

AMBULANCE

(Poland, 1962)

A Resource Guide

by

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2. The Film: Its Images and Sounds

Ambulance achieves its effect through the juxtaposition of images and sounds. Each is carefully chosen to represent a much larger facet of the Holocaust, but it is up to us to supply the missing context.

- a) **The sounds of Nazism:** Hitler's animalistic ranting and Nazi military music. These blend in with the grating, mechanical cough of the exhaust. We begin with the most debased specimen of human language, a voice that commands the vast military might of the German army and the advanced technology of its industry.
- b) **The van:** the technology of mass murder in miniature. The exhaust pipe over the cobblestones suggests the chimneys of the crematoria. German efficiency is conveyed by the careful, unhurried test of the exhaust valve, the accelerator, the carbon monoxide fumes.
- c) **The driver's face:** is initially hidden from view. Perhaps this suggests that he is the Messenger of Death.
- d) **The police dog and the children at play:** the dog shows more compassion than his master. The dog establishes a rapport with the children, is drawn into their game, and returns the child's shoe and propeller. It is the dog that cries out in the end, not the children. They still live in a world in which dogs are playmates, adults are guardians and ambulances save people from death.
- e) **The fenced-in yard:** a playground or prison? Only the birds are free to escape. The Holocaust landscape is one of compounds, fences, machines and deadly fumes all designed to destroy human feeling and human life.

The film uses facts to suggest beyond themselves. It captures a moment in modern history when the might and technology of the most advanced nation in Europe was channeled into the murder of children. It depicts a mad universe in which an ambulance is used to gas human beings; the symbol of healing becomes the insignia of death. The gas vans, which were actually used by the Nazis in the earliest stages of the "Final Solution", are the artist's way of responding to the gas chambers in which millions were destined to perish. The mind cannot grasp what even one such gassing was like. It would be impossible to watch any "realistic" attempt to portray it on film. By restricting our viewpoint to a single, manageable incident, *Ambulance* forces us to draw on our own imagination and knowledge to supply the rest of the terrifying details.

1. Approaches to the Holocaust

Holocaust is the term used to designate the planned mass murder of the entire Jewish people for the sole reason of their having been born Jews. What happened to the Jews was not genocide, namely an attempt at denationalization, horrible though it be, but Holocaust. The universal significance of the Holocaust derives from its uniqueness and from the fact that it happened to Jews.

The Nazis and their collaborators designed the death and degradation of the Jews to be as culturally specific as possible, to be the supreme travesty of all times: they rode horseback on the rabbis of Minsk-Mazovietsk, they filmed naked men and women sharing the ritual bath in Warsaw, they forced men to urinate on the Torah scrolls in Vilna. What this means is that we cannot comprehend the murder of European Jewry, much less properly mourn their loss, without knowing the meaning and specific content of their lives. The victims, for the most part, spoke, read and wrote in Jewish languages, constantly rubbed shoulders with other Jews in the factory, store, theater, school, labor union, home and house of prayer; enjoyed Sholem Aleichem as much as they did Charlie Chaplin, a good cantor - as much as Caruso or Chaliapin. So while it is true that the Holocaust is the nearly total annihilation of European Jewry by means of systematic planning, advanced technology, starvation and mass murder, it is also true that the brutalization and killing of each Jew represents the rape of an entire civilization.

3. A Jewish Response

But *Ambulance* is also the work of a Jew, Janusz Morgenstern, born in Poland in 1922 and a graduate of the famed Lodz Film School. Morgenstern, who has remained in Poland, uses two aspects of the film to depict the Holocaust as a uniquely Jewish event: the music and the figure of the adult civilian.

The melody develops slowly and is constantly being interrupted by the mechanical preparations and the children's games. But eventually we recognize it as Mordechai Gebirtig's famous evocation of childhood:

*Kinder-yorn, zise kinder-yorn,
Eybik blaybt ir vakh in mayn zikorn.
Ven ikh trakht fun ayor tasyt,
Vert mir azoy bang un layd.
Oy, vi shncl bin ikh sheyn alt gevorn.*

*(Childhood, sweet years of childhood,
You are always alive in my memory.
Whenever I'm reminded of those times,
I ache with Longing.
Oh, how swiftly I've grown old.)*

Instead of the lost world of childhood as remembered by an adult, we have children who are brutally robbed of their youth and of their lives. They will never be given the chance to grow old. Perhaps Morgenstern meant this also to be a tribute to Gebirtig himself who was shot by the Germans in 1942 during a deportation from the Ghetto of Cracow. *Ambulance*, which begins with the menacing sound of German marching music, ends with a Yiddish folk melody turned into a *Kaddish*.

The most intriguing figure in the film is that of the adult Jew who reassures and lines the children up and then calmly joins them in death. There are at least two levels on which he can be understood: as a representation of Janusz Korczak, a real historical figure, and as a latter-day Abraham. Korczak was one of the great educators of this century. After his orphanage was relocated in the Warsaw Ghetto, he managed not only to keep the children from starving, to protect them from the typhus that was raging in the ghetto, but also to maintain a full-scale educational program, including concerts and religious services. One account of his legendary death is that of his colleague Michael Zylberberg:

This was the last Yom Kippur celebrated by Dr. Korczak and his children. On a sunny day in August, 1942, the orphanage was surrounded by SS officers; Korczak, his staff and his children (about 120 of them) were taken to the Umschlagplatz (round-up station) for transportation to the Treblinka extermination camp. Korczak knew, without a doubt, what awaited them; but although the Germans offered him personal freedom, he chose to go to the death camp with the children. His one aim was to hide the truth from them and comfort them. They marched very slowly, in rows of four; I stood at a nearby window and watched them go. I never saw them again. (A Warsaw Diary, 1939-45, p. 46)

Modeled after Korczak's behavior, the adult Jew in *Ambulance* understands that when faced with the choice between death and death, the only way to uphold one's human dignity is to diminish the suffering of those around you.

In reality, the Nazis tried to conceal the fate of their victims until the last moment. A German officer would never have openly rehearsed the mechanics of death. But what the film loses in authenticity, it gains in symbolic significance. For the children cannot comprehend such a demonic plan even when it is revealed to them, and the adult realizes the futility of fighting the murder machine. Furthermore, he is enacting a role that goes back to antiquity; he is accompanying all his children to the mass and mechanical *Akedah*. How profoundly different the Holocaust is from the mythical binding of Isaac is one of the central questions raised by this film.

4. Art and Atrocity

It is at this point that artistic responses to the Holocaust take on special significance. For art, whether verbal or visual, speaks through imagery, symbols and the traditions of earlier artists. Thus, the language of art is ideally suited to evoke an atrocity in which the values and sanctities of a civilization were methodically perverted as its people were being murdered. The artist may do this in several ways:

- a) by finding the single instance that stands for the many;
- b) by choosing a symbolic framework derived from Jewish and general culture and showing its utter defilement at the hands of the murderers, and
- c) by shaping all this into a coherent statement whose eloquence will haunt us after the details are forgotten.

Great art challenges our assumptions and our complacency; it bridges the gap between the universal and the particular and by transcending the facts, it ultimately contributes to a deeper understanding of their meaning. For these reasons it is crucial that we enlist the artistic conscience of the Holocaust in our own effort, as individuals and as a community, to achieve some sense of order out of this nightmare.

