

# The Holocaust in American Cinema

by Sam Hellerstein

The Holocaust was the massacre of more than 6 million Jews, and another 5 million Russians, Poles, Roma, and other minorities regarded by the German Nazi party as racially inferior. It is widely considered the most horrific act of brutality in the history of the world. Interestingly enough, it has become embedded in American culture, owing perhaps a large portion of its fame to its portrayal in American film.

I chose this project because I wanted to know more about the many films connected in some way to the Holocaust, and to have a chance to see some of the more prominent examples. I wanted to know if there were any recurring themes, and generally just wanted to know more about the Holocaust and if films portray it correctly. Until I decided to do this project, I had seen very few Holocaust movies, and I realized that with this I could both watch the films and study them more in-depth. Using what I learned, I will explain some recurring themes in these films, explain one of the more prominent moral questions involving the portrayal of the event, and I will talk about the films themselves.

The overall portrayal of the Holocaust in American films is the most important issue. Many films about the Holocaust are well-known, and are watched by many people, so the way the Holocaust is portrayed may be especially influential on public opinion. Because of this, maintaining historical accuracy is particularly important. Usually this matter does not need to be addressed because of the easiness of obtaining information, but sometimes events are changed to help the mood of the film.

More often, people bring up moral issues pertaining to the portrayal. These people are divided into two camps - those who feel that through film and the portrayal of the events the Holocaust has actually been trivialized and those who feel that the Holocaust must be portrayed in one way or another, despite the dangers of generalization and trivialization.

One of the most well-known advocates of the former argument is the famous Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel. He has declared many times that he is disgusted to see “the final moments of the victims re-enacted with special effects” and believes that the Holocaust is truly impossible to portray, because it was so indescribably evil, and that trying to portray the suffering only helps to trivialize it. In cases such as the *Holocaust* miniseries, such violent atrocities had to be

slightly dulled for the viewers, which Wiesel and others claim trivialize the Holocaust.

Supporters of the latter argument, I for one, recognize the portrayal as a part of learning about the Holocaust. The supporters of this approach believe that although it is impossible to completely portray the events, what we have now is extremely accurate, perhaps the best we can get it. It may trivialize it a small amount, but it is very necessary if people are to learn all they can about the Holocaust.

Of course, the most important part of the portrayal of the Holocaust is the films themselves. In the next section, I will describe some of the more influential and well-known Holocaust films, and provide a brief history of Holocaust films.

*The Great Dictator*, released in 1940, was maybe the first movie directly referencing Jews and internment in the camps. This movie, surprisingly enough, was directed and financed by Charlie Chaplin, who also starred in the film and was not Jewish. Other movies referenced Nazi racism, but never actually referenced the Jews, usually saying something along the lines of “non-gentiles” instead. The number of films just before and during the War that even mentioned the treatment

of Jews was very limited, as was the number that portrayed Nazis as evil. This was caused mostly because of fear on the Hollywood moguls' part; they did not want to offend German audiences or be blamed for sending America into war. However, shortly after Pearl Harbor, Hollywood was encouraged by the Government to make anti-Nazi war films. The number of Holocaust films was still in short supply, until after the war. For a few months after the war in Europe ended and footage of the Holocaust came to the States, people were very interested in watching the Holocaust in news reels. This ended after only 6 months, presumably because Americans were interested more in rebuilding America's relationship with Germany and helping Germany to rebuild after the War rather than criticizing past policies, and a mainstream Holocaust film was not seen until the 1950s.

During the 1950's Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* had become a Broadway musical and finally, in 1954, a movie. The movie was a fictionalized record of her life, and was one of the first successful Holocaust films. Several other films appeared during the 1960s, among them classics like *Judgment at Nuremberg*, about the trial of Nazi war criminals, and *The Pawnbroker*, which dealt with the psychological effects of the war on a concentration camp survivor. However, the next major turning point was not in film, but in television. The 1978 television series *Holocaust* revitalized interest in the Holocaust and was immensely

successful. When broadcast in Germany, it became one of the most influential television productions in history. One-third of the German people watched the series, and the broadcast prompted the German government to strengthen sentences against Nazis. It was influential enough to start its own cynical joke: “*The Holocaust* miniseries had a bigger impact than the original.”

Many more Holocaust films sprang up, including *War and Remembrance*, another television miniseries. Another recent addition to the list of classic Holocaust movies was *Schindler’s List*. It was released in 1993, and became extremely famous as an accurate depiction of life in a concentration camp and Oskar Schindler’s development from a businessman to a savior of the Jewish people. Along with it, many more Holocaust films with themes of rebellion and righteousness were made, and it helped renew interest in the Nazi’s greatest act of brutality.

I am going to focus on three films in particular, from three time periods – namely, before America entered the war, shortly after the war, and present day.

*The Great Dictator*, as mentioned earlier, was written, directed, and produced by Charlie Chaplin in 1940. It is a comedic story about a Jewish barber (played by

Chaplin) who fought for a fictional equivalent to Germany, called Tomania, during the First World War. He is affected by amnesia after the war and returns from the hospital to find that the Dictator Hynkel is now leading Tomania. His anti-Semitic Hitler-like policies compel the Barber's old war buddy to quit his high-ranking position and join with the Barber and his friends in the Jewish ghetto. Meanwhile, Hynkel prepares to invade a neighboring country. Just before the invasion, the Barber and his partner escape from the camp they are held at, and Barber takes Hynkel's place. (The real dictator is out hunting and is mistaken for the Barber by his own men. Chaplin plays a dual role as the Barber and Hynkel). The Barber ends the film with a speech denouncing racism and Nazism.

Being directed by a gentile and being released before any other significant strikes at Nazi Germany, the movie was odd for its time. It was made before America knew of the full scale of Nazi anti-semitism, and even more strikingly, it was a comedy. Though Chaplin later stated that he wouldn't have made the movie if he had known about the true horror of the Holocaust, a comedy was maybe the only way the American public could learn about the situation without political or public outrage. The American government was intent on staying out of the war, and had told the Jewish leaders of Hollywood that if their movies caused America to join in the war, then they and other Jews would be blamed. So, none of the major film

studios in Hollywood, even though they were owned by Jews, released the film, despite the fact that the light-hearted nature of the film could hardly compel America to join the war.

*The Great Dictator* had a relatively small impact, but it was revolutionary in that it was the first film to openly denounce Nazism. Like many other movies that came after, it featured a gentile Savior. The Jews in the movie strangely follow few Jewish customs, probably to show that most Jews were assimilated into German culture. The fact that the Barber was a veteran of World War I was similar to many other German Jews' predicaments, that they had served Germany loyally yet were branded as traitors. Perhaps most odd was that Chaplin was the only person, Jew or Gentile who was bold enough to make a movie exclusively about Jews and their treatment under Nazis.

*Judgment at Nuremberg*, made in 1961, is a film about the trial of several Nazi judges and doctors, who are being accused of wrongly authorizing sterilization and death penalties to Jews and others who did not deserve them. Several witnesses are brought to the trial, and we are given insights into the lives of the American judge, portrayed by Spencer Tracy, and the German defendants. While the widow of an executed general and one American colonel try to sway the American judge's

decision, the Nazi defendants converse with each other about the trials during their prison stay. It is made obvious that the main defendant, a Nazi judge, has already decided that the entire group of Nazis is guilty. As the trial moves along, the trial becomes more than a prosecution of the Nazi judges and doctors, but of the whole world. The defense attorney implies that if it was the Nazi judges' fault, it was also the whole world's fault for standing idle while the Holocaust took place. The defense attorney points out that the sterilization of the mentally challenged was advocated by an American judge, also. However, the main defendant pleads guilty, and the judge declares all of them guilty, punished with lifetime imprisonment.

*Judgment at Nuremburg* was a deeper, closer look at the reasons behind the Holocaust. Ernst Janning, a Nazi judge and the main defendant, is extremely ashamed of his and his comrade's actions, and stays quiet until he pleads guilty. He then states that the German public claimed they knew nothing because they didn't want to remember, that they all knew what was happening, but they believed that it was for the good of Germany. This is met with a yell of "Traitor!" from one of the other defendants, and shows that even within the Nazi regime's legal system, some followed reluctantly.

Other notable events in the film were the questioning of victims, such as a non-Jewish woman who had been allegedly having a romantic relationship with a Jewish man. While the Nazi's defense attorney Hans Rolfe badgers her to tears, the lead Nazi defendant, Ernst Janning, is compelled to speak about how he and the rest of Germany allowed the Holocaust to turn from a simple propaganda tool to a complete genocide. In another scene, a man is brought to testify. It is revealed that he is mentally handicapped and was taken out of public school and later sterilized. The victims' testimony is strong evidence and shows Janning and the others to be guilty of their crimes.

The most revolutionary part of the movie was the use of footage taken by military photographers of the camps; some of the gruesome images included corpses burnt in furnaces, corpses being pushed by bulldozer into a ditch, and other images such as lampshades made from skin or ashtrays made from human bone. *Judgement at Nuremberg* is a moving and intellectual piece, and although it receives less attention than it deserves, it ranks among the greatest Holocaust films.

The 1993 film *Schindler's List*, directed by Steven Spielberg, is a film about a German businessman named Oskar Schindler. While employing Polish Jews as slave labor in his Krakow factory, he witnesses the atrocities of the Nazi party

when the Jews are deported. Many Jews who have hidden are shot in their homes, and huge droves of people are walking through the city as onlookers throw dirt at them. He then has several Jews taken out of the camp to work in his factory, and after watching the brutality they live through, he purchases a large percentage of the people who used to work for him to come to his arms factory, where he purposely manufactures defective weapons. His actions effectively protect many Jews from going to, and being killed at, Auschwitz.

*Schindler's List* is one of the most well known Holocaust films, and a classic of the genre. It has also been fairly controversial. The amount of graphic murder and scenes of the victims' nudity while being gassed, among other aspects, caused some scenes to be followed by a small amount of public outrage. However, the explicitness also strengthens the film's portrayal of torture and eventual freedom the film portrays. The film is shot entirely in black and white, despite being made in the 1990s. This was, as the director describes, to make the film seem gritty and the scenario unpleasant. The only scenes with color were the beginning, the appearances of a little girl in a red coat, lighting of candles, and at the end of the film.

The appearance of the red girl is perhaps the most meaningful of the few colored moments. The first time she is seen, she is rushing into a house to escape from a huge deportation. Schindler then gains some sympathy toward the Jews, as he is disgusted by the brutal murder of many of the hidden Jews. She is captured, as seen later in the film, when Schindler accompanies the Nazi officers of the nearby concentration camp to a mass burning of the Jews murdered in the ghetto. He watches with a face stricken in horror as the little girl's charred corpse is wheelbarrowed toward a towering pile of burnt bodies. This is recognized as another turning point in Schindler's moral stance, from a sympathetic bystander to a person who genuinely cares about the tortured, remorselessly murdered Jews, and decides to save them. He has seen all he can and can no longer put up with it, and soon starts his struggle to save the Jews of Krakow.

As we have seen, a usual component of Holocaust films is a gentile savior. Oskar Schindler is, of course, one of the most famous of these. Others include the Romanian officer, Schultz, in *The Great Dictator*, and several others. Many of the Holocaust films are centered on country-wide secret rebellions (such as the saving of the Danish Jews in *Miracle at Midnight*, or specifically Jewish rebellions (such as the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising). Such scenes are usually included to give the audience a sense of hope, despite the historical inaccuracy of the events.

The Holocaust has been an important presence in modern culture. In addition to the films, there are hundreds of books about it, such as Elie Wiesel's *Night* and Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*. There have also been TV series, such as *The Holocaust* miniseries, and Broadway productions like *The Diary of Anne Frank*. References to the Holocaust can be seen in politicians' speeches, and other genocides such as the Darfur conflict are often compared to it. However, one of the most widespread media about it has been film. This could be for several reasons- the easy availability of films to the public, or the dramatic tension associated with movies that will draw the audience. Films don't require directors to come up with endings to episodes or any other such plot device like in a TV series and the story can flow more smoothly because the audience can watch the movie in one sitting, not several months. The Jews in Hollywood today may have wanted to focus on their history, also.

But as a result of such widespread media portrayals, the Jewish experience shown in many films has become less and less a Jewish event, and more of an event the world can relate to. This is one of the problems people like Eli Wiesel address when talking about movies; the audience needs to understand the Jews' problems are like their own for a full effect, and the result is a version which has been

“Americanized” and generalized for the people to understand, at the expense of the uniquely Jewish experience . Although the large amount of Holocaust media helps the public learn, it also generalizes the Holocaust so that it is no longer a solely Jewish event.

When talking about films, we can't simply talk about regular Hollywood films with fictional or dramatized plots. Documentaries are both more accurate and do away with the risk of generalization, because you are watching it for information. They can be longer than most films and are not bound by storytelling, only by a concern to accurately depict the film's subject. However, they also lack some important aspects of films with stories. They are not as widely seen or acknowledged as story films, and thus are less useful for informing the masses. So, there is a trade-off; the documentary is generally more accurate, but is not as popular and not as widely seen. Apart from the lack of a wide audience, documentaries can be as or more engaging for the people who see them than some movies with plots. They can range from personal testimonies to long descriptions of the history of the Holocaust. While they are often neglected by mass audiences, they are in several ways better than fictional stories.

My opinion is that despite the generalization or trivialization of the Holocaust, it is extremely important for people to learn about it. The only way to prevent more genocides of that magnitude is to know about it. Through the wide distribution of Holocaust films, people can learn about the Holocaust very easily. Though generalization is a side effect, it is the price for helping people to understand the situation.

Lastly, this project has had a great effect on me as a young adult. From the start I wanted to know more about the Holocaust, and thought that film was a very accessible method of learning about it. I decided to study these films and what they do for people and the image of the Holocaust. Soon after I began watching them, I became interested more and more in Jewish history and the Holocaust. This led me to study more about the reasons behind the Holocaust and anti-semitism, which helped me to better understand the films I had seen. Learning more about Jewish history and the Holocaust has given me a much larger sense of my Jewish identity. It has helped me to learn about the Jewish way of life and our unique experiences as Jews. It is also the largest research project I have accomplished, and has surely prepared me for the challenges I will face in my upcoming transition to adulthood.

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