

NEW YORKER FILMS PRESENTS

SOBIBOR, OCTOBER 14, 1943, 4 PM

A Film by Claude Lanzmann

OFFICIAL SELECTION 2001
CANNES FILM FESTIVAL
NEW YORK FILM FESTIVAL

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SYNOPSIS

In this unique document, Claude Lanzmann confutes two cliches: that the Jews had no inkling of what awaited them in the gas chambers, and that they went to their deaths without resistance. The full title of the film, "Sobibor, Oct. 14, 1943, 4 p.m.", refers to the place and time when Jewish prisoners in the Sobibor extermination camp staged a successful uprising, the only one, against the Nazi captors.

The story, which sometimes has the aura of a fairy tale, is told to the camera by Yehuda Lerner, who took part in the revolt as a youth. Lerner was taken from the Warsaw ghetto and sent to his first camp when he was 16. Before being sent to Sobibor, the brave and resourceful boy proceeded to escape from eight different camps in six months, each time having the luck to be picked up by German soldiers and taken to another place instead of shot.

Sobibor had been mentioned in "Shoah", Lanzmann's 1985 marathon, landmark documentary about the Holocaust told through the voices of its survivors. But Lanzmann felt that Lerner's extraordinary account deserved a film of its own.

CREDITS

Director	Claude Lanzmann
Camera	Caroline Champetier (1979) Dominique Chapuis (2001)
Editor	Chantal Hymans Sabine Marnou
Sound	Bernard Aubouy
With...	Yehuda Lerner

Running Time: 95mins.

Language: In Hebrew and French

Aspect Ratio: 1:66

Color

Sound: DTS Digital

CLAUDE LANZMANN'S FILMOGRAPHY

DIRECTOR

Israel, Why (1972)

Shoah (1985)

A Visitor from the Living (1997)

Tsahal (1994)

Sobibor, 14 October 1943, 4 p.m. (2001)

WRITER

Elise ou la Vraie Vie (1970)

Tsahal (1994)

Sobibor, 14 October 1943, 4 p.m. (2001)

PRODUCER

A Visitor from the Living (1997)

ACTOR

Hotel Terminus: The Life and Times of Klaus Barbie (1988)

A Visitor from the Living (1997)

Autopsie d'un Mensonge—Le Négationnisme (2000)

DIRECTOR'S COMMENTS

“Sobibor occupies a crucial position in “Shoah”, and the death camp uprising is referred to early on in the film by Jan Piwonski, from Poland, who was assistant switchman at the station at the time. Piwonski witnessed the camp’s construction and the arrival of the first convoy for the gas chambers. But, contrary to the position adopted for Treblinka, Chelmno or Auschwitz Birkenau, no Jewish protagonists talked about Sobibor. All the same, I had shot a large amount of footage with Ada Lichtman and her husband who both managed to escape during the uprising and, above all, with Yehuda Lerner, its emblematic hero, a surprising figure and, as we shall see, a man of tireless and indomitable courage.

The Sobibor uprising could not be a mere moment in “Shoah”: it deserved a film of its own, it demanded to be treated individually. It is in fact a paradigmatic example of what I have referred to elsewhere as the “reappropriation” of power and violence by the Jews. The Shoah was not only a massacre of innocents, but more specifically a massacre of defenseless people, tricked at every stage in the process of destruction, up to the very doors of the death chambers. Justice must be done to a dual legend, the one claiming that the Jews allowed themselves to be led to the gas chambers without any premonitions or suspicions and that their death was “comfortable”, and the other claiming that they put up no resistance to their executioners. Without mentioning the great rebellions, such as that of the Warsaw ghetto, individual and collective acts of bravery and freedom were frequent in the camps and ghettos: insults, curses, suicide, reckless attacks. However, it is true that an ancient tradition of exile and persecution hadn’t prepared the Jews, as a whole, for the efficient use of violence that requires two inseparable preconditions: a psychological disposition and technical knowledge of weapons. It was a Soviet Jewish officer, Alexander Petchersky, a career soldier familiar with the use of weapons, who decided, planned and organized the uprising in barely six weeks.

Transported to Sobibor in early September 1943 with other Jews, also soldiers in the Red Army, Petchersky was lucky enough not to be sent straight to the gas chambers like the remainder of his comrades: of the 1,200 (one thousand two hundred) people making up the group, the Germans selected around sixty men whom they urgently needed for hard labor and maintenance work. Their turn to die would come later, as was the case with the cobblers, tailors, goldsmiths, laundry women and a few children too who had been living for months or weeks in the section of the camp called “camp number 1” (“camp number 2”, where the gas chambers were, being the death camp as such adjacent to the first) and formed the slave labor serving the Nazis before being periodically eliminated in turn. Alexander Petchersky is no longer among us. Other participants in the rebellion are still alive, scattered around the globe. Yehuda Lerner speaks here for himself and the others, the living and the dead.

To make this film, I wanted to follow the trail of Yehuda Lerner and so I returned to Poland and Belarus, to Sobibor itself, where I hadn't set foot in more than twenty years. I was able to measure the passing of time: the station is even more dilapidated than it was in the past. A single train per day runs between Chelm and Wlodawa. The ramp that more than 250,000 (two hundred and fifty thousand) Jews descended, which was then a grassy embankment, has now been roughly coated with cement for the loading of timber. Yet the Polish government decided five years ago to build a small and touching museum with a red roof in Sobibor. Similarly, at Wlodowa, the synagogue whose yard was used as a truck park in 1978 has also been turned into a museum and is now surrounded with pretty grounds and green lawns.

But museums and monuments institute oblivion as much as remembrance. Let us now listen to Yehuda Lerner's living words."

Claude Lanzmann