

SYNECDOCHE and LE PACTE present



OFFICIAL SELECTION
OUT OF COMPETITION
FESTIVAL DE CANNES

THE LAST OF THE UNJUST

A FILM BY CLAUDE LANZMANN

Le Pacte

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THE LAST OF THE UNJUST

A FILM BY CLAUDE LANZMANN

2013 - France/Austria – 218 minutes - 1.85 - 5.1

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SYNOPSIS

1975. In Rome, Claude Lanzmann filmed Benjamin Murmelstein, the last President of the Jewish Council in the Theresienstadt ghetto, the only “Elder of the Jews”* not to have been killed during the war. A rabbi in Vienna, following the annexation of Austria by Germany in 1938, Murmelstein fought bitterly with Adolf Eichmann, week after week for seven years, managing to help around 121,000 Jews leave the country, and preventing the liquidation of the ghetto.

2012. Claude Lanzmann, at 87 – without masking anything of the passage of time on men, but showing the incredible permanence of the locations – exhumes these interviews shot in Rome, returning to Theresienstadt, the town “given to the Jews by Hitler”, a so-called “model ghetto”, but a ghetto of deceit chosen by Adolf Eichmann to dupe the world. We discover the extraordinary personality of Benjamin Murmelstein: a man blessed with a dazzling intelligence and a true courage, which, along with an unrivaled memory, makes him a wonderfully wry, sardonic and authentic storyteller.

Through these three periods, from Nisko in Poland to Theresienstadt, and from Vienna to Rome, the film provides an unprecedented insight into the genesis of the Final Solution. It reveals the true face of Eichmann, and exposes without artifice the savage contradictions of the Jewish Councils.

**according to Nazi terminology*

Rabbi Benjamin Marmelstein was the last Chairman of the Theresienstadt Judenrat (Jewish Council). I filmed him during a whole week in Rome in 1975. In my eyes, the case of Theresienstadt was capital, both lateral and central, in the genesis and process of the Final Solution. These long hours of interviews, rich in firsthand revelations, have never ceased to dwell in my mind and haunt me. I knew that I was the custodian of something unique but backed away from the difficulties of constructing such a film. It took me a long time to accept that I had no right to keep it to myself.

Some 60 kilometers northwest of Prague, Theresienstadt, a fortress town built at the end of the 18th century by Emperor Joseph II and named after his mother, Marie-Theresa of Austria, had been picked by the Nazis as the site of what Adolf Eichmann himself called a “model ghetto”, a show ghetto. In March 1939, one year after the annexation of Austria (the Anschluss), Germany dismantled the Czechoslovakian Republic, replacing it with the puppet state of Slovakia and the Protectorate of Bohemian Moravia (the Hitlerian name for the Czech Republic).

The decision to create the Theresienstadt ghetto was taken in September 1941. As the Nazis had done in all the ghettos in Poland since October 1939, they formed a Jewish Council, composed of twelve members and an Elder, called the *Judenälteste*, or “the Elder of the Jews” in their vocabulary of contempt and fear with its tribal connotations. In Theresienstadt, during the ghetto’s four years of existence, there were successively three Jewish Elders.

The first, Jacob Edelstein, was a Zionist from Prague who cherished youth. After two years of Nazi hell, in which everything, absolutely everything, was forbidden to the Jews, he welcomed the birth of Theresienstadt with blind optimism, hoping that the difficult life that awaited them there would prepare them for their future settlement in Palestine. The Nazis arrested him in November 1943, deported him to Auschwitz, and killed him six months later with a bullet in the back of his head – Genickschuss –, after murdering his wife and son before his eyes in the same manner.

The second Elder was Paul Eppstein. He was from Berlin and was also killed by a bullet in the back of his head in Theresienstadt itself on 27 September 1944.

Benjamin Marmelstein, the third and therefore final Elder, a rabbi from Vienna, and deputy to Josef Löwenherz who presided over the Jewish community in the Austrian capital, was named Elder in December 1944. Marmelstein had a striking appearance and

was brilliantly intelligent, the cleverest of the three and perhaps the most courageous.

Unlike Jacob Edelstein, he could not bear the suffering of the elderly. Although he succeeded in keeping the ghetto going until the final days of the war and saved the population from the death marches ordered by Hitler, the hatred of some of the survivors came to be focused upon him.

Holder of a diplomatic passport from the International Committee of the Red Cross, he could easily have fled. He refused, preferring to be arrested and imprisoned by the Czech authorities after a number of Jews accused him of collaborating with the enemy. He spent eighteen months in prison before being acquitted of all charges.

He went into exile in Rome, where he lived a harsh life. He never went to Israel, despite his deep desire to do so and his pure love for that land.

All the Jewish Elders met a tragic end: Parnass from Lvov (renamed *Lemberg* by the Germans); Adam Czerniakow from Warsaw, who committed suicide when the deportations to Treblinka began; Gens from Vilna; and Chaim Rumkowski, from Lodz, who, carried away by what he imagined was his power, went by the name of “King Chaim” and who had coins minted with his effigy. He managed to keep the Lodz ghetto going longer than any other, until the Germans brutally liquidated it, whilst condemning its “king” to the cruelest of ends, mocking his death in Auschwitz.

Benjamin Murelstein is the only Jewish Council Elder who survived the war, making his testimony infinitely precious. He does not lie; he is ironic, sardonic, harsh with others and with himself. Thinking of the title of André Schwarz-Bart’s masterpiece, *The Last of the Just*, he calls himself “The Last of the Unjust”. He thus gave this film its title.

Before our interviews in 1975, he had written a book in Italian called *Terezin, il ghetto modello di Eichmann*, published in 1961. The tone of the book and that of the interviews are very different. The book describes the victims and their awful suffering with fraternal compassion and a real gift for writing, whilst in the interviews, Murelstein instead presents his own defense.

When I first quote him in the film, the year is 1942, with the arrival of a «transport» of German Jews from Hamburg, the Nazis having decided to make Germany Judenrein (purged of its Jews) and to deport the last Prominenten – the prominent – and those whose status had, until then, allowed them to remain in their homes,

albeit in terrible conditions, to Theresienstadt.

But, since 1941, Theresienstadt had above all been populated by Czech and Austrian Jews. Thanks to the former, members of the technical office responsible for developing construction plans, outstanding designers, we have an extraordinary collection of works of art that reveal what real life was like in the «model ghetto»: built to house 7,000 soldiers at the most, Theresienstadt took in 50,000 Jews during its peak periods.

Most of these artists of genius, who got up in the middle of the night to secretly complete works that they interred deep underground, were murdered in the gas chambers of the death camps. But their names are forever inscribed in our memories, along with those of the great musicians, actors, writers and directors who went through Theresienstadt before dying farther east.

One final word: instructed by Eichmann in Vienna to organize the forced emigration of the Jews of Austria from summer 1938 until the outbreak of war, Benjamin Murmelstein fought relentlessly to help more than 120,000 flee the country.

CLAUDE LANZMANN



INTERVIEW WITH CLAUDE LANZMANN

At what point did you think of dedicating a film to the ambiguous figure of Benjamin Murelstein, former President of the Jewish Council of Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia, until now often considered a collaborator ? You had a very long interview with him during the filming of SHOAH, in Rome in 1975 – why didn't you use the footage then ?

SHOAH is an epic film, and the overall tone is of unremitting tragedy. When you listen to Benjamin Murelstein, you see that it doesn't fit with that; it's in another register. That said, he was the first protagonist I had filmed. It had been very difficult for me to organize a meeting with him. It was my wife at the time, the German writer Angelika Schrobsdorff – said to be the most beautiful woman in Germany – who convinced him, because he liked women. From Jerusalem, we had arrived in Rome with some very sophisticated camera and sound equipment, but as soon as we arrived, our minibus was completely ransacked by an organized Italian gang. We had to rush in some more equipment from Paris. That incident left me a bit stunned, but we still filmed for a whole week with him.

It had been so difficult to make SHOAH the way I did it, without commentary – the construction of the film itself generating its own intelligibility – that if I had included an episode like that, the film would have lasted 20 hours ! So I decided to deal with it later, but I put it off for a long time.

The issue of Jewish Councils, with all it implies and the stakes it raises, was very difficult but nonetheless already featured in SHOAH. The paradox is that I could have had a living Council President in Murelstein, and that the whole tragic saturation of SHOAH led me to replace him with a dead Council President – Adam Czerniakow of Warsaw, who committed suicide in July 1942, the first day of deportations to Treblinka. In SHOAH, Raül Hilberg portrays Czerniakow by commenting on the diary he kept every day until his suicide, which he just had published in the United States and to which he wrote the foreword. Before reading this diary on my recommendation, Hilberg was vehemently opposed to all those people, all those Jewish dignitaries who “collaborated” with the Germans. So I discussed this with him at length, and I demonstrated to him that all these men were caught up in some savage contradictions and had no alternative course of actions. Hilberg ended up agreeing, and he completely altered his assessment of these men.

What made you take a renewed interest today in this particularly painful aspect of the extermination of Europe's Jews ?

I had deposited all this material with the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, and they had digitized it all. But they treated it as raw material that could only be accessed by researchers. Then one day in Vienna, about five or six years ago, I attended a screening of part of my unedited interview with Benjamin Murmelstein. I was totally outraged. I felt as if I'd been robbed. I thought: «it was me who did all that!» That was when I decided to get down to making a proper film out of it. In *The New Yorker*, Richard Brody, who had also seen part of this unedited interview, wrote in an article: "It's interesting, but for it to become art, it has to be Lanzmann that does it." That's when I took the decision to make a proper cinematic work, whatever the considerable difficulties I knew would be in store for me.

“The last of the unjust” is how Murmelstein describes himself in the film. An unjust, a traitor, that's how many people still see the Presidents of the Jewish Councils of the time. That's not how you present him in the film, despite posing some very hard questions, notably when you ask him about his desire for power. However, over the course of the interviews you seem to adopt a genuine benevolence towards him. What convinced you about the sincerity of his motives ?

Genuine collaborators – meaning people who shared Nazi ideology – like the French collaborators for example, did not exist amongst Jews. Except perhaps in Warsaw, with the small group known as the Thirteen, because they were based at 13 Leszno Street. Their leader was a certain Gancwajch, who was a traitor and German informant. But he is practically unique. The others were appointed by the Germans, and refusal to accept meant a death sentence. They tried to save something, they believed in the rationality of the Germans, thinking that the Germans needed Jewish labor, and therefore if they worked, they wouldn't be killed. They were wrong. Killing the Jews was the priority. As for Murmelstein, he's a different case altogether. I was struck by his capacity to be quick on the draw, by his knowledge, and his intelligence. Above all, I felt that he was perfectly sincere. Very often he says: "We didn't have time to think." That was the whole perversity of the Nazis – all the time issuing new orders to be carried out right away, and each as impossible to fulfill as the next.

Murmelstein admits all this after long hours of discussion: "We didn't see what was going on. We didn't pay attention..." Even he who had no illusions about the Nazis' cruelty and their infinite capacity for trickery. And he doesn't lie, either, when he says he didn't know about the gas chambers; that's absolutely true. They were afraid

of the deportations from Theresienstadt to the East, but they couldn't imagine the reality of death in the gas chambers. Birkenau for them – and this exactly fits with what I showed in SHOAH about the Czech “family camp” – was a sort of replica of Theresienstadt only harsher. As Filip Müller says magnificently in SHOAH, “He who wants to live is condemned to hope.” They all wanted to live.

Intellectuals like Hannah Arendt or Gershom Scholem, who you knew well, had an extremely harsh judgment for these Jewish Council Presidents. In Scholem's opinion, Marmelstein should have been hanged. What do you think explains this tough stance ?

I knew Scholem very well. He was my Best Man at my wedding in Jerusalem with Angelika. But I didn't know Hannah Arendt. Scholem was a gentle man, incapable of killing a fly, except between two pages of one of the tremendous Talmuds that lined his amazing library. When Eichmann was sentenced to hang by the Court of Jerusalem, he declared himself against the sentence, whilst at the same time irresponsibly calling for it for Marmelstein who had been acquitted by the Czech justice of all charges brought against him by some Jews from Theresienstadt.



This allowed Murelstein to say comically: “He was a great scholar, but he’s a bit capricious when it comes to hanging.” Murelstein voluntarily spent 18 months in prison, and the judges, who were no softies, ordered his liberation, with no serious charge retained against him. He was the absolute opposite of a collaborator. He says himself that he was a big-mouth, and that he could be brutal. It was also his way of standing up to the Germans.

One of the film’s great historical revelations is the totally fresh light it sheds on the personality of Eichmann. Here, he doesn’t come across at all as the stereotypical bureaucrat, the embodiment of “the banality of evil” as the philosopher Hannah Arendt described him in her account of the Jerusalem trial, but as a real “demon”, fanatically anti-Semitic, violent, corrupt... Was this a real discovery for you ?

Yes. I didn’t follow much of Eichmann’s trial in 1961, but I have learnt since, through working on SHOAH that it was a poor trial, a trial run by ignorant people, in which the prosecutor even confused the locations. Eichmann’s direct participation in the Kristallnacht couldn’t even be substantiated. The trial was wanted by Ben Gourion as a sort of founding act for the justification of the creation of the State of Israel. It was a dirty trial. And Hannah Arendt, who had emigrated to the United States and



who only knew all of this from a great distance, spouted lots of absurdities on this subject. The banality of evil, as Paul Attanasio wrote in *The Washington Post* when he was writing about SHOAH, is often nothing but the banality of Mrs. Arendt's own conclusions.

Regardless of your indulgence towards Marmelstein, he's a moral figure who is at times very problematic, notably when he talks about "the taste for adventure" which drove him to accept those kinds of responsibilities in Theresienstadt. Are we seeing in THE LAST OF THE UNJUST the inverse of what you brought to the fore in SOBIBOR, OCTOBER 14, 1943, 4PM, a film dealing with Jewish heroism ?

Unlike you, I liked the fact that Marmelstein confessed this "desire for adventure". By taking huge risks, he managed to get 120,000 Austrian Jews out the clutches of their persecutors, and what he recounts is a magisterial lesson in history. In SOBIBOR, the men who revolted and succeeded in killing the camp guards were all Jewish soldiers or officers of the Red Army, professionals who were used to weapons, violence and force. In fact, only fifty of them effectively managed to rise up. The 1,250 others were all sent to the gas chamber. In reality, there was no possibility to revolt. One of the lessons of THE LAST OF THE UNJUST, in my view, is that at a certain point you no longer have any other choice than to comply and obey; that all resistance becomes impossible. That said, Benjamin Marmelstein, fought tirelessly right to the end against the killers. As he said, the Nazis wanted to make him into a puppet, but the puppet had learned to pull the strings itself.

What exactly was the objective of Nazi propaganda through the existence of a model ghetto, apparently humane like Theresienstadt? Was it merely a question of tricking the international authorities, the Red Cross and the Allies, or was there also an ambiguous message addressed to the German population ?

I don't think it was addressed so much to the Germans. It was mainly done for foreigners. The Nazis always tried to cover every angle. For quite a while, when for example the Americans hadn't yet entered the war, they have tried to camouflage their plans towards the Jews. When the first deportations took place, in the case of Nisko for example, they tried to have people believe the Jews were deporting themselves.

And Theresienstadt was human, as you said, in appearance only: you understand in my film that it was the worst kind of concentration camp, with blackmail, lies and naked violence inseparably mixed up. To me, Theresienstadt was the acme in cruelty and perversity.

In the film's preamble, you mention the extreme difficulties in making it. What form did these take ?

First and foremost, this involved difficulties in terms of conception. We had to bring new life to all this. But there were also difficulties due to the subject matter, of course. We can see that these men were no saints. I like the way Murelstein describes himself like Sancho Panza facing the craziness, the “don-quixotery” of others. He was a realist, who knew very well how to anticipate the logic of the Nazis. He never trusted them. As Murelstein puts it very well, completing a formulation of Isaac Bashevis Singer, they were all martyrs, but not all martyrs are saints. But the film isn't just the 1975 interviews from Rome: I filmed for two months in Vienna, in Poland, in Israel, and at Theresienstadt in the Czech Republic, which Hitler renamed the Protectorate of Bohemia-Moravia following annexation. This was a series of shoots that were technically and cinematographically difficult, and morally very trying.

For you, is the film a judgment of a man, the “weighing of a soul” in some way, or should it be seen more widely as the rehabilitation of the role that the Jewish Councils played during the war ?

It is both. It's a film about the utterly extraordinary man that Benjamin Murelstein was – a great scholar, a specialist in mythology as science, hugely intelligent, humorous, and extremely sincere with me. But the problems he had to confront were the same as the other Presidents of the Jewish Councils of Eastern Europe, mainly in Poland. Some of them had oversized egos, there's no doubt. They were mesmerized by having power, even if it was granted by the Germans. But the case of Murelstein is very different because the “show ghetto” of Theresienstadt was absolutely unique. It had to be displayed and it was. It's very clear in one of my previous films, *A VISITOR FROM THE LIVING*, which Gallimard is going to publish, and which describes the visit of the International Committee of the Red Cross to Theresienstadt in June 1944 after the effort to embellish the ghetto that Murelstein implemented.

Although acquitted during his trial in Israel, Rudolf Kastner was fatally shot in the street in 1957 by an improvised righter of wrongs. Benjamin Murelstein never dared set foot in Israel after the war. When this film is screened, especially in Israel, it will inevitably reopen the sensitive debate on the role of the *Judenrats*, and just how far they compromised their principles. What sort of reaction do you expect ?

Murmelstein told me – and I fully understand him – that he wouldn't have been able to face a second trial. The trial organized by the Czechs had already been extremely tough. They weren't a soft touch, if the number of people sentenced to be hanged in Pankratz prison is anything to go by. That aside, I'm not sure that this film will stir up much controversy. It clearly shows that it wasn't the Jews who killed their fellow men. You can see who the real killers are. I have no doubt that Murmelstein gain more understanding, more empathy, and that the prosecutors might calm down. I'd like that.



CLAUDE LANZMANN

Born in Paris on 27 November 1925, Claude Lanzmann was one of the organizers of the Resistance at the Blaise Pascal high school in Clermont-Ferrand in 1943. He took part in the urban Resistance effort, then the fighting in the maquis, in the surrounding Auvergne countryside.

As a reader at the University of Berlin during the Berlin blockade, he met Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir in 1952, becoming friends. Since then, he has continually contributed to the review *Les Temps Modernes*, and today is the director of the publication. Up to 1970, his activities were divided between *Les Temps Modernes* and journalism, writing numerous articles and pieces of reportage, with an unswerving fidelity to Israel, which he first visited in 1952, and staying true to his anti-colonialist convictions. Signatory of the Manifesto of the 121, which denounced repression in Algeria and called for conscientious objection, he was one of the ten indicted. He then ran a special issue of *Les Temps Modernes* dedicated to the Israeli-Arab conflict, in which, for the first time, Arabs and Israelis laid out their reasoning together.

Since 1970, Claude Lanzmann has worked exclusively in filmmaking. He directed the film *ISRAEL, WHY*, partly intended as a response to his former fellow anti-colonialists who refused to understand that having wanted independence for Algeria, one could want the survival of Israel. The premiere was held at the New York Festival on 7 October 1973, a few hours after the start of the Yom Kippur War.

Claude Lanzmann began to work on *SHOAH* in the summer of 1974, and making this film was a full-time occupation for him for 12 years. Upon its worldwide release in 1985, the film was considered a major event, both historically and cinematographically. Ever since, *SHOAH* has had lasting reverberations.

After *ISRAEL, WHY* and *SHOAH* came a film about the Israel Defense Army, *TSAHAL*, which dealt with fear and the conquest of courage, about weapons, about the re-appropriation of force and violence by Jews. It was the last part of a trilogy that Claude Lanzmann had been nurturing for years.

A VISITOR FROM THE LIVING (1997), his fourth film, was based on an interview that Maurice Rossel gave to him in 1979 during the filming of *SHOAH*. It constitutes

a unique document in the annals of the Second World War: Berlin delegate for the International Committee of the Red Cross from 1942, Maurice Rossel was the only member of that organization to have visited Auschwitz in 1943. He also inspected the “model ghetto” of Theresienstadt in June 1944.

SOBIBOR, OCTOBER 14, 1943, 4PM, Claude Lanzmann’s fifth film, was part of the Official Selection at the Festival de Cannes in 2001 (out of competition).

In 2009, Claude Lanzmann published the book *The Patagonian Hare*, a dazzling account of his life traversing the 20th century, which became a bestseller in France, Germany and the United States. In 2012, he published *The Tomb of the Divine Diver*.

He has been awarded the Resistance Medal with rosette, and is a Grand Officer of the Légion d’Honneur, and Grand Officer of the National Order of Merit.

On 14 February 2013, the Berlin Film Festival presented him with a Golden Bear in recognition of his life’s work.

FILMOGRAPHY

- 2013 **THE LAST OF THE UNJUST**
- 2010 **THE KARSKI REPORT**
- 2001 **SOBIBOR, OCTOBER 14, 1943, 4PM**
- 1997 **A VISITOR FROM THE LIVING**
- 1994 **TSAHAL**
- 1985 **SHOAH**
- 1973 **ISRAEL, WHY**

CREW

Director	Claude LANZMANN
Camera	William LUBTCHANSKY Caroline CHAMPETIER (A.F.C.)
Editor	Chantal HYMANS
Sound	Antoine BONFANTI Manuel GRANDPIERRE Alexander KOLLER
Assistant director	Laura KOEPEL
Production manager	Thibault MATTEI
Director of post-production	Christina CRASSARIS
Produced by	David FRENKEL Jean LABADIE Danny KRAUSZ
A production by	SYNECDOCHE LE PACTE DOR FILM LES FILMS ALEPH
In coproduction with	France 3 Cinéma
French distribution and international sales	LE PACTE
Developed with the backing of	Cinéma 7 Développement
With the participation of	Canal+ Ciné+ France Télévisions ORF (Film/Fernseh-Abkommen) Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée
With the backing of	La Région Île-de-France en partenariat avec le CNC Österreichisches Filminstitut Filmfonds Wien La Fondation pour la Mémoire de la SHOAH



Otto Blüh

Sofie Brunner
geb. Wehrman

Stella Geiger
geb. Heizer

Isidor Dawer

Neure Billing

Siegfried Schick

Hans Toch

Elise Gansel

Siegfried Resek
geb. Grünweg

Therese Roth
geb. Heilpam

Emo Hess

Helene Karpel

Isidor Trebitsch

David Liebermann

Leopold Steiner

Rosa Tauber
geb. Lausch

Ida Gollmann

Herta Auerbach
geb. Pöler

Erich Neubauer

Maria Glaser

Markus Sprech

Lilly Margulis

Richard Engler

Jakob Fischl

Alexander Weisz

Weingarten
Krisbacher

Paul Goldberger

Kurt Heim

vine Breuer

Robert Geiger

Daniel Brunner

Goldschmidt

Margarete Ke

Le Pacte