

עיון וחקר
הרצאות ומסות

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Search and Research
Lectures and Papers

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The Shaping of the Holocaust Visual Image
by the Nuremberg Trials
The Impact of the Movie Nazi Concentration Camps

Yvonne Kozlovsky-Golan

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THE SHAPING OF THE HOLOCAUST VISUAL
CONSCIENCE BY THE NUREMBERG TRIALS

BIRTH OF THE HOLOCAUST IN HOLLYWOOD-STYLE MOTION PICTURES:
THE IMPACT OF THE MOVIE *NAZI CONCENTRATION CAMPS*

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Kozlovsky-Golan wrote her PhD thesis on Film and American Legal History at Haifa University, and graduated in 2002. Her research interests deal with history and cinema, the memory of the Holocaust and its penetration into the world's consciousness through film, and the representation of the Holocaust survivor in the Israeli cinematic fiction discussion.

Her publications include: **"Gibson's Passion,"** in *Mel Gibson's "Passion" – the film, the Controversy, and Its Implications*, ed., Zev Garber (Purdue University Press, 2006); **"The Birth of the Holocaust in Motion Pictures,"** *Political Film Review Newsletter* 216 (December 31, 2004); **"The Birth of the Holocaust in Motion Pictures: Schemes in Black and White,"** *War in Film, TV, and History* (proceedings of the 2004 Film & History League Conference), eds., Peter C. Rollins, John E. O'Connor, James R. Knecht (CD-ROM, 2004). She served as super producer in Israel of the Austrian-Israeli co-production *Lina and Leila*, directed by Michael Fiefenberger, 2004.

Kozlovsky-Golan is also a writer and poet, and published *The Pain of Pleasure* (Tel Aviv: Reshafim Publishing, 1994).

*In memory of my friend and colleague,
Nathan Ofek, 1942–2006*

1. Introduction

The uniqueness of the Nazi leadership trials of winter 1946, or, as they are widely known, the Nuremberg Trials, does not lie only in their judicial significance, but also — and primarily — in the impact these trials made on Western culture and society in general, and, more specifically, on the image the West formed of those events.

The transition that the oppressed peoples of Europe made from Nazi occupation to liberty and the liberation of the death and concentration camps were visually documented by the liberating armies. In the West it was the American army with its allies, and in the East it was the Russian army. The first aim of both these armies was to justify the war to their own peoples, particularly the opponents of the war at home. At the same time, preparations were made to try the Nazi leaders on charges of crimes against humanity and conspiracy to engage in war. As big as the crimes were, however, the problem arose of how to bring evidence of them to the courts. The prosecutors decided that the film footage shot during liberation would constitute the most credible evidence. In this paper I will show that the use of these films as evidence had a considerable effect on the perception of the Holocaust, its memory and the characteristics attributed to it, both in the Nuremberg court and later by global viewers around the world.

On 8 September, 2004, a notice appeared in the press that the American film director Steven Spielberg had been knighted by the French Legion of Honor in recognition of his battle against hatred and intolerance. This recognition elevated the filmmaker and his films, particularly his work on the Holocaust, to the

xenophobia, anti-Semitism and fanaticism are on the rise again, it is essential that cinema, which touches each one of us deep inside, recalls the horror of what is unutterable.”¹

Primo Levi may have recognized the importance of film as a particularly valuable means of commemorating the Holocaust in his book *The Drowned and the Saved* (*I sommersi e i salvati*). In a chapter entitled “The Gray Zone,” which discusses human memory, Levi writes: “In short, we are compelled to reduce the knowable to a schema: with this purpose in view we have built for ourselves admirable tools in the course of evolution, tools which are the specific property of the human species — language and conceptual thought.”² In this chapter alone Levi mentions two feature films: *Kapo* (Gillo Pontecorvo, Italy, 1960) and *The Night Porter* (Liliana Cavani, Italy, 1974). His remarks seem to indicate that film supported his abstract memory of the Holocaust, and, additionally, were proof that human memory and thought are substantiated by motion pictures, which successfully preserve and conceptualize events that are assumed to be true.³ In a chapter entitled “Communicating,” Levi writes: “For all of us survivors, who are not exactly polyglot, the first days in the *Lager* remain impressed in our memories like an out-of-focus and frenzied film, filled with a dreadful sound and fury signifying nothing... A black and white film, with sound but not a talkie.”⁴ Here is an indication that Levi’s language of conceptual thought was influenced by primary images absorbed during his experience as a concentration camp prisoner, and reinforced, as we shall see, by films that he himself mentions as examples to explain what happened.

Like Levi, millions of people were influenced by images from the world of cinematic visualization. And, as in Levi’s

case, it can be assumed that their Holocaust memories and conceptual thoughts were molded into a form of collective memory that determined Western culture’s understanding of the Holocaust.

2. Goals of This Paper

Thus, it is the goal here to prove that indeed the conception of the Holocaust as perceived for decades now has not only been fundamentally influenced by images from the film world, but that these images have appreciably determined the way that Western culture, collectively, understands the Holocaust. This understanding in fact derives from the influence of the above-mentioned original film footage shot by the Allied forces when they liberated the concentration camps. Any discussion of historical “truth” must take account of this primary documentation, which has greatly impacted on the film industry, literature, and our culture’s general sensitivity to the subject of the Holocaust.

Conceptual thought results from complex syntheses of sensory perceptions that become a transferenceal dialog between the individual and the cinematic or artistic creation. I argue that the visual dimension is preeminent in shaping the personal or collective world view. This does not mean that visually impaired people have no world view, but rather that they generally accept the concept prevailing in their culture, which is created by the sighted.

I certainly have no intention of contending in this article that the “truth” can be found in movies, but that the world of documentary and fictional films does constitute a definitive point of reference for any discussion of the power, cruelty, and difficulty of the Holocaust experience. It can even be said that in movies we relive trauma in a way that is usually spared us in

1 Allison Wolfe, “Names and Faces,” *The Washington Post*, 6 Sept., 2004, Style Section, CO3 (final edition).

2 Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 36.

3. The Known and the Invisible: The Survivor's Historical Memory Versus the Documenter's Collective Memory

The word "Holocaust" brings various associations to mind, most of them visual. These associations derive from televised documentaries and feature films, mostly aired on Holocaust memorial days or occasions. Specific examples are Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*,⁵ photo albums, and televised interviews with survivors. In order to fully understand the immediate impression these visuals left on our memories, we must investigate the source of our cinematic knowledge, and the source of the films that have conceptualized the term "Holocaust." We must research the films' historical origin and the prototypes upon which later films drew. We will examine these films' historical infrastructure, based on the primary liberation documentaries that, in retrospect, became the foundation of the whole genre.

In this context, I claim that the cinematic narrative embryo for the genre known as "Holocaust" was born in those liberation films, which gave rise to various types of movies that described the horrors of that era and brought it to the consciousness of the viewers.

However, the Holocaust memory concept is rife with contradictions when we start comparing these cinematic memories with the actual memories (albeit subjective) of the survivors, collected through Testimony Pages and other documentary projects, and with the camp liberators' documentation. In this case, the "cinematic story" presents a view that is neither scientific nor academic, although it seems real. I will demonstrate the conflict between the survivors' subjective memories and the liberators' visual memories by examining an Israeli documentary. This film can give us a better perspective on Holocaust research and its visual documentation, the pros and cons of this method, and its effect on the collective consciousness of peoples and countries

in respect to Holocaust memory and the lessons to be learned from it.

Ra'anana Alexandrowicz's film *Martin* (1999)⁶ describes the efforts of a Dachau concentration camp survivor to prove that the camp inmates had been gassed to death. While making the film and constructing his main thesis, the director sought to verify the survivor's claims. To that end, he moved away from Martin's testimony to visual material filmed in the camp by the Americans immediately after liberation. Alexandrowicz's movie shows footage from *Nazi Concentration Camps* (George Stevens, 1945),⁷ filmed by the Americans on the day that the Dachau concentration camp was liberated, and records an interview with the administrator of the Dachau camp museum. This material ultimately prompted three main conclusions. First, Alexandrowicz does not consider the footage filmed on the day of liberation to be documentary in the full sense of the word — that is, it was not a case of cameramen serendipitously entering the camp and filming whatever they happened to see there at that moment. As a director Alexandrowicz perceived the orchestration involved in the line-up of local residents who had been "invited" by the Allies to see the horrors that had been taking place right next door. A spotlight on the pile of bodies (piled up in advance by the Americans?) was designed to focus the eye on the atrocity; the local inhabitants entered the room on one side of the camera and left it from the other side. Alexandrowicz, seeking to authenticate and verify Martin's memories of the Holocaust in Dachau by means of visual material, realized that in a certain sense these memories were contrived.

Alexandrowicz's second conclusion is that everything that Martin claimed he had seen as an objective witness in Dachau was negligible. For the museum staff, Martin's personal memory

6 *Martin*. Dir. Ra'anana Alexandrowicz. Israel, 1999.

7 *Nazi Concentration Camps*. Dir. George Stevens. Department of Defense, European Command, Office of Military Government for Germany (US), Office of the Chief Counsel for War Crimes, 1945. Produced and presented as evidence at the Nuremberg war crimes trial of Hermann Göring and 20 other Nazi leaders.