

"PROVOCATIVE"

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"UNFORGETTABLE"

— Variety

SOBIBOR, OCTOBER 14, 1943, 4 PM

A film by Claude Lanzmann



NEW YORKER FILMS PRESENTS SOBIBOR, OCTOBER 14, 1943, 4PM A FILM BY CLAUDE LANZMANN
CINEMATOGRAPHY CAROLINE CHAMPETIER (A.F.C.) (2001) AND DOMINIQUE CHAPUIS (A.F.C.) (1979) SOUND BERNARD AUBOUY
EDITING CHANTAL HYMANS AND SABINE MAMOU A CO-PRODUCTION WHY NOT PRODUCTIONS-LES FILMS ALEPH-FRANCE 2 CINEMA
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“SOBIBOR”: ESCAPE FROM THE FINAL SOLUTION

BY A.O. SCOTT

In 1979, while he was making “Shoah,” his nine-hour documentary about the Nazi attempt to obliterate the Jews of Europe, Claude Lanzmann filmed a long interview with Yehuda Lerner, a survivor of the Sobibor camp in eastern Poland. The story that Lerner had to tell — about a carefully planned, surprisingly successful uprising of camp inmates against their would-be murderers — was not included in “Shoah.” The purpose of that film was not to document exceptional acts of mercy and bravery, but rather the more normative experience of inhumanity, terror and death.

More recent films about the Holocaust, both documentary and fictional, have preferred to tell uplifting stories of hope in the face of evil. As if to protect his latest film, “Sobibor, October 14, 1943, 4 p.m.,” which is based on Lerner’s recollections, from being taken out of context, Lanzmann concludes with a recitation, accompanied by an on-screen list, of the trainloads of Jews that arrived in Sobibor during the 18 months of its operation. About 250,000 people died in the camp, which was divided into two units, one for slave labor and one for extermination. They came primarily from Poland, the Netherlands and the Soviet Union.

Lerner was a teen-ager when he arrived in September 1943. He had been deported from the Warsaw ghetto and had managed to escape from eight different camps. “What did you tell the Germans who captured you?” Lanzmann asks him, wondering why Lerner’s captors did not kill him on the spot. “The truth,” he replies with a shrug, unable to explain his extraordinary luck. Eventually Lerner was taken to Minsk, where he was interned with a group of Soviet prisoners of war, all Jews, who impressed him with their discipline and sense of order. It was these soldiers — in particular an officer named

Alexander Petchersky — who organized the revolt of Sept. 14.

Like “Shoah,” “Sobibor,” which will be shown at the New York Film Festival Thursday night and is to open in New York on Friday, derives some of its power from the straightforwardness of its technique. In the first half, Lerner’s voice is accompanied by color film of the landscape he describes. We see Warsaw and Minsk as bustling modern cities where the past is visible in the shape of monuments.

“Museums and monuments,” Lanzmann argues in a director’s note

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.” Lerner makes clear that nobody expected to leave Sobibor alive. Two previous uprisings had failed, and the Red Army officers immediately set about forming a committee to plan a third one.

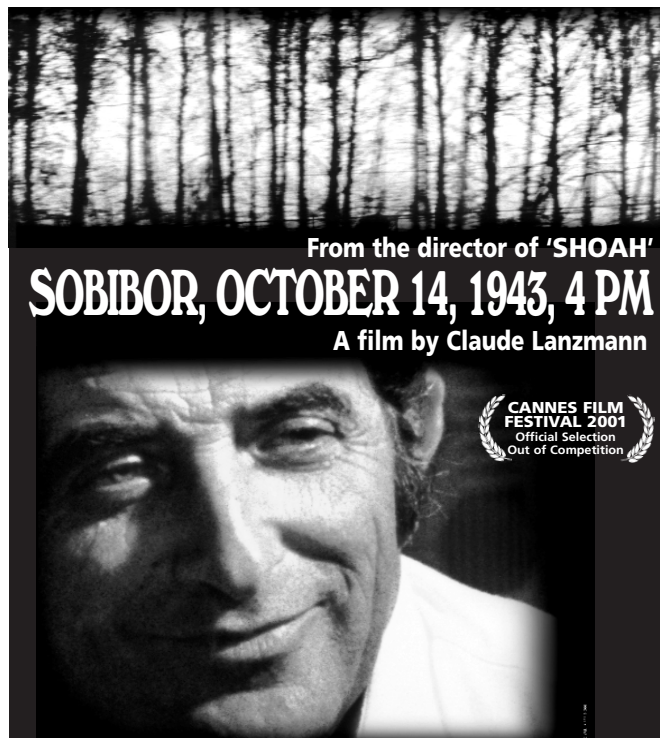
Nothing Hollywood might devise could be as nerve-rackingly suspenseful as the second half of “Sobibor,” in which Lanzmann simply trains his camera on the face of Lerner, a stout, man with bushy sideburns and a slight twitch in one corner of his mouth, and lets him talk. Lerner speaks Hebrew, which is translated first into French by an off-camera interpreter and then into the English of the subtitles, but as his story gathers momentum, the language barrier seems to drop away.

It helps that Lerner is an engaging raconteur who still seems amazed at the facts of his own life. Recalling how he killed a German guard with an axe, he says, “I split his skull completely, as if I’d been a specialist, doing it all my life.” And then he turns pale with an emotion he identifies, when pressed, as joy, but which seems like something unspeakably more complex.

And similarly, the feelings that this simple, deeply intelligent movie produces — of horror, admiration, hope and grief — are as hard to name as they are to dispel.

PRODUCTION NOTES:
‘SOBIBOR, OCTOBER 14,
1943, 4 P.M.’

Written and directed by Claude Lanzmann; in Hebrew and French, with English subtitles; directors of photography, Caroline Champetier and Dominique Chapuis; edited by Chantal Hymans and Sabine Marnou; released by New Yorker Films. Running time: 95 minutes.



that appears on screen at the start of the film, “institute oblivion as much as remembrance.” His own documentary method, juxtaposing the voices of survivors with images of train tracks, quiet forests and dilapidated, silent camp buildings, brings the experience as close to the present as possible — which means that it also takes account of the unbridgeable chasm between the present and the past.

In his note Lanzmann writes that “justice must be done to a dual legend, the one claiming that the Jews allowed themselves to be led to the gas