



Hotel Terminus. M.C.E.G./Sterling.

Shtetl. Marian Marzyński, director.

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History and Memory of the Shoah

Documentary producers usually operate on the premise that historical actors and documents are “facts” which need little mediation or interpretation. A film that follows this approach, Robert Rosenstone notes, unwittingly conveys “memory (and nostalgia) rather than history ... [because it] never asks questions of its witnesses, and never comments on their opinions, however wrong or inaccurate they may be ...”[1] This kind of filmmaking has been challenged, notably by films on the Holocaust such as *Shoah* (1985). Similarly Marcel Ophüls’ classic documentary, *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1970), assailed the nation’s heroic memory of wartime resistance. Ophüls’ more recent film, *Hotel Terminus* (1988), and a new picture, *Shtetl* (1996), by Marian Marzyński uncover the complex nature of the Shoah and probe the role of individual and collective memory. Both *Hotel Terminus* and *Shtetl* question our unreflective acceptance of oral testimony and documentation. These films challenge accepted historical methodology and press us to search for meaning in the Shoah and all history. *Hotel Terminus*, Ophüls’ first film in a decade, is a documentary about Klaus Barbie, his victims and friends, and the Vichy legacy. At the center of this film is Barbie, the infamous “butcher of Lyon.” Yet the young Barbie is described by inhabitants of his hometown and classmates as the son of a schoolteacher and an upright Catholic boy. As an SS captain Barbie headed a section of the Lyon security police during 1942-44 and was responsible for the torture, death, and deportation

of many victims. After working for American intelligence, Barbie escaped to Bolivia in 1949 with the assistance of Washington and the Vatican. As Klaus Altman, Barbie worked for various Bolivian dictators until he was discovered and extradited to France. In 1987 he was convicted for crimes against humanity. However, as its title suggests, *Hotel Terminus* is a documentary less about Barbie than Vichy France—particularly Lyon—where the Gestapo was headquartered in the Hotel Terminus. In a broader sense Ophüls studies the legacy of the Shoah. He uses interviews with various individuals who knew Barbie as their torturer, friend, or neighbor. The film opens with Johannes Schneider-Merck, a South American friend of Barbie, who recounts how his friend exploded in anger at a suggestion that Adolf Hitler had betrayed the idealism of German youths. Ophüls shifts to a Lyon café where middle-aged men play billiards and reflect upon their experiences under Nazism. One interviewee even recalls how as a bellboy in the Hotel Terminus he received large gratuities from Gestapo members. This is followed by a series of visual images of the hotel while the audio track offers a jarring sequence of statements by contemporaries of Barbie who describe him as kind and moral, or brutal and demonic. The opening sequence indicates that Ophüls is more interested in memories and legacies than the persona of Barbie, fragmented and filtered by witnesses. Ophüls devotes a great deal of attention to the ambiguous and contested legacy of the war. In a speech after Barbie’s extradition, the prime minister of France emphasized that the trial would “honor the memory of

that time of grieving and struggle by which France preserved her honor.”[2] Yet when prosecutors decided not to indict Barbie for the murder of Jean Moulin, the martyr of French resistance, the case prompted debate about the divisions, particularly ideological, which had plagued the resistance. This returned French attention to the difficult task of reconciling the reality of French right-wing and antisemitic ideas to the myth of national unity in resistance. At one point in *Hotel Terminus* an interviewee suggests that conservatives, such as Rene Hardy, collaborated with the Nazis in order to purge leftists like Moulin. Other interviewees try to reconcile their actions during the war with accepted historical myths. One Vichy police officer claims to have protected French suspects, admittedly only prominent gentiles. A woman who charged Jewish fugitives high rents for lodgings claims to have acted out of patriotism. German interviewees rebuke Ophuls for “sensationalism,” but Wolfgang Gustmann praises his SS comrades for having halted the Communists before 1944. Ophuls juxtaposes segments in order to challenge ahistorical memories. During an interview with Simone Lagrange, a soft-spoken Jewish survivor whose family was exterminated, Ophuls allows her to describe her memory, as a thirteen year old, of being arrested on D-Day. Visiting her old apartment, Lagrange chats with an elderly woman who, Lagrange later tells Ophuls, secreted herself inside her apartment while the Lagrange family was taken away by the Germans. At the Hotel Terminus Lagrange remembers seeing a man with “a friendly smile” who held a cat; this, she later learned, was Klaus Barbie. The SS captain yanked Simone by her hair and beat her in an attempt to discover the whereabouts of her siblings. This passage is followed by an interview with a National Front leader who dismisses the Barbie trial as Israeli/Jewish propaganda. Ophuls then returns to Lagrange who recalls how her family was betrayed by a gentile neighbor. The director of *Shtetl*, Chicago-based Marian Marzynski, places the legacy of the Shoah at the center of his harrowing journey back to the Jewish ghetto or shtetl of Bransk, near Bialystok. The director describes historical events surrounding the 1942 deportation from Bransk, but his documentary is about physical survival and the power of memory. The film opens with Marzynski, who as a child survived the Shoah at a Catholic charity, recounting a heart-wrenching attempt in 1969 to visit his shtetl. Now Marzynski returns with Nathan Kaplan, a 70 year-old Jewish-American, to visit Bransk, the home of Kaplan’s parents. From this point Marzynski seeks a personal understanding of the Shoah through his investigation of Kaplan’s past and Bransk’s

history. The director focuses upon a young, local historian, Zbyszek Romaniuk. Our first view of the shtetl is from the flat of Romaniuk’s parents where the weedy gardens and huts outside are a metaphor for the forgotten shtetl. The young Pole provides hospitality and guides the Americans’ search for the vanished shtetl civilization. Soon, however, we see disturbing indications that the Shoah is an undigested legacy for Poles. Romaniuk tells his visitors that he learned nothing about the shtetl in school but only later discovered that before the war sixty percent of the town’s population was Jewish. Shortly afterward Marzynski cuts from Kaplan reading aloud fragments of a Torah to a pig butcher who declares himself an expert in Jews and economics. The Pole then explains how Jewish capitalists used cunning and capital to control the economy. Another Pole describes searching for valuables in the homes of Jews deported to Treblinka. More disturbing is the realization that the 300 Jews who escaped the deportation were nearly all caught, and, given that only five German soldiers were stationed in the town, Poles must have participated in the round-up. Yet, when the filmmaker approaches a Pole accused of turning in escaped Jews, he finds that the man is senile. Later Marzynski visits an elderly man accused of killing Jews for reward money; instead of righteous indignation, we feel pity for a man who can only repeat, “Death sits on my nose.” During the middle segment of *Shtetl*, Marzynski accompanies Romaniuk during his visit to America and Israel. Among Americans, especially Bransk survivors, Romaniuk is eventually accepted. His knowledge and sincerity win over the audiences. But, for the first time in his life, Romaniuk begins to hear highly unfavorable statements about Polish gentiles. One former resident of the town recounts her last memory of Warsaw in 1938: university students protesting outside her bus were carrying signs, “Down with the Jews!” Another Holocaust survivor and a curator for the Holocaust Memorial describes the fate of her family when they returned to their shtetl after liberation. Neighbors attacked the family at night and killed her mother and baby brother. The accusations culminate in a session with Israeli high school students who demand that Romaniuk admit Polish responsibility for the Holocaust. *Shtetl* concludes when Marzynski returns to Bransk with Jack Rubin, a survivor of the Bransk deportation. The director uses Rubin, the former “goose king of Bransk” and a successful clothier in Baltimore, as a living symbol of the vitality of the shtetl. Rubin visits his family’s former home and business, and engages in friendly conversations with several former employees. For a moment Rubin is the shtetl,

and it is alive. Rubin matter-of-factly describes the hardships he endured when he and his brother fled Bransk and hid in the barns of several farmers who had been business contacts. However, when Rubin organized a sleigh journey to Bialstoyk, the Germans learned of his plan, presumably from local Poles, and killed all of the passengers except Rubin who fled. The film ends with Marzynski returning to Bransk as Romaniuk, now a vice-mayor, prepares the town's quincentennial celebration. The young Pole, recently an object of antisemitic gossip and graffiti, has decided not to include the Jews in Bransk's historical memorial or the celebrations. For the townspeople the only Jewish allusion occurs when the band plays "Fiddler on the Roof." Romaniuk defends himself. Once Jews played a vital role in Bransk, he admits, but the locals do not want to hear about it, and, after all, no Jews live in Bransk now. [Shtetl](#) and [Hotel Terminus](#) focus our attention upon the past as remembered events. These films lead us toward a historical understanding through memory, that fickle instrument easily dulled by age and clouded

by conscience and will. Both films are also personal journeys by filmmakers who seek the elusive history of the Shoah as conveyed by the memories of its survivors. As the survivors die, their memories also vanish. Talking to Marian Marzynski, an Atlanta woman takes out a shabat cloth and remembers her childhood in Bransk. With emotion she places the cloth upon the table. "What was, was," she says, "and it will never, never, never be again. It's a civilization, a way of life that's gone forever. It will never be duplicated. It can't. It was a very rich, rich, rich civilization." [Notes](#): [1]. Rosenstone. [Visions of the Past: The Challenges of Film to Our Ideas of History](#). (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard UP, 1995) 25. [2]. Quoted in Pamela Calvert, "Liberators: Documentary and the Construction of Public History," [Film and History](#) 25.1-2 (1995) 31. [3]. Quoted in Henry Rousso, [The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944](#), trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard UP, 1990 and 1991) 201. This speech is not included in [Hotel Terminus](#). [Shtetl](#)

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