: Well thank you for all the work you have done to really emphasize the importance and this is the first time I saw the film. I think it's very impressive. Uh, our time is up so I would like to thank you, Marek, for sharing your expertise with us. I hope in the future I will see you in person on the ground rather than cyberspace. I would also like to thank everybody who attended this really memorable screening. Thank you Laurayne again for making this possible. I wish everybody a good night, bye.

36:52 Thank you very much. Thank you.

36:55 [Read Write Think Dream The Library UC San Diego Channel / www.uctv.tv/librarychannel/]

37:03 [“The Last Stage” by Wanda Jakubowska / Featuring J. Marek Haltof / Professor of English, Northern Michigan University / April 14, 2020 /

37:07 [Presented by / The Holocaust Living History Workshop / Deborah Hertz, Director, The Jewish Studies Program, UC San Diego / Susanne Hillman, Program Coordinator, The Holocaust Living History Workshop / UC San Diego Library / Erik T. Mitchell, The Audrey Geisel University Librarian / Nikki Kolupailo, Director of Communications and Engagement]

- 37:12 [UCTV / Producer, Lynn Burnstan / Production & Editor,
Marci Bretts]
- 37:16 [uctv / University of California Television / www.uctv.tv / The
views, contents, and opinions expressed herein do not
necessarily represent those of the University of California /
©2021 Regents of the University of California. All rights
reserved.]