

Beyond the Memory: the Era of Witnessing – Analyzing Processes of Knowledge Production and Memorialization of the Holocaust through the Concepts of Translocal Assemblage and Witness Creation

by

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B.A., University of Victoria, 2008

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## **Abstract**

This paper considers the symbiotic relationship between iconic visual representations of the Holocaust – specifically film and Holocaust sites – and processes of Holocaust memorialization. In conjunction, specific sites and objects related to the Holocaust have become icons. I suggest that specific Holocaust sites as well as Holocaust films can be perceived as elements of one and/or multiple translocal assemblage/s. My focus in this analysis is on the role of knowledge production and witness creation in Holocaust memorialization. It is not my intention to diminish the role of Holocaust memorialization; rather, I seek to look beyond representational aspects, and consider the processual relationships involved in the commemoration of the Holocaust in institutions, such as memorial sites and museums, as well as through elements of popular culture, such as films. Furthermore, I analyze the tangible and intangible layers of memories and meaning present in Holocaust films and sites through the lens of palimpsests. These conceptual frameworks allow me to consider how visual representations of the Holocaust, such as film, and site inform each other? How are specific representations of Holocaust sites and objects shaping and informing the commemoration of the Holocaust in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

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## Introduction

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, while the number of survivors of and witnesses to the genocidal atrocities of the Third Reich are gradually passing away, public interest in this historic event continues to increase (Bayer, Kobrynsky, 2015). This trend is reflected, for example, in the reception of the films such as *Son of Saul* (Hungary, 2015): the movie won the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival, an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film at the 88<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards as well as a Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film (Times of Israel, Jan. 14<sup>th</sup> 2016). The numbers of visitors to Holocaust museums and memorial sites continue to rise annually; for example, in 2014 the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) had 9 million visitors; Auschwitz-Birkenau 1.5 million and Yad Vashem 900,000 visitors (USHMM website; Daily Mail; Yad Vashem website). Bayer and Kobrynsky have argued that “[t]he preservation of Holocaust memory is without doubt one of the dominant ethical imperatives of our time” (2015, p. 1).

Yet, what is ‘Holocaust memory’? Memory in itself is paradoxical: memory, Edward Casey argues (1981, p. 255), has more to do with absence than with presence; the temporal and spatial distance between the presence and the past, which has elapsed from the present and events which have already occurred, perpetually increases as we inevitably continue to move forward in time. Yet, due to memory’s overlapping temporalities, it has qualities of continuity, an “invisible process of the past gnawing into the future” (Keiller, 2007, p. 83 in Grossman, 2013, p. 204). The act of remembering is, according to Casey, an attempt to recover the past and the events, and it involves a twofold “fusion of horizons”: first, a temporal fusion between the lived experience in the ‘here and now’ and the felt limits of the past experience recalled; second, spatial, in which the scene in which one is situated is fused with the horizon of the remembered past (1981, p. 257). These processes take place as one engages with one’s personal, individual memories as well as when we engage in the shared memory of a group. How do groups share their collective memory of events? Since we cannot literally show our recollection to others, how can we illustrate the processes of memory if the very object of inquiry is intangible?

Expanding on Alyssa Grossman's work on film and memory (2013), I propose that a close relationship exists between memory, image transmission and topography. Visual media, such as photographs and specifically film with its ability to transgress spatial and temporal boundaries, are particularly conducive for the exploration of memory processes in that they convey images and thoughts while at the same time, through the act of watching, generate memories in the viewer. The sensuous processes involved and evoked in watching moving images resemble the phenomenological experiences of walking around a place or through a landscape, in that the materiality of places and sites plays a vital role in remembering and recollections.

I propose that filmic representations of the Holocaust and Holocaust sites are similar "structures of recall" (Gross, 2000, p. 133 in Grossman, 2013, p. 206) in that both facilitate and generate memories. Both elements represent features of 'Holocaust memory' not only through their materiality, but through their evocative qualities: the cinematic and actual landscapes allow the mind to explore the invisible and remote dimensions of memory through a bodily experience. While both, Holocaust films and Holocaust sites, offer visible, tangible aspects of commemorative culture, through the internal, invisible processes and mediations of each viewer and visitor, memories are conveyed.

Although Holocaust commemoration is taking place through many other important, complex and diverse cultural forms, for example, the extensive literature on the Holocaust, musical performances, art, etc., I chose the medium of film specifically for its visual qualities, which bear similarities to individual memories of events or situations. An equally complex analysis of the relationships between the material world of the Holocaust and literature or other forms of cultural expression would be an additional fascinating research project.

This thesis considers the symbiotic relationship and dialogue between iconic visual representations of Holocaust films and Holocaust sites and the role of these two subjects in the experience of 'witnessing' the Holocaust as well as in processes of Holocaust memorialization.

## **Research questions**

In this thesis, I will investigate the following questions: (how) are Holocaust films drawing from the memory archive, which was created through the documentary films and photographs taken at the liberation of the camps? How do Holocaust films engage in a dialogue with Holocaust sites? Is there a common 'language' between/across Holocaust films? And how do Holocaust sites 'speak' through their materiality and physicality? Essentially, I seek to answer my earlier question about how memories, an internal, invisible process, are generated and shared with a larger group through cultural media?

## **Theoretical approaches**

These research questions confronted me with a methodological and theoretical challenge. As I began to grapple with the material and visual representation of memorial culture, while at the same time seeking to explore the invisible dimensions of memory, I explored three streams of theoretical approaches: one, materiality and object-focused theories appeared to be well-suited to allow me to investigate the visible, tangible aspects of both film and sites. Second, concepts which focused on silences and absences allowed me to discuss the intangible aspects of memory from a solid theoretical framework. Third, scholarly work on knowledge production and witness creation allowed me to consider the individual experiences of witnessing within a larger cultural context.

For the development of my thesis I drew from the following works:

1. Tim Ingold's work on processual and relational interaction with landscapes (2007); Igor Kopytoff's concept of object biographies (1986); and Caroline Humphrey's (2005) and Langdon Winner's (1980) analysis of the relationship between ideology and structures.
2. Michel-Rolph Trouillot's work on silences and absences in history and archives; Michel Foucault's work on the gaze of power and the structure of the panopticon (1995); and Geoff Bailey's concepts palimpsest (2007).
3. Annette Wieviorka's work on witnessing (2006); Leshu Torchin's exploration of the processes of knowledge production and witness-creation through the use of visual

representations; and Cornelia Brink's work on the role of photographic and cinematic images in the context of Holocaust memorialization.

As an overarching analytical approach, which would allow me to illustrate the boundary-crossing, relational aspects of memory and memorial culture, Colin McFarlane's notion of "translocal assemblage" (2009) offered itself as particularly suitable. In the Social Sciences the notion of 'assemblage' is frequently used as an analytical as well as a methodological tool to conceptualize the social world as well as to unpack complex socio-cultural processes and to destabilize established discourses and meanings (Ong, Collier, 2005). The term 'translocal' or 'translocality' is used to describe socio-spatial dynamics and identity formation across boundaries, including national boundaries, yet, it also refers to the increasing (re-) discovery of the importance of the local (Appadurai, 1986).

## **Methodology**

In order to explore my research questions, I created three case studies by selecting a specific Holocaust site and juxtaposing it with a specific Holocaust film (or series), which had been influential in the discourse of Holocaust commemoration.

I explore each case study by first, researching the history of the site and second, by connecting it with an overview of the site in present-day; third, by investigating the representation of the site in the selected film. Based on the focus of the filmic representation on a specific feature of the site I explore this feature in more depth, connecting it with the historical events and the representation of the site in the present. As a conclusion of each case study, I illustrate the relationship between the site's history, its present-day state and its filmic representation; additionally, I discuss how the site and film are situated in the larger context of Holocaust memorialization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The first site is Treblinka, a former extermination camp located in a rural area north-east of Warsaw. No immediately visible structures have remained of the camp itself, and at the present-day key features of the former camp are represented through a memorial; for example,

the gas chambers, a burning pit, and the railway tracks. The second site is the former concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau, south-east of Kraków. This was the largest of all camps, and numerous structures and objects of the former camp have been preserved. The third site is the former concentration and labor camp Płaszów in the suburbs of Kraków. The camp was largely dismantled by the SS, but the commandant's house and the former administrative building have remained intact. The camp features in the blockbuster movie *Schindler's List*.

I selected three films which correspond with one of the sites: the French documentary film *Shoah* (1983); the US TV-mini-series *Holocaust* (1978); and the US feature film *Schindler's List* (1993). I selected these three films specifically as they are markedly different in their general genre, and also because they were produced over the course of three decades and represent watershed moments in the visual representation and memorialization of the Holocaust. Through the combination of one film and one site I created three case studies: Treblinka – *Shoah*; Auschwitz-Birkenau – *Holocaust*; and Płaszów – *Schindler's List*.

### **Division of the chapters**

In Chapter one I explore the portrayal of the Treblinka site and the historical events in the documentary film *Shoah* through visual images of the present-day site as well as through survivor and eyewitness testimony. I describe the juxtaposition and assemblage of images, camera angles and testimony the filmmaker uses in order to develop a narrative. In the film, the gas chamber emerges as a key feature which is symbolically represented in the present day site in a large monolithic structure. I discuss the representation of the gas chamber as a monument as well as in the film through the lens of palimpsests. In addition, I explore the materiality of the Treblinka site also as a palimpsest, considering what is immediately visible, and what is beneath the surface, drawing from recent archeological findings.

In Chapter two I explore the portrayal of Auschwitz-Birkenau in the TV mini-series *Holocaust*. In the series, 'Auschwitz' emerges through progressive verbal references, the use of archival footage and photographs, and the re-enactment of actual historical events. While the actual

site of Auschwitz-Birkenau is not represented in the series, the archival photographs were taken at the location, and thus provide a visual reference point to the history and structures of the site. Transportation and trains emerge as a key feature in the series, which corresponds with the railway tracks leading into the Birkenau camp and the associated ramp. I discuss the railway tracks and the ramp from a materiality-based theoretical approach in order to illustrate the complex history of the ideology-based structures at the site.

In Chapter three, I explore the portrayal of the site of Płaszów in the movie *Schindler's List*. The camp as well as the commandant's villa, which is depicted to loom over the camp, feature prominently in the film. Steven Spielberg relied on the re-enactment of actual historical events and on cinematic techniques, which resembled the documentary footage taken at the liberation of the camps, thus, lending an archival 'feel' to the movie. In this chapter, I focus on the portrayal of the commandant's villa in the film and relate it to the actual house at today's site. For this analysis I am drawing from Foucault's work on the "gaze of power" as well as the concept of translocal assemblage.

In Chapter four – the analysis – I discuss key themes, which emerged from all three films: ramps, transportation and ashes. First, I illustrate how these themes emerge in each of the three films through specific imagery (such as locomotives, boxcars, railway tracks, train stations) or symbolic imagery (such as steam, smoke, fire and ashes). Second, I discuss in more detail the key role of railway transportation in the implementation of the Final Solution, and the centrality of the experience of transportation for the deportees by drawing from recent publications (see Gigliotti, 2009; Hilberg, 1998; Jones, 2013) and survivor testimony. Furthermore, I illustrate how racial and genocidal ideology informed the processes of disposing of the bodies of the murdered victims to the extent of pulverizing the charred bones of the incinerated corpses. The perpetrators developed methods to burn corpses in open pits by utilizing railway tracks as "roasts", thus, fusing the aspects of transportation and murder. Fourth, I explore the role of railway tracks and ashes in Holocaust memorialization by drawing from the analytical tools of palimpsests and translocal assemblage by demonstrating that both ashes and railway tracks are key features in Holocaust memorials around the world.

## **Contribution of the research**

My research offers a novel way of exploring the aspects of ‘material witnesses’ as well as the notion of ‘bearing witness’ in relation to Holocaust sites and Holocaust films in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By relating specific sites to filmic representations and subsequently, identifying a key feature at certain sites, I illustrate the ‘dialogue’ which exists between visual culture and the materiality of locations. Furthermore, by determining key themes which emerge across a selection of Holocaust films, I demonstrate that filmic representations of the Holocaust are ‘speaking’ in similar ‘languages’ by relying on similar visual images. Also, by exploring the visible and invisible materiality of Holocaust sites in view of the key themes in Holocaust films, I illustrate that what is *beneath* the surface (e.g. the victim’s ashes) is the most vital aspect of Holocaust memorialization.

## **The emergence of a visual memory of the Holocaust**

Film and Holocaust sites became fundamentally linked with each other as well as with the concept of witnessing at the end of the Second World War and during the ensuing Nuremberg trials. In order to understand how photographs and film, as well as sites have come to be perceived as witnesses of the events of the Holocaust – who, in turn, allow viewers or visitors in the present to ‘witness’ the Holocaust – it is necessary to consider how photographs, films, locations and the role of the witness in court became intrinsically linked at the time of the liberation of the camps and subsequent trials.

As the allied troops liberated the concentration and extermination camps they took extensive documentary photographs and film footage in order to create a historical record. The men and women who encountered the camps were thus not only eyewitnesses of the atrocities, but their cameras functioned as witnesses as well (Sliwinski, 2010). During the Nuremberg trials, the photographs and film footage were used as visual evidence of the “crimes against humanity”. Instead of the traditional, spoken narrative usually associated with testimony, the media – as in the cameras – as well as the media – as in newspapers and newsreels – bore witness and enabled the court and the public to witness through images. The pictorial evidence

outweighed all other forms of testimony, perhaps precisely because they bore witness to something which the spoken word is insufficient to capture; furthermore, this specific use of the images played a distinct role in the legitimization of photography and film as tools for bearing witness (Zelizer, 1997, p. 13).

The film *Nazi Concentration Camps* (1945) was created following an order of General Dwight Eisenhower as an official document to compile evidence of the crimes and to be shown as an exhibit during the Nuremberg Trials. The film was particularly mesmerizing in that it enabled the audience in the court room to have the sensation of a shared experience with the filmmaker and to bear witness – albeit remotely – to the atrocities. The film footage contributed to an illustration of the sheer magnitude of the atrocities in a more persuasive way than the photographs. The documentary films converged multiple forms of media, such as text, photographs as well as moving images, in order to interpret the spatially and temporally distant events. These narrative elements of film used in the context of a legal framework created a link between film, witnessing and giving testimony. Also in 1945, the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force commissioned a documentary – *German Concentration Camps Factual Survey* – about the German atrocities, assembling a team, which included, amongst others, filmmakers Sidney Bernstein and Alfred Hitchcock. The film material included footage taken by the Soviets in Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau. The film, however, remained uncompleted due to the rapidly changing situation in the summer of 1945: by June 1945 the Americans, frustrated with the slow development of the film in London, withdrew from the project, and assigned director Billy Wilder to make a shorter movie, which was released under the title *Death Mills* (1945) (*Night Will Fall*, 2014). The Bernstein team continued to work on the original documentary, but by September 1945 the film was filed and shelved. Filmmaker and anthropologist André Singer revisited the uncompleted film in 2014 and made a documentary called *Night Will Fall* about this project. In 1955, Alain Resnais made the documentary short film *Night and Fog*; this film was composed of contemporary shots of specific camps and archival film footage. The documentary footage of the liberated Holocaust camps introduced specific locations, for example, Buchenwald, Ohrdruf, etc., to the public – particularly across the

Atlantic. Josh Kirsh, who worked as a film editor in London, describes his experience when he first encountered the documentary footage filmed by the allies:

“At the top of the dope sheet [with the raw film footage] was a name which was totally unfamiliar to all of us. It was spelled D-a-c-h-a-u, and we didn’t know what the hell that was. Whether it was initials or anything. But we soon found out, because once we started screening this material it was like looking into the most appalling hell possible.”  
(*Night Will Fall*, 2014).

Josh Kirsh’s experience illustrates how previously unknown place names were fused with the images of the atrocities committed in these locations. Through the act of watching the documentary film and witnessing the atrocities public memory began to connect specific Holocaust sites with visual imagery.

Images of the camps became widely reproduced in newspapers and illustrated magazines, such as *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, *Illustrated London News* and *Daily Mail*, among dozens of other publications (Sliwinski, 2010), creating an experience of mass witnessing (Torchin, 2012). In the documentary footage of the liberation of the camps the sites were the place ‘where it really happened’: thus, in the processes of giving testimony and bearing witness the original locations of the Holocaust featured as a crime scene. Allied soldiers would go to visit the liberated camps to ‘see with their own eyes’. To experience an original site of the Holocaust thus became closely linked with the idea of ‘witnessing’.

The notion of ‘witnessing’ the Holocaust through film is a theme which has been revisited by and inspired filmmakers. For example, when Claude Lanzmann began to work on the film *Shoah* he wanted to create the narrative through the testimony of eyewitnesses, thus, he himself would be a witness to the testimony, and the viewer would also become a witness. *Shoah* is a film about witnessing, but, as Dori Laub suggests, it is also a testimony to the performance of bearing witness (1992, p. 208). Steven Spielberg, while filming *Schindler’s List*, wanted to depict the ‘truth’ (Charlesworth, 2004). Spielberg’s use of specific filming techniques, such as hand-held cameras and black-and-white imagery, mimicked the documentary footage of the 1940s. To the filmmaker, the visual connection with the archival images made the movie “more real,

somehow” and that it “embodied the truth” of what happened. Schindler’s List provided an experience of “retro-active witnessing” (Liss, 1998, p. xi) to millions of viewers across international boundaries (Manchel, 1995; Charlesworth and Addis, 2010).

Cinematic film productions featuring the Holocaust were instrumental in the creation of a collective memory – and a memory archive (Grossman, 2009) – of the historical event in the US and Western European societies. As we have seen from the examples of *Shoah* and *Schindler’s List* above, the medium of film provides an opportunity for the public to witness history. The act of watching a film about the Holocaust – regardless if it is an entertainment movie or a historic documentary – engages the audience in two forms of witnessing: the witnessing of the reality of the historical events as well as the witnessing of a fantasy of the events (Casey, 1981). The making of a film as well as the viewing of the completed film are events – “an event in which images come to *presentation* in which they come to *be*” (Casey, 1981, p. 252). The audience performs the act of viewing the film through which the images come to live (Casey, 1981). Inevitably, the viewer assumes a point of view: through the lens of the camera the audience experiences the film in first person. It is this performance of viewing that the “fusion of horizons” occurs (Casey, 1981, p. 255): the audience has become a witness to the events depicted. Casey argues that in the act of watching a film “we are in a strange no-man’s land in which past and present are not clearly distinguished – opening up a space in which we can quasi-remember” (Casey, 1981, p. 259).

While the Holocaust is an event “essentially unwitnessed” (Felman, Laub, 1991), the persuasiveness of the visual images transgresses what Shoshana Felman so eloquently describes as the “incommensurability of a different topographical and cognitive position” (1991, p. 56). To ‘witness’ the Holocaust in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is in fact to ‘imagine’ the Holocaust: we imagine what it may have been like to experience the Holocaust, yet, it is our imagination which creates the ‘memory’ of the event.

## Chapter 1:

### Treblinka - *Shoah*

#### Introduction

The events of the Holocaust have inevitably altered and shaped the landscape of Central and Eastern Europe, and left tangible, material traces. Sites and objects related to the Holocaust, due to their temporal and spatial immediacy to the events, are perceived to function as witnesses and/or give testimony. The sites and landscapes associated with the Holocaust appear to be the 'real' center of the historical events and seem to be 'saturated' with memories (Linenthal, 1995, p. 154-163). Claude Lanzmann was particularly drawn to the relationship between topography and memory, and in his film *Shoah* (1983) he frequently shows images of a specific site in the present in combination with oral testimony of eyewitnesses about events at the site.

For the purpose of this chapter, I will use the site of Treblinka in Poland, and the cinematic representation of the site in the film *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann as a case study. For my analysis I am drawing on the concept montage as it relates to filmmaking; palimpsests as it relates to archaeology and meaning; and translocal assemblage as it provides a model to address expansive, fluid, relational and highly complex textures of associations and relevancies transgressing temporal and spatial boundaries.

In section I, I will first provide a historical summary of the Treblinka site during its operation as a death camp. Second, I will provide an overview of the memorial site as it exists in present-day Poland. Third, I will explore how the Treblinka site is represented in the film *Shoah*. In section II, I will analyze one specific feature of the Treblinka site: the gas chambers. First, I will discuss the representation of the gas chambers in *Shoah*; second, I will discuss the material remains of the gas chambers at the present-day Treblinka site, the symbolic representation of the gas chambers in the monolithic structure and Lanzmann's montage through the lens of palimpsests. In section III, I will discuss the Treblinka site (considering its history, the present-day memorial site and its representation in *Shoah*) through the lens of translocal assemblage to illustrate the

network of dynamic and complex relationships which exist between the tangible and intangible aspects of the Treblinka site.

## **I. Overview of the site of the former death camp Treblinka**

### **1. Historical summary of Treblinka**

*Operation Reinhard* was a code name for the plan of the Third Reich to murder approximately two million Jews who lived in the German-occupied part of Poland. *Operation Reinhard*<sup>1</sup> took place between autumn 1941 until late summer 1943. Three killing centers were established: Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka II. The overwhelming majority of victims in these death camps were Jews deported by train from ghettos in Poland, however, once the camps were in full operation Jews from areas across Europe were transported there as well. The property of the victims was sorted at the camp sites, and then distributed to other centers, from where the victims' belongings were shipped back to the Reich. It is estimated that approximately 1.7 million Jews were killed under *Operation Reinhard* as well as an unknown number of Poles, Roma and Soviet prisoners of war (USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia; Webb, 2014).

The Treblinka camp was built ca. 80 km northeast of Warsaw in a rural area near the small village of Treblinka, along the railroad line Warsaw-Białystok. The topography of the area is flat, with light-coloured sandy soils, dispersed with large wooded areas and agricultural fields. A gravel mining enterprise for the production of concrete already existed close to the railway junction Malkinia, and the mine owner had added an additional 6km-long railway track from the existing line to the mine. Although Treblinka was in a remote area it was well connected via the railway tracks with sites with particularly large Jewish populations: the Warsaw ghetto (ca. 500,000 inmates) and the Białystok ghetto (ca. 60,000 inmates). Treblinka consisted of two camps: Treblinka I was built in December 1941 as a forced labour camp for Jews and Poles on the site of the gravel mine. An average of 1,000 – 2,000 inmates were detained in this location, and it is estimated that approximately 20,000 persons have passed through the camp; at least

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<sup>1</sup> *Operation Reinhard* refers to the plan of the Nazis to murder all Jews in German-occupied countries. For this purpose, three extermination camps were built: Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka, where Jews were murdered with carbon monoxide in gas chambers. In addition to these extermination camps, the Majdanek concentration camp and the concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau began to use Zyklon B to gas people to death.

half of the prisoners died from inhumane conditions, torture and murder. Treblinka I was shut down in late July 1944 (USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia; Webb, 2014; Sereny, 1995).

Treblinka II (located ca. 1.6 km from Treblinka I) was built as an extermination camp for Jews and began operation on July 11<sup>th</sup> 1942 under commandant Irmfried Eberl. An area in the forest was selected and clear-cut, leaving a perimeter of trees around the camp site. This camp was built to the east of the rail track leading to Treblinka I. In order to speed up the process of delivering the victims to the site as well as in order to avoid eyewitnesses, a short rail track was laid to the extermination camp (USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia; Webb, 2014; Sereny, 1995).

Treblinka II extended over the surprisingly small area of approximately 400 x 600 metres. Watchtowers were placed along the periphery of the camp. The entire camp was surrounded by and divided into several sections by barbed wire fences. These fences were interwoven with pine branches, which prevented the deportees from seeing other areas of the camp as well as anybody from looking into the camp. Just as at the other *Operation Reinhard* camps, the gas chambers were the heart of the camp, and were the only stone buildings (Lanzmann, 1995, p.55). Initially, three gas chambers existed, which consisted of 4x4 meter rooms. A feature of all extermination camps of the *Operation Reinhard* was a pathway along which the victims were forced to the gas chamber. This path was cynically referred to by the SS guards as *Himmelfahrtstrasse* (road to heaven) (Arad, 1987). These pathways were lined on each side with a tall fence, also interwoven with pine branches; this, in combination with the numbers of people who would be forced to hurry along prevented the victims from being able to process what was happening or to see ahead. If a lot of transports were arriving at the camp, victims often had to wait, naked, during summer or winter, in this pathway until the gas chambers were empty.

On July 22<sup>nd</sup> 1942 the first transport from the Warsaw ghetto arrived with 6,500 deportees, and over the next two months over 250,000 Jews were sent to Treblinka. Alfred Spiess, the German state prosecutor at the Treblinka trial in 1960 described how, during the early phase of the camp, Franz Eberl, the commandant, let too many trains come to the camp, and as a result, the

corpses of those who had died during transport and the bodies of the murdered victims, were stacked like wood on the ramp or piled up around the gas chambers and left for days (Lanzmann, 1995, p. 45 - 47). On August 28<sup>th</sup> 1942, deportations to Treblinka were temporarily suspended as the gas chambers continued to break down, and the burial pits were overflowing with bodies. Franz Stangl was ordered to replace Irmfried Eberl. Stangl described to Gitta Sereny his first impression of Treblinka:

“We could smell it kilometres away. The road ran alongside the railway. When we were about fifteen, twenty minutes’ drive from Treblinka, we began to see corpses by the line ... and as we drove into Treblinka station, there were what looked like hundreds of them – just lying there – they’d obviously been there for days, in the heat. In the station, a train full of Jews, some dead some still alive” (Sereny, 1995, p. 157).

New, larger gas chambers were built at in early September in 1942. The new gas chambers had a capacity to kill 12,000 to 15,000 victims per day. During his trial, Franz Stangl, the former camp commandant, stated that a transport of thirty freight cars or 3,000 people could be murdered within three hours. During a fourteen-hour workday 12,000 to 15,000 people were annihilated ([www.HolocaustResearchProject.org](http://www.HolocaustResearchProject.org); Sereny, 1995).

Stangl restructured the camp, and divided it into two main sections and several subsections. The “upper camp” included the gas chambers, the pits for the disposal of the bodies – later including burning racks for the corpses – and barracks for the Jewish forced work groups who dealt with the removal of the bodies from the gas chambers. The “lower camp” included the unloading ramp, several barracks for undressing and selection of the victims’ belongings, and several working and living quarters for Jewish forced laborers, who worked in workshops. The trains with the deportees arrived now at a station platform including a railway station made to look genuine, with a false clock, painted in bright colours. A camp street was built, wooden benches dotted the area like a luxury spa, surrounded by flowers. The SS staff had access to a clinic, a dentist, barbers, and a zoo (Sereny, 1995, p. 219).

Trains arrived at Treblinka station, where they would wait, before they were taken into the actual camp. Czeslaw Borowi, a resident of Treblinka, describes the process:

“[T]here were sixty to eighty cars in each convoy, and there were two locomotives that took the convoys into the camp, taking twenty cars at a time ... The locomotive picked up twenty cars and took them to the camp. That took maybe an hour and the empty cars came back here. Then the next twenty cars were taken, and meanwhile, the people in the first twenty were already dead” (Lanzmann, 1995, p. 20).

The railway cars would often stand for hours at the Treblinka station, and locals witnessed the agony and despair suffered by the deportees: “They waited, they wept, they asked for water, they died” (Lanzmann, 1995, p. 25). Once the trains were moved into the camp, and the sealed doors opened, chaos ensued.

Abraham Bomba, a survivor of Treblinka, describes the chaos of the arrival at the camp: the deportees were “falling out from the train, pushing out each other, over there losing each other, and the crying and the hollering ... And we had no time even to look at each other because they start hitting us over the head with all kinds of things” (Lanzmann, 1995, p. 36). The deportees had to leave all belongings they had brought with them at the ramp, were herded into undressing rooms where their hair was cut off, and then forced to enter the pathway leading to the gas chamber. The victims’ belongings were sorted in several barracks along the ramp.

The camp staff consisted of approximately 40 SS and ca. 100 Ukrainian guards. All other labor was performed by a contingent of 800 to 1,000 Jewish prisoners who were selected from incoming trains; they processed incoming convoys, collected and sorted the victims’ belongings, dragged the bodies of the victims out of the gas chamber, and buried the corpses in mass pits (USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia; Webb, 2014).

Beginning at the end of November 1942 – in accordance with the official order of Operation 1005<sup>2</sup> – the exhumation of the mass graves at Treblinka began. Additional *Kommandos* were created: the *Feuerkolonne* (burning brigade), who would pile the corpses in layers on to the “roasts”; and the *Aschenkolonne* (the ash brigade) who had the task of collecting the ashes and charred bones from the burning sites, and pulverize the remaining bones with the help of special wooden mallets (Webb, 2014). Richard Glazar describes: “They sent us out into the countryside to forage for disused [railroad] racks” (Sereny, 1995, p. 220). The bodies of deportees of incoming transports as well as the partly decomposed corpses dug up from the mass graves were piled up by the hundreds on these racks (Sereny, 1995, p. 220).

Over time, large mounds of ashes began to build up, and the SS experimented with various methods to get rid of the ashes. Finally, the decision was made to blend the ashes into the local soil, or to bury ashes in the ground under thick layers of sand (Rajchman, 2012).

The prisoners at Treblinka launched an uprising on August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1943. It is estimated that 70 of those who broke free survived the war and some were able to give testimony at subsequent trials. After the revolt, transports still arrived at Treblinka. The last train, consisting of 39 cars, arrived with deportees from Bialystock on August 19<sup>th</sup>, 1943. The SS dismantled all buildings and planted lupines and pine trees over the site. A small farm was built from the bricks of the dismantled gas chamber and a Ukrainian guard lived on the site until shortly before the arrival of the allied armies (Sereny, 1995, p. 249). The Red Army reached the area on August 16<sup>th</sup> 1944, and noted that the ground was littered with small bone fragments, human teeth, shoes, pots, pans and broken dishes, shaving brushes and lumps of human hair. The road which lead to the

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<sup>2</sup> *Sonderaktion 1005* (Special Action) refers to an operation which was performed under strict secrecy between 1942 -1944: in order to hide any evidence of genocidal murder *Sonderkommandos* were created by groups of prisoners who were forced to exhume all existing mass graves and burn the bodies. SS Standartenführer Paul Blobel was in charge of the Aktion. By May 1943 the operation was extended to the areas further East, where the *Einsatzkommandos* had killed hundreds of thousands of people by shooting. Blobel experimented with various ways of disposing of the bodies, until he found that the most ‘effective’ way was to build giant “roasts” or pyres by laying railway tracks over open pits, and stack layers of corpses and firewood. Once the bodies had been burned remaining bone fragments were crushed, and the ashes were poured into rivers, scattered across the landscape, buried in pits, or strewn onto roads. The prisoners were usually shot after the work was completed (IHRA, 2005, p. 46 – 60).

camp was black – this was due to the human ashes that had been deposited by the prisoners (USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia; Webb, 2014).

The total number of victims murdered between July 1942 and August 1943 at Treblinka is estimated to range from 870,000 to 925,000.

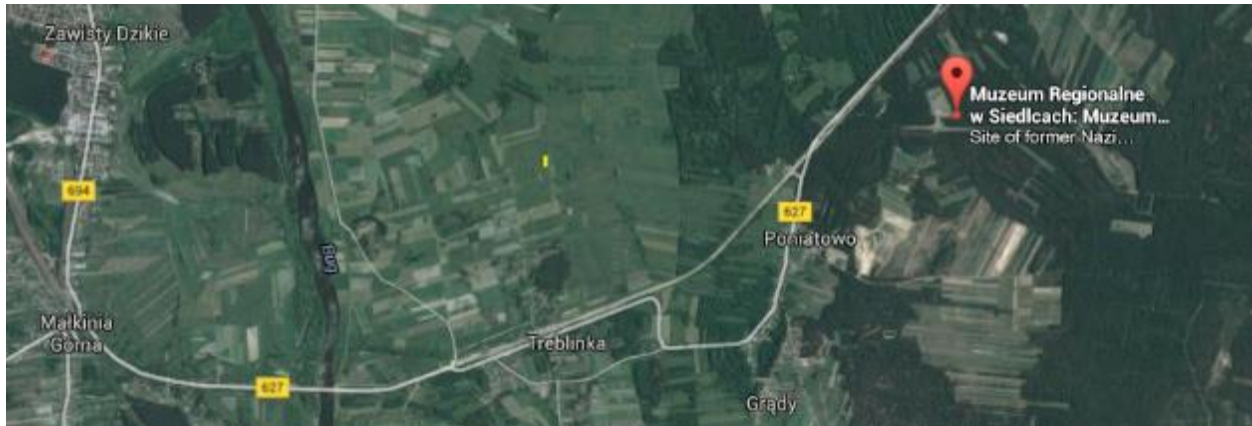


Fig. 1 Google Maps. Online. ><https://www.google.ca/maps><. Accessed October 10 2015.



Fig. 2. Treblinka environs, 1943. Online. >[http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media\\_nm.php?ModuleId=10005193&MediaId=448](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_nm.php?ModuleId=10005193&MediaId=448)< Accessed January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

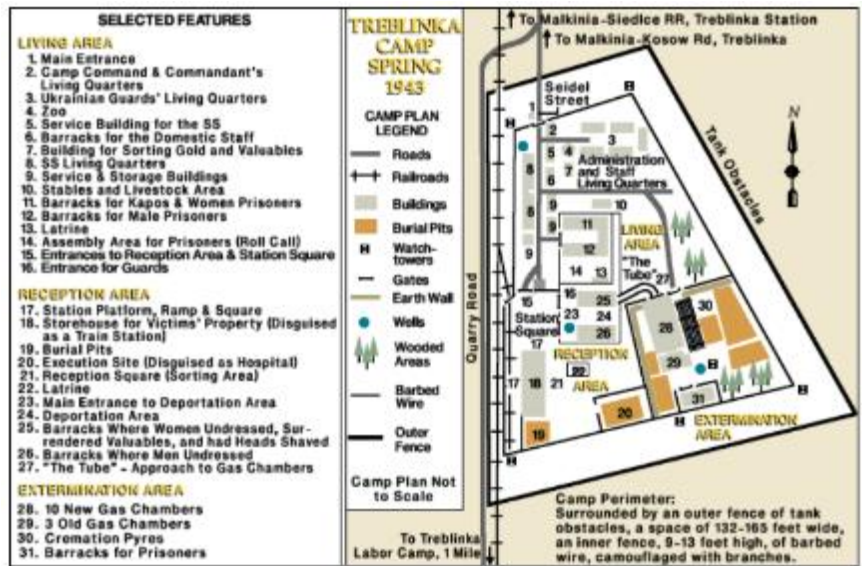


Fig. 3 Treblinka camp, spring 1943. Online.

>[http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media\\_nm.php?ModuleId=10005193&MediaId=447](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_nm.php?ModuleId=10005193&MediaId=447)< Accessed January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016.



Fig. 4 Archival photographs taken by Red Army August 1944. Online. ><http://www.deathcamps.org/treblinka/maps.html>< Accessed October 10 2015



Fig. 5 Archival photographs taken by Red Army August 1944. Online. ><http://www.deathcamps.org/treblinka/maps.html><  
Accessed October 10 2015



Fig. 6 Archival photographs taken by Red Army August 1944. Online. ><http://www.deathcamps.org/treblinka/maps.html><  
Accessed October 10 2015

A first investigation was conducted in 1944 by the Extraordinary Soviet-Polish Investigation Commission. The Commission expressed concern about locals who scoured the site, digging and using bombs or artillery shells to create craters to search for valuables (Webb, 2014, p. 121). In 1945 a first clearing-up of the area was undertaken and a survey map was drawn up by the Polish Commission into War Crimes in Poland. With only a small number of survivors, no visible remaining structures, and disturbances of the ground after the abandonment of the camp, the actual size, layout and operation of the death camp remained unclear. A number of maps were

produced over several years by survivors as well as by perpetrators with discrepancies in regard to shape or features.

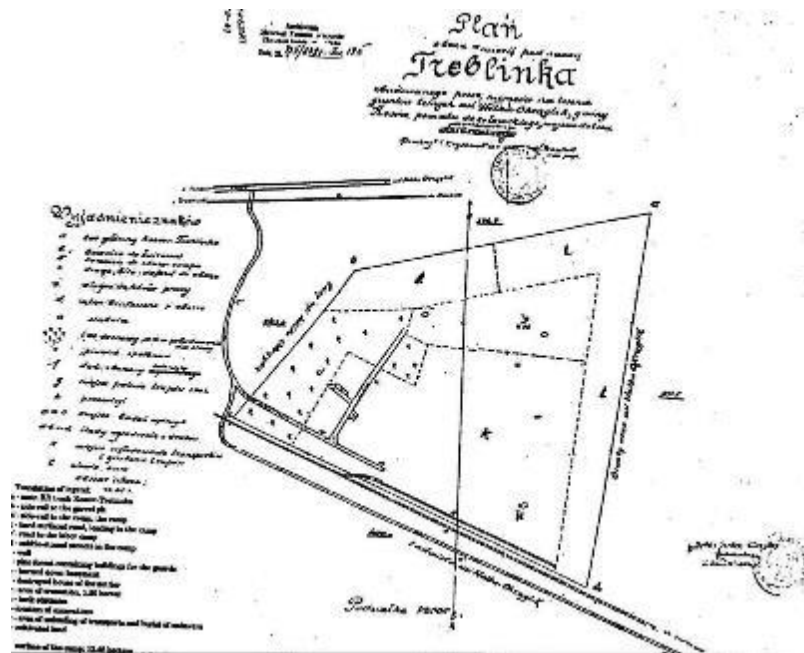


Fig. 7 Survey map 1945. Online. ><http://www.deathcamps.org/treblinka/maps.html>< Accessed October 10 2015.

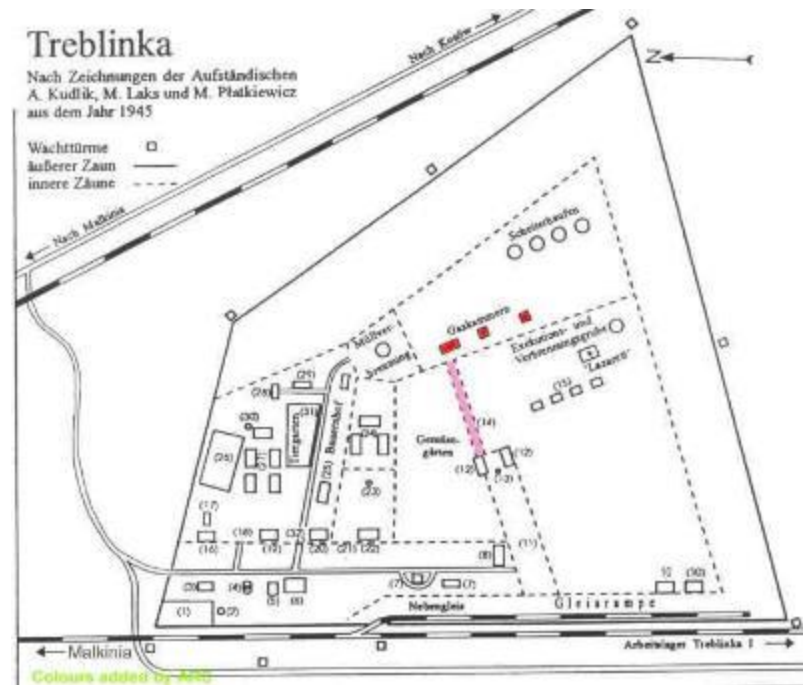


Fig. 8 One of the first maps drawn by survivor Wierknik Kudlik, 1945. Online. ><http://www.deathcamps.org/treblinka/maps.html>< Accessed October 10 2015.

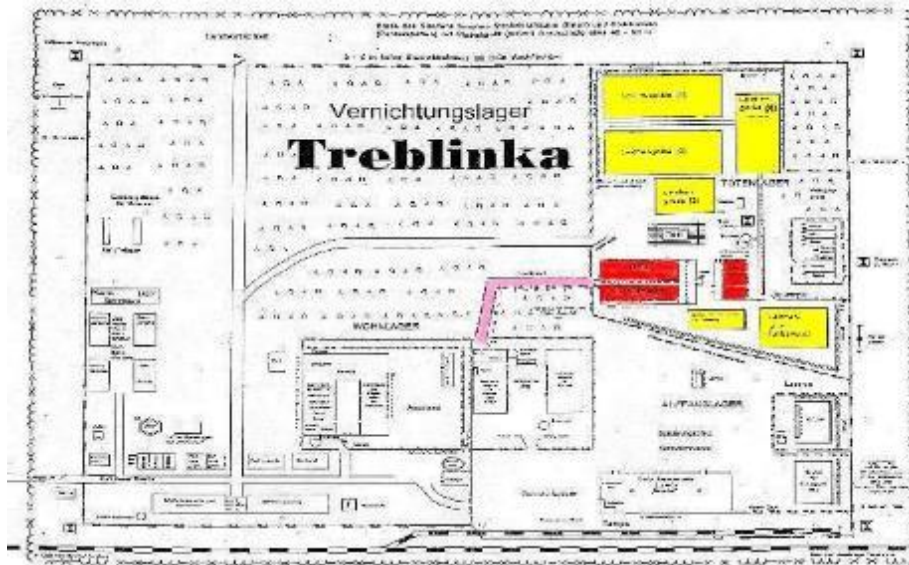


Fig. 9 Treblinka Trial Map: drawn and used as evidence against camp commandant Franz Stangl during second Treblinka trial in 1970. Online. ><http://www.deathcamps.org/treblinka/maps.html>< Accessed October 10 2015.

In order to prevent further disturbances of the site, in 1947 the site was fenced in and guarded by the Polish Army (Webb, p. 122). In 1958 the site was declared as a place of martyrology by the government of Poland, and a monument resembling a large stone arch was inaugurated at the site of the former gas chambers. In 1964 Treblinka was declared a national monument, and a monument was built on the site of the 'new' gas chambers, surrounded by 17,000 stones, which outline the area of the death camp, was unveiled. A camp custodian house was turned into an exhibition space in 1989, and became a branch of the Siedlce Regional Museum. Since May 7<sup>th</sup> 1999 Treblinka and its environs are protected as a Holocaust memorial under the Act on the Protection of the Former Nazi Extermination Camps. The Act applies extraordinary protection measures, such as an additional protection zone (Webb, 2014).

## 2. Treblinka Museum of Struggle and Martyrdom at present day

The site of the former extermination camp Treblinka is located in a rural area to the northeast of Warsaw. Visitors to the site very likely visit the location deliberately, as the area is rather remote. From the highway DW694 visitors turn at Malkinia Gorna onto DW627, until a small

sign on the right curb of the road informs visitors of the location of the Muzeum Walki i Męczeństwa w Treblince. A narrow road leads through a densely forested area directly to a small parking lot.



Fig. 10 Aerial view of the Treblinka memorial site, Poland. Online. ><http://www.googlemaps.com> < Accessed October 10 2015.

From the carpark a sandy path leads further into the pine forest to the entrance of the Treblinka site. As visitors follow this sandy road, they pass a small building which houses the site's museum. Parallel to the path are a number of large standing stones which mark the former boundary of the camp. About half-way along the path between the carpark and the actual entrance to the memorial site the road turns into a 200-meter path made of rounded cobblestones. The single railway track which once led from Treblinka station into the camp is represented by a symbolic railroad made of concrete sleepers in the location of the former tracks (Gilbert, 1997). The tracks end where the former ramp would have been located (Sereny, 1995, p. 148). Here, the cobblestone path turns towards the main area of the camp.



Fig. 11 Memorial of symbolic railway track and standing rocks indicating the perimeter of the camp. Online. >[www.intopoland.com](http://www.intopoland.com)< Accessed October 10 2015.

As visitors follow the narrow road, they symbolically follow the journey of the victims into the camp (Young, 1993). On the right hand side of the path are a number of large stones, which are inscribed with the names of the countries of origin of the deported victims.



Fig. 12 In the foreground symbolic railway track; former ramp; to the right, standing rocks with names of countries; the path leads towards the tall memorial. Online. >[www.muzeumsiedlce.art.pl](http://www.muzeumsiedlce.art.pl)< Accessed October 10 2015.

At the end of the path, the visitor encounters a large, clear-cut area which is surrounded by dense forest. Gitta Sereny was struck by “the terrible smallness of the place” and the seemingly peaceful forest which “lend[s] a misleading air of normalcy and space” (1995, p. 145).

The most dominating structure in the site is a large granite memorial stone, which stands for the over three hundred thousand victims from Warsaw who found their dead here (Sereny, 1995, p. 149). The monolith is located at the approximate location of the 'new' gas chambers. A stone in front of the structure carries the inscription "Never again" in Polish, Yiddish, French, German and English.



Fig. 13 The tall monolithic memorial surrounded by 17,000 shards of granite, each inscribed with the name of a village or community. Online. >[www.muzeumsiedlce.art.pl](http://www.muzeumsiedlce.art.pl)< Accessed October 10 2015.

Surrounding this large structure are 17,000 standing granite shards of various shapes and sizes which represent (and are inscribed with the names of) the countless villages and communities of the murdered victims. Behind the large memorial is a black rectangular shape, which resembles one of the original cremation pits where the exhumed bodies were burned, consisting of crushed and cemented black basalt, a strong symbolic reference to the charred ashes of the burnt corpses (Young, 1993).



Fig. 14 The memorial at the location of the former burning pit, located behind the monolithic memorial. Online. >[www.en.wikipedia.org](http://www.en.wikipedia.org)< Accessed October 10 2015.

In the background is a symbolic cemetery, which consists of two large trees surrounded by further stones; this is the area where the bodies were initially buried. The intent of the designers of the memorial was to suggest iconographically the greatest of all genocidal cemeteries (Young, 1993, p. 186). The memorial bears a strong resemblance to the ancient Jewish cemeteries in Eastern Europe (Young, 1993, p. 189)



Fig. 15 View of the granite shards resembling an ancient cemetery. Online. >[www.muzeumsiedlce.art.pl](http://www.muzeumsiedlce.art.pl)< Accessed October 10 2015.

Visitors can return to the former ramp, and continue to follow the large standing rocks, and the “Black Road”, which leads to the former forced labor camp, and its associated execution site. The former forced labor camp consists of a clear-cut rectangular area, in which are embedded eight also rectangular shapes which appear to be the foundations of the former barracks (Young, 1993).

There is no interpretation, such as signs or guides, at the Treblinka site or any of its associated locations. Visitors can acquire a map at the small visitor center at the entrance to the site, and receive information about the specific memorials through this form of media. The majority of visitors to the Treblinka site participate in the March of the Living on their way from Auschwitz-Birkenau.

### **3. The representation of the Treblinka site in the film *Shoah*<sup>3</sup>**

*Shoah*, released in 1985, is a film directed by Claude Lanzmann. Lanzmann, born in Paris in 1925 as the child of assimilated French Jews, joined the Resistance during the war. After WWII, he earned a degree in philosophy and taught in Berlin. He developed close ties to existentialism. Lanzmann began to do on-camera reports in Israel, and was subsequently commissioned by Alouph Hareven from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs to “make a film about the Holocaust from ‘the viewpoint of the Jews,’ a film that is not ‘*about* the Shoah, but a film that *is* the Shoah.” (Brody, 2012). *Shoah* is made exclusively of first-hand testimonies of witnesses – Jewish survivors, perpetrators and bystanders - of the historical event of the Holocaust. Lanzmann took over 350 hours of raw footage, and the making of the film took eleven years (Brody, 2012). Brody describes *Shoah* as a “symphonic mixture of voices” (2012) as Lanzmann has kept the original responses of his interview subjects (in Polish, Yiddish, Hebrew, English and German) along with his own questions (in French, German and English) and the voices of his interpreters (in Polish, Yiddish and Hebrew). Instead of using archival material, Lanzmann juxtaposes images of present-day sites of the events with the audio recording of the eyewitness testimony. Lanzmann filmed at locations in Poland, Germany, the USA and Israel. *Shoah* was praised by many critics as a masterpiece and won numerous awards (Brody, 2012).

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout the film, the focus switches back and forth between witness testimonies and associated sites. For the purpose of this chapter I will discuss primarily the representation of the Treblinka site and the oral statements in conjunction with specific camera shots. It is important to note, that these sections are not filmed and represented in a direct sequence but interspersed with other testimonies/sites; furthermore, the film contains additional testimonies by local residents about the waiting trains at the Treblinka station. I am not including all of these testimonies in this chapter as I felt they did not offer additional information in relation to the focus of my case study.

The film *Shoah* begins with several paragraphs of text which provides contextual information about the site of Chelmno, which was the first place in Poland where Jews were murdered by gas. The text also provides information on Simon Srebnik, a survivor of Chelmno and the first witness in the film. The first scene of the film is of a river, lined with lush trees, rolling meadows and fields. In a small rowboat which glides along the river sits a man (Simon Srebnik), singing. The next scene shows Srebnik visiting the site of Chelmno – a large, clear-cut area surrounded by forest – as he recalls the events he witnessed. Locals remember Srebnik as a young boy, singing in a boat on the river. The camera then cuts to a scene in which Lanzmann interviews Mordechai Podchlenik, another Chelmno survivor. In a following segment, the camera sweeps over a large open area where burnt tree stumps are still smoldering, while Motke Zaidel and Itzhak Dugin, survivors of Vilna, describe how they were forced to dig up the corpses of victims in order to incinerate them.

In the next scene, Richard Glazar<sup>4</sup>, a Treblinka survivor, recalls his experiences, sitting on the patio of a Café in Basel (Switzerland), facing a river on a warm summer day. In the background is a bridge with pedestrians and a tram crossing. The camera films Glazar close-up, as he gazes onto the river while he describes the events he witnessed in an even tone in a soft, rolling dialect:

“It was at the end of November 1942. They chased us away from our work and back to our barracks. Suddenly, from the part of the camp called the death camp, flames shot up. Very high. In a flash, the whole countryside, the whole camp seemed ablaze. It was already dark. We went into our barracks and ate. And from the window, we kept on watching the fantastic backdrop of flames of every imaginable color: red, yellow, green, purple. And suddenly one of us stood up. We knew ... he had been an opera singer in Warsaw. His name was Salve, and facing that curtain of fire, he began chanting a song I didn't know.”

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Glazar described his experiences at Treblinka in his autobiographical book *Trap with a Green Fence: Survival in Treblinka*, published in 1994.



Fig. 16 Testimony by Richard Glazar. Screenshot from *Shoah*. Claude Lanzmann (director), 1985 [documentary]. France: Cine Classics.

As Glazar describes the unimaginable scene at Treblinka, he continues to gaze over the river, his eyes slightly narrowed. The changes in his facial expressions are very subtle, and the emotional strain of recalling these scenes is only noticeable in the lowering of his gaze, a brief narrowing of his lips, a halting of his speech. The normalcy of the scenery – a bridge crossing a river, busy passengers bustling, the patio of a café on a summer day – the everyday soundscape of life – such as car noises, voices – and the details which Glazar explains with such vividness creates a sense of disbelief in the viewer. It is impossible to reconcile the images which Glazar creates through his soft-spoken, gentle voice with the everydayness of the setting. It is only when he recites the song that his eyes meet those of the interviewer:

“My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken us?”

Here, the scenery changes to a view of the Treblinka site on a grey winter day: the viewer sees the imposing structure of the large monolith, which dominates the memorial site, surrounded by the sharp, somber, irregular granite shards, the distinguished shapes of the dense forest against the glum sky and the white of the snow-covered ground. The camera sweeps in a pan shot across the site and its surrounding landscape. The sweep of the camera begins with the monolithic structure and moves – too fast for the viewer to truly focus on specific images – around in a half-circle, capturing the countless upright stones, empty stretches of a clear-cut area surrounded by thick forest, finally lingering of the cobblestone pathway, half-covered by

snow, as the voice of Richard Glazar continues to recall the song, as the camera sweeps slowly over the snow-covered site:

“‘We have been thrust into the fire before,  
but we have never denied Thy Holy Law.’

He sang in Yiddish, while behind him blazed the pyres, which they had begun then, in November 1942, to burn the bodies in Treblinka. That was the first time it happened. We knew that night that the dead would no longer be buried, they’d be burned.”  
(Lanzmann, 1995, p. 9/10).

As Glazar’s statement is completed, the name “Treblinka” is blended into the screen.



Fig. 17 Treblinka. Screenshot from *Shoah*. Claude Lanzmann (director), 1985 [documentary]. France: Cine Classics.

From the beginning of the film, Lanzmann, takes the viewer straight to the core of the events of the Holocaust: the burning of the bodies of the victims, who were murdered in gas vans or gas chambers.

By juxtaposing the present-day site of Treblinka with the eyewitness testimony of Glazar, Lanzmann draws connections between the ‘there and then’ of the events described by Glazar and the ‘here and now’ of the memorial site in present-day Poland. Lanzmann allows the oral testimony of the witness to infuse the site with images, and thus creates a continuity and a

relationship between the memory of the witness and the topography of the site. The perspective of the camera provides a viewpoint from within the memorial site, and – metaphorically – from within the camp site. From this viewpoint it is not possible to get a grasp of the layout of the site; scattered throughout the sites are various memorials, seemingly randomly placed, and the entire area appears to be enclosed by dense, almost black forest.

The following scenes return the viewer to previously shown survivors, in Israel as well as in Chelmno, as they recall in detail the burning of the bodies, the pulverizing of the charred bones, and the disposal of the ashes into rivers. Further segments follow, showing interviews with locals in the vicinity of different death camps in Poland. Lanzmann interviews a number of different witnesses of the Treblinka site, such as local villagers and railway workers. In this segment, the viewer sees Henrik Gawkowski, who was a train conductor who drove the trains into the camp, leaning out the window of a driving steam engine. The camera is positioned high and focuses over Gawkowski's shoulder so that the viewer has a similar perspective to the train driver. It is a warm summer day, and the landscape consists of lush trees and green meadows. The steam from the locomotive drifts in clouds past the train driver, as the viewer hears the rhythmic clacking of the wheels along the railway tracks and the high whistle of the locomotive. Gawkowski turns his head, and now looks past the camera as if looking at an imaginary train. The train gradually slows, and finally comes to a stop at a small stop in the country side. Over the driver's shoulder a sign indicates that this stop is "Treblinka".



Fig. 18 Henrik Gawkowski, train conductor. Screenshot from *Shoah*. Claude Lanzmann (director), 1985 [documentary]. France: Cine Classics.

The driver leans further out of the window, almost as if to see if passengers are getting on or off the train. The viewer hears the voice of Abraham Bomba, a Treblinka survivor, “[T]here was a sign, a small sign, on the station of Treblinka.” The camera cuts to a view of a blue ocean with a motorboat driving cutting through the waves, and closes in on a view of Bomba sitting on a patio or balcony overlooking the ocean, in the background Tel Aviv, Israel. The shot of Bomba is a close-up, similar to the shot of Glazar.



Fig. 19 Testimony by Abraham Bomba. Screenshot from *Shoah*. Claude Lanzmann (director), 1985 [documentary]. France: Cine Classics.

“I don’t know if we were at the station or if we didn’t go up to the station. On the line over there where we stayed there was a sign, a very small sign, which said ‘Treblinka’. Because

nobody knew. There is not a place. It is not a city. It is not even a small village.” (Lanzmann, 1995, p. 17)

The scene changes to the view of a horse-drawn cart loaded high with hay, as the viewer listens to the statement of Czeslaw Borowi, a local resident at Treblinka who has lived in the village all his life and witnessed the arriving deportation trains. Then, the camera takes in Borowi, Claude Lanzmann and the translator while in the background train of boxcars slowly moves through the frame, the rhythmic noise of the train running along railroad tracks.



Fig. 20 Testimony by Czeslaw Borowi, local resident at Treblinka. Screenshot from *Shoah*. Claude Lanzmann (director), 1985 [documentary]. France: Cine Classics.

Borowi describes the confusion of the locals as they noticed the first trains arriving in the summer of 1942, juxtaposed with a view of a long row of boxcars standing still on a track, the view of the train obscured by lush, tall trees. Borowi describes:

“There were sixty to eighty cars in each convoy, and there were two locomotives that took the convoys into the camp, taking twenty cars at a time. The locomotive picked up twenty cars and took them to the camp. That took maybe an hour and the empty cars came back here. Then the next twenty cars were taken, and meanwhile, the people in the first twenty were already dead” (Lanzmann, 1995, p. 20).

During a close-up shot of boxcars driving along tracks, the locals describe the suffering of the deportees locked up in the cars: “They waited, they wept, they asked for water, they died”.

The following scene shows a view from the back of a train onto the receding railway tracks. The train drives at a fast pace, the steam from the engine lingers like fog over the tracks. The tracks are lined on each side by dense forest.



Fig. 21 View from the back of the train driving towards the Treblinka camp. Screenshot from *Shoah*. Claude Lanzmann (director), 1985 [documentary]. France: Cine Classics.

The viewer listens to statement of Abraham Bomba, who describes his experience during transport; in the background the rhythmic clicking of the train wheels is audible, and the high whistle of the locomotive. The scene then changes to a shot of the engine’s stack.



Fig. 22 Shot of engine’s stack. Screenshot from *Shoah*. Claude Lanzmann (director), 1985 [documentary]. France: Cine Classics.

As Bomba describes the suffering experienced by the deportees inside the cramped cars on a hot September day, the scene changes from the chimney to a view of Bomba on a balcony with the blue ocean in the background; next, the camera is positioned from the point of view of the engine driver, overlooking the front of the locomotive. As the train drives through a rural setting, the engine releases plumes of smoke, and the viewer hears the high whistle of the locomotive along with the clicking of the engine wheels along the railway tracks



Fig. 23 Shot of the locomotive driving through the countryside towards the Treblinka camp. Screenshot from *Shoah*. Claude Lanzmann (director), 1985 [documentary]. France: Cine Classics.

The train conductor Henrik Gawakowski from Malkinia describes how he would drive the cars with the deportees from the Treblinka station to the unloading ramp inside the camp two or three times a week for 1 ½ years. He would have 20 cars in front of the engine, pushing them towards the camp (Lanzmann, 1995, p. 31). He would hear the victims scream, begging for water (Lanzmann, 1995, p. 25). A narrow dirt road turns off the railway tracks, and Gawakowski explains that during the operation of the camp a railway spur had existed along that road.



Fig. 24 Train conductor Henrik Gawakowski points to the dirt road which was once the spur that led to the Treblinka camp. Screenshot from *Shoah*. Claude Lanzmann (director), 1985 [documentary]. France: Cine Classics.

The camera takes a dynamic shot as it follows along the dirt road, until it meets the symbolic railway line of the Treblinka memorial site.



Fig. 25 The symbolic railway track at the Treblinka camp – this is where the train would have arrived at the camp. Screenshot from *Shoah*. Claude Lanzmann (director), 1985 [documentary]. France: Cine Classics.

In the next scene, the camera angle is low, positioned close to the tracks, and faces the oncoming engine from the front in a zoom shot. The engine gradually slows down, releasing plumes of dark smoke, and moves gradually closer towards the camera until it finally comes to a full stop. At this point, the entire frame is filled with a close-up image of the engine's front. The sounds of the engine as well as the hissing of the steam, the slowing clacking of the railway

tracks and the squealing of the breaks in conjunction with the dominating image of the locomotive offers no escape for the viewer.



Fig. 26 Frontal shot of locomotive coming to a stop. Screenshot from *Shoah*. Claude Lanzmann (director), 1985 [documentary]. France: Cine Classics.

In the next scene, the camera takes a close-up shot of Abraham Bomba as describes the chaos, which ensued upon arrival of the train: “We had no time to even look at each other ... you didn’t know what had happened, you had no time to think, all you heard is crying and all the time, the hollering of the people”. The scene changes to a close-up shot of Richard Glazar who gives testimony to a similar experience: “And suddenly it started: the yelling and screaming. ‘All out, everybody out!’ All those shouts, the uproar, the tumult! ‘Out! Get out! Leave the baggage!’ We got out, stepping on each other.” The scene changes to a wide shot of the symbolic railway track und sweeps in a 90-degree turn to the monolith at the Treblinka memorial site, facing it from the front, gradually zooming in closer. Glazar and Bomba describe the undressing, and the ensuing panic amongst the victims.



Fig. 27 Frontal view of the monolithic structure from the unloading ramp. Screenshot from *Shoah*. Claude Lanzmann (director), 1985 [documentary]. France: Cine Classics.

The next shot is a close-up of the rock shard with the name Czestochowa, as Abraham Bomba gives testimony of the agony and despair of the deportees as they were led towards the door of the gas chamber. The camera moves away from the single rock, the gaze directed towards the monolith. The camera captures the seemingly chaotic mass of the jagged rocks, zooming in closer on the monolith's rear, and gradually the viewer can see the shape of a menorah which is carved into the horizontal boulder across the top.



Fig. 28 View towards the monolithic structure from the back. Screenshot from *Shoah*. Claude Lanzmann (director), 1985 [documentary]. France: Cine Classics.

The scene changes, now showing a trail in the forest surrounding the Treblinka site, the monolith visible at the end of the trail; the sun is low in the sky and golden rays shine through the trees. The viewer can hear the twittering of birds. As the camera follows the trail, the

viewer listens to the testimony of Abraham Bomba: “All at once at one time everything stopped by a command. It was all quiet. The place where the people went in and just like a command, like everything was dead.” The camera then cuts to Bomba, who pauses for a moment to take a deep breath, and continues to recollect how the murdered victims were removed from the gas chambers in minutes by *Sonderkommandos*: “And in no time this was as clean as though people had never been on that place. There was no trace, none at all, like a magic thing, everything disappeared” (Lanzmann, 1995, p. 37).

Lanzmann has taken the viewer onto a real as well as a metaphorical journey: beginning at the darkest part of Treblinka’s history – the burning of the corpses – he tells the viewer about the arrival of the deportation trains at the Treblinka station through the eyes of survivors as well as local bystanders. He follows the train on its – metaphorical – way to the unloading ramp inside the camp through the testimony of the two survivors as well as the train conductor. He accompanies the victims as they are herded off the train, forced to undress and then walk to and enter the gas chamber through the lens of the camera as well as through the descriptions by Glazar and Bomba. In *Shoah*, Lanzmann functions as a listener to the testimony of the witnesses and he enables the viewers to bear witness to the eyewitness statements. By providing the perspective of different types of witnesses, he persistently asks: What does it mean to witness? What does it mean to be a witness to the Holocaust? (Feldman, 1991, p. 228). Throughout the journey to and into the Treblinka camp, the viewer experiences similar limitations as they were experienced by the different witness groups - Shoshana Felman refers to this as the “different performances of the act of seeing”: the eyewitnesses are differentiated less in what they actually saw but rather by what and how they did not see, or failed to witness (1991, p. 208). The deportees did not understand the purpose of the site or where they had arrived. The local villagers saw the arrival of the deportation trains, knew about the camp’s existence and were aware of the suffering of the deportees, but overlooked their responsibility as well as their complicity as witnesses (Felman, 1991, p. 208).

The viewpoint of the camera of the Treblinka site is that of the victims: it is on the ground level from where only sections of the topography are visible. It is impossible to get an overview of

the site or of its surroundings as the view is limited by the dense forest, which encircles the camp. Similarly to the disorientation experienced by the deportees, the film places the viewer in a position of the witness who sees the site and hears the testimony, but cannot fully understand the significance of what they are seeing. It is only during the secretly filmed statement given by Franz Suchomel, who was a SS Unterscharführer at Treblinka, that the viewer, for the first time, receives a more comprehensive view of the Treblinka site from an elevated point of view: the camera faces towards the unloading ramp, and slowly sweeps across the camp site in a 360-degree motion, taking in the entire area. Only those in charge of the design and operations of the site had a full understanding of its purpose and were in control of what the deportees and locals could see, by limiting sight through branches interwoven in the barbed wire fences and by maintaining a screen of trees around the camp site.



Fig. 29 View over the full Treblinka site from an elevated position. Screenshot from *Shoah*. Claude Lanzmann (director), 1985 [documentary]. France: Cine Classics.

Through the different viewpoints of witnesses who give a personal testimony about their experiences, *Shoah* raises questions about what has been proposed by scholars to be the (im)possibility of witnessing a historical event such as the Holocaust, yet, also about the impossibility of escaping what one has witnessed (Felman, 1991).

## II. Analysis of the Treblinka site

I will begin my analysis of the gas chambers at Treblinka by first, exploring the representation of this aspect of the extermination camp in the film *Shoah*; second, I will discuss the material remains of the gas chambers at the present-day Treblinka site, the symbolic representation of the gas chambers in the monolithic structure and the Lanzmann's montage through the lens of palimpsests.

### **1. The Treblinka gas chambers in *Shoah***

The central focal point for Claude Lanzmann in his film *Shoah* was to explore the event-without-a-witness (Felman, 1991, p. 211): the death of the victims by gas. No one had returned from this death to speak to it, and Lanzmann sought to witness the event through the interviews with those who had come close to witnessing it: the German perpetrators, Jewish members of the *Sonderkommandos*, Polish bystanders (Brody, 2012). Lanzmann carefully montages the victim's journey to and into the gas chamber through the use of voices and places: he juxtaposes oral testimonies, which speak to specific events and places, with images of the sites in the present. The survivors' accounts as well as the careful sequencing of Lanzmann's imagery lead the viewer to the core of the Holocaust: the death of the victims. The filmmaker 'interrogated' the sites by analyzing and exploring them through his camera: he "filmed the slabs and stones for days on end, from every conceivable angle, unable to stop, running from one to another" (Thirlwell, 2012, online). He was determined to make the materiality of the site 'speak' to him: "I filmed them because there was nothing else to film, because I could not invent, because I would need this footage for when Bomba, when Glazar, when the farmers, or indeed when Suchomel, were speaking. These steles and these stones became human for me, the only trace of the hundreds of thousands who died here" (Thirlwell, 2012, online).

Lanzmann portrays the gas chambers at Treblinka through different views of the large monolithic structure at the center of the site, through distance or proximity to the monolith, through positioning, in conjunction with testimony given by different witnesses about specific events: Richard Glazar and Abraham Bomba speak about their own experience of almost entering the gas chamber, and their subsequent life in the camp; Franz Suchomel speaks about

the operational aspects of the gas chamber; and Alfred Spiess, the state prosecutor, explains the context of the extermination camps and the gas chambers as a core element.

The first shot of Treblinka on an overcast winter day at dusk, a pan shot takes in the rock shards overlaid with Glazar's testimony which describes his experience living in the camp, witnessing the burning of the victims. In this first shot, the gas chamber/monolith is not shown.

After several shots wide of the landscape around Treblinka and a focus on the trains and transport, the camera begins with a dynamic shot of the symbolic railway track and unloading ramp, and then zooms in sweeps on the tall monolith, facing at it frontally, gradually zooming in while remaining at a distance. This visual impression is juxtaposed with the testimony of Glazar, describing the process he went through upon his arrival at Treblinka: the undressing, the waiting, and his selection for work by an SS guard, upon which he leaves the area. The visual representation of the gas chamber/monolith from a distance symbolically represents the proximity to which Glazar came to entering the building, yet, without fully understanding its purpose.

The subsequent shot of the gas chamber/monolith is taken from the back of the structure, gradually zooming in, as the viewer listens to Bomba's statement: the waiting, naked; his selection for work; but he only stands to the side, and thus observes what happens next: the herding and pushing of the victims towards the door of the gas chamber, the crying and shouting, as the camera comes to focus on the menorah on the back of the monument. The positioning of the camera behind the structure along with the juxtaposition of the previous shot from the front represents symbolically the victim's entering of the gas chamber, observed by Bomba, and his subsequent witnessing of their death.

Lanzmann thus creates a montage of the monolith at the present-day site of Treblinka, which symbolically represents the doors to the gas chamber with the black rift in the front of the memorial; the description provided by the survivors of the last moments of the victims as they were forced into the gas chamber; and a view of the back of the monolith with its solid surface and the engraved menorah.

The shot of the Treblinka site following this segment is taken from a low angle, gazing over the countless jagged rock slabs, as the viewer listens to the testimony of Glazar, who describes his first experiences in Treblinka and his disbelief as he begins to understand what happened to the group of deportees with whom he had arrived, but without a view of the gas chamber/monolith. The camera view suggests that Glazar has now become part of the site that surrounds the gas chamber.

In the next scene, the camera takes in the monolith in a long shot from a distance, as it sweeps horizontally slowly at eye level over the large open site in a 180-degree move, as Glazar describes in voice-over his encounter with the enormous piles of the victim's belonging and Bomba testifies to his first night at the camp. A further long shot of the site, following a similar sweeping turn at eye level follows, with the voice-over of the testimony of both survivors of their emotional surrender. This composition of the oral testimony and the visual representation of the site represents the awareness of the survivors of the purpose and central role of the gas chamber as they have become a part of the small community of Jewish prisoners who worked at the Treblinka site.

Perhaps the most significant shot of the gas chamber/monolith is filmed from a hand-held camera with the cameraman walking towards the monolith from the front. In this shot, the camera is at eye level and provides the viewer with the same point of view as the cameraman. This scene is juxtaposed with the voice-over of the statement from the German state prosecutor: "The gas chambers were at the heart of the camp. They were built first in the woods, such as at Treblinka. The gas chambers were the only stone buildings ... These camps weren't built to last." The filmmaker continues to move closer to the monolith with a focus on the crack in the stone. The state prosecutor continues: "Himmler was in a hurry to begin the 'final solution'. The Germans had to capitalize on their eastward advance and use this remote backcountry to carry out their mass murder as secretly as possible. So at first they couldn't manage the perfection they achieved 3 months later." At this point the camera has moved so close to the looming monolith that the entire screen is filled with a view of the gaping black space between the massive rocks on each side.



Fig. 30 Focus on the rift in the monolithic structure. Screenshot from *Shoah*. Claude Lanzmann (director), 1985 [documentary]. France: Cine Classics.

This sequence is particularly significant for a variety of reasons: first, it provides symbolically the perspective of the victims as they walked towards the gas chamber. The gaping crack in the rock signifies the open door to the room, while the darkness inside the gap does not allow us to see what is inside. The imposing view of the structure is accompanied by perhaps the most distant witness perspective of the film – the prosecutor – who describes the cruel and ideology-informed planning that brought the extermination camps into existence. The merciless, factual mindset behind the killing apparatus is resembled in the dense, ragged and solid material of the memorial. Finally, the movement of the camera towards the object which concludes with the object filling the entire screen resembles the earlier shot of the locomotive moving towards the camera. I suggest it is significant that in the first take (the locomotive) the object moves towards the camera, until it comes to a halt seemingly only within a few centimeters, whereas in the second shot, it is the camera which moves closer towards the object. This juxtaposition resembles the enclosed position of the deportees inside the locked boxcars, while the victims were forced to run to the gas chamber. Both scenes confront the viewer with the material reality of the victims' experiences: the physical and psychological trauma of the experience of the transport, and the finality of their death. Lanzmann imitates with the positioning of the camera the experience of the witnesses who could observe and hear from the *outside* what

happened on the *inside*, just as the viewer as a witness can move close to the symbolic gas chamber without being able to enter it.

## **2. The remains of the gas chambers at the Treblinka site**

A common misconception about the Treblinka site – and, in fact, many other sites related to the Holocaust – is that the site was completely dismantled and destroyed by the SS (Sturdy Colls, 2015) and that no traces of their genocidal activities survived. This misconception is based on two factors: first, as the camps were liberated by the allied troops, a number of the camps were still in operation, and thus had intact architectural structures. Photographs and documentary film taken at liberation enforced a focus on the built environment of the camps as evidence. Through the perpetual use and repurposing of specific iconographic images by mass-media, an iconography of the Holocaust began to emerge around, which focused - in addition to emaciated survivors and mounds of corpses - on barracks, watchtowers, barbed wire fences and gas chambers (Torchin, 2012; Zelizer, 1997; Sturdy Colls, 2015). Second, early investigations into the genocidal crimes, for example by the Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland, focused largely on visible material evidence, oftentimes they conducted only a superficial analysis of sites (Webb, 2014; Sturdy Colls, 2015, p. 25). Resulting reports would indicate that all traces and evidence had been destroyed at a particular site, and no structures or mass graves were found. This information was subsequently included in official histories and publications about specific sites.

There are, of course, a variety of reasons why no visible material evidence above ground has remained. In the case of Treblinka, for example, the SS did indeed attempt to hide the evidence of their crimes by destroying and demolishing all built structures to the ground level, the foundations were buried with soil and sand, and the rubble was scattered around the site. The ground was flattened, and trees and vegetation were planted over the top of the area (Sturdy Colls, 2015; Sereny, 1995). Finally, a small farm building was built on the site. Furthermore, looters continued to dig at the site since the end of the war based on the belief that some valuable items may have been left behind. Finally, as first attempts were made at the site to

protect the human remains, further disturbances and changes were made to the landscape (Study Colls, 2015; Webb, 2014).

Recent archaeological research at Treblinka has resulted in the location of the foundations of numerous demolished structures, and researchers have located the old gas chambers based on the bricks, tiles and other materials which were used to build them (Sturdy Colls, 2014a). These excavations also revealed that the SS made considerable efforts to hide the evidence of their crimes by dumping large quantities of sand on top of the structures; in some areas the sand extended over 1.5 m deep. This explains why after post-war investigations it was assumed that no structures had remained (Study Colls, 2015, 249).



Fig. 31 The large sand deposits that were dumped over the top of the old gas chambers at Treblinka. Sturdy Colls, 2015.



Fig. 32 Tiles from the old gas chambers at Treblinka, which confirm witness testimonies that this building was modelled on a bathhouse. Sturdy Colls, 2015.

I suggest that the existence of the remains of the gas chambers at Treblinka below the ground and the monolithic structure which symbolically represents the gas chamber as part of the memorial above ground can be perceived as a palimpsest. The term palimpsest is used in different disciplines as a metaphor. In archaeology, for example, it commonly refers to a “superimposition of successive activities, the material traces of which are partially destroyed or reworked because of the process of superimposition” (Bailey, 2007, p. 203). Geoff Bailey suggests specific forms of palimpsests, two of which I feel are particularly suited in the context of the Treblinka site: first, a “true palimpsest” implies that all traces of previous activities have been fully erased except for the most recent, and any material traces of earlier layers which may have remained are incorporated into the final layer (Bailey, 2007). The last layer of a true palimpsest represents activities that are unrelated to previous layers. Second, a “palimpsest of meaning” can be defined as “the succession of meanings acquired by a particular object, or group of objects, as a result of the different uses, contexts of use and associations to which they have been exposed from the original moment of manufacture” to their current state (Bailey, 2007, p. 208).

The concept of palimpsest provides a framework in which we can position the material structural remains of the gas chambers, the symbolic representation of the gas chambers as a memorial, and the illustration of the gas chambers in *Shoah* in relation to each other. The layers of earlier activities at the site – the operating gas chambers – have been partly destroyed and subsequently buried. Only the most recent layer of activities is visible above the ground: the symbolic representation of the gas chambers in its monolithic form. The remaining traces of the camp site have been incorporated into the memorial in that specific features of the site, such as the location of one of the burning pits and the location of the gas chambers are represented symbolically. The exclusively symbolic representation of specific features at Treblinka reinforces the idea that no physical evidence has remained.

The last layer of the true palimpsest at Treblinka – the memorial – represents activities and meanings which are unrelated to the activities and meanings from the original manufacture. The original purpose of the gas chambers was to exterminate hundreds of thousands of people.

The meaning of the Treblinka site as a whole, and the monolithic structure as a symbolic representation of the gas chamber, is that of a memorial to those who perished at this location. Lanzmann's visual focus is on the monolithic structure in the context of the memorial, however, he continually reminds the viewer that there is more beneath the surface. Through the testimony provided by the survivors Lanzmann offers the viewer a glimpse into the abyss that is a composite of the memories of the survivors. By focusing on the Holocaust sites in the present-day landscape, Lanzmann refers to the most recent, tangible layer of the palimpsest. Yet, it is only through the memories of the survivors that the true meaning of the site is revealed. Lanzmann weaves connections between the visible and the invisible, the tangibility and the intangibility, the present and the past, the living and the dead through a montage of testimony and images of the actual site. Through this composition, Lanzmann illustrates the importance of the connections between memory and the material world, as each one would be meaningless without the other.

### **III. The site of Treblinka as a translocal assemblage**

I suggest that the analytical tool 'translocal assemblage' provides a novel view of the complex web of relations which exists between the physical remains of the historical Treblinka site, the present-day memorial site, and the film *Shoah*. This web of connections is highly complex, multi-dimensional and fluid, and cannot be fully captured in only a few sentences, yet, I will explore some of these relationships in this sub-chapter.

The extermination camp Treblinka was a new material as well as ideological space which was created by the German perpetrators in the context of the *Operation Reinhard* death camps. The specific topography around Treblinka was essential in its establishment: the remote location of the site in combination with nearby railway junctions as well as its proximity to two ghettos with large Jewish populations in Warsaw and Białystok. Thus, the camp was embedded in a complex network of extermination centers, which in turn were an element of the ideology of the Nazi state. It became a part of the European railway system, which the perpetrators used to

transport their victims across the continent to Eastern Europe for extermination, and also to ship the victims' belongings back to the German Reich. The deportees who were murdered at Treblinka were sent here primarily from the nearby ghettos, but also from countries across Europe. As the bodies of the victims were incinerated and their ashes blended with, buried in, or strewn across the local landscape, the remains of those individuals have merged with the soil at Treblinka on a material level; thus, a connection exists between the lives of the victims in their places of origin, and the material environment at the Treblinka site. A very small number of survivors were able to escape from Treblinka and give testimony at subsequent trials. Some of the survivors emigrated to Israel, the United States, and perhaps other countries. Thus, connections exist between the places of origin of these survivors, their memories of their families and loved ones, their experiences at Treblinka and their lives after the war. Their experiences will have undoubtedly affected and being passed on to their families as post-memory (Hirsch, 2012).

The memorial which was erected at the Treblinka site symbolically represents specific elements of the former death camp: the railway tracks; the unloading ramp; the gas chamber; the burning pits and the mass graves. The symbolic representation of these elements thus creates spatio-temporal connections between the actual material structures at the camp in the "there and then" and the memorial structures in the "here and now".

Claude Lanzmann, a French filmmaker, recorded eyewitness testimony from survivors (some of whom he sought out in Israel and the US), perpetrators (some were interviewed in Germany) and bystanders, and juxtaposed these recordings with images filmed at present-day sites. Through this process Lanzmann created a link between the memories and the words of the witnesses with the local topographies in modern-day Poland, while also drawing connections between the memories, the historical sites and the countries of residence of the eyewitnesses.

Further connections exist through specific forms of tourism or movements such as the March of the Living (an annual educational program in which students – many of whom are Jewish - from around the world travel to Poland to visit Holocaust memorial sites). Thus, the site of Treblinka

is connected with individuals and communities from around the world; as individual visitors and groups interact and engage with the site, and draw from and create personal memories and experiences, they create highly dynamic, interactive and fluid connections across spatial and temporal boundaries.

These are only a small number of the connections that surround the present-day Treblinka site in Poland; countless more relations exist and continue to form and evolve. What I seek to illustrate with my example is the interconnectedness between the materiality of the site, its history, its role as a memorial site, the different meanings the site has for different individuals and groups, and the continuity of the site in the present. At times, the absence of physical markers at sites such as Treblinka may give the appearance of the site being “empty” or that there is “nothing there”. I suggest that an analytical tool such as translocal assemblage clearly demonstrates the wealth and depth of connections which *do* exist in and around such sites.

## Chapter 2:

### Auschwitz-Birkenau - *Holocaust*

#### Introduction

Charlesworth suggests that the permanent structures of the Holocaust can be perceived to 'speak' of the events as witnesses (2004). This can be interpreted in that the structures are representative of the ideology which created them (Humphrey, 2005), but also the materiality of structures and objects allows humans to connect through their emotions and their imagination. The former concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland, Tim Cole argues, "more than any other place, has come to symbolize everything about the 'Holocaust'" (1999, p. 98). Auschwitz-Birkenau was the largest of all camps, and its built environment remained after the end of World War II, providing a focal point for Holocaust commemoration as well as education. The place Auschwitz-Birkenau 'speaks' of the events which took place, but it has also emerged as a symbol. According to Cole 'Auschwitz' is not only a geographical place, but it is a mythical "place of mind" (1999, p. 106). This 'Auschwitz' consists of elements which merge different chronological periods as well as aspects of the different landscapes and structures of the main camp and Birkenau, emphasizing certain aspects and omitting others (Cole, 1999). The maintenance, management and interpretation of the vast, diverse and complex site Auschwitz-Birkenau has been much criticized and debated. While such ethical and aesthetical concerns are important and necessary, I suggest the site nevertheless offers us the opportunity to investigate the material traces of the events in the site's landscape, structures and objects. I therefore suggest to 'listen' to the materiality of the site through specific object-focused analytical approaches. This will enable us to access a wealth of information which lies beyond the naked eye, and allows us to perceive the site as part of a highly complex and multi-dimensional web of actions and interactions.

For the purpose of this chapter I will use the site of Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland, and the cinematic representation of the site in the TV mini-series *Holocaust* (1978) as a case study. This TV mini-series is significant in the discourse of Holocaust-related films as it was the first time

that a dramatization of the Holocaust was broadcast to an American and to a West German television audience. American television played a leading role in constructing a transnational narrative about the genocide of the Jews, and *Holocaust* was for many Americans the first time that they learned about the extent of the Jewish suffering (Shandler, 1999). While some critics accused the mini-series of trivializing the Holocaust, it was an enormous success: an estimated 120 million viewers watched the 9 ½ hour long series, aired in four episodes, in the US. The series won numerous awards, such as Emmys and Golden Globes. It was rebroadcast again a year later. When *Holocaust* was aired in West Germany in 1979 it was watched by an estimated 15 million households, approximately one third of the viewing public (Martschukat, 2013, p. 202; Wuthnow, 1987, p. 359).

For my analysis I am drawing from materiality and object-oriented approaches, such as Caroline Humphrey's (2005) and Langdon Winner's (1980) work. In addition, I will apply McFarlane's (2011) concept of translocal assemblage in order to explore the representation of the site in *Holocaust* as well as in popular culture. I suggest that the size of the large Auschwitz complex alongside with its multitude of purposes (penalty; forced labour; extermination) and sequential changes in material structures over time has contributed to a cinematic representation that relies on a small number of material key elements of the site in combination with a narrow selection of specific events and victims.

The new place of the camp complex, which was created by the Nazis in this relatively rural area in southern Poland, became an agent in a complex way of meanings, functions and discourses, which – during the years of its operation – began to expand beyond the European continent. Not only has the materiality of the landscape been changed through the construction of the camp and the murder of approximately 1.5 million victims at this place, but also through the activity of continually increasing numbers of international visitors.

In section I, I will first provide a brief historical summary of Auschwitz-Birkenau between 1940 until 1945. Second, I will provide an overview of the memorial site as it exists in present-day Poland. Third, I will explore how Auschwitz-Birkenau is represented in the TV mini-series *Holocaust*. In section II, I will analyse the ramp at Birkenau as well as the railway tracks leading

into the camp through object-based approaches. In section III, I will analyse Auschwitz-Birkenau through the lens of translocal assemblage.

## I. **Overview of the site of the former concentration and death camp Auschwitz-Birkenau**

### 1. **Historical summary of Auschwitz-Birkenau**

Today, the term 'Auschwitz' is commonly used to refer to the location of the former concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau; however, this does not take into consideration the complex history of the large camp complex and changing operational purposes.

The site of the former concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau is located approximately 65 km from Kraków, in the town of Oświęcim in Southwest Poland. Under German occupation, the name of the town was changed to Auschwitz. The name 'Auschwitz' refers to an extensive structure of several principal camps and over 40 sub camps which were dispersed over a radius of several hundred kilometers. Auschwitz I was the site of the administrative headquarters (it functioned primarily as a concentration camp); Auschwitz II or Birkenau was an extermination camp with an adjacent concentration camp; Auschwitz III or Monowitz was a labour camp housing prisoners. In the sub camps, prisoners were deployed in forced labour in industrial and armaments production, in mines or quarries (Steinbacher, 2005). The very location of Auschwitz is crucial as it is located along a main traffic artery: in the 1940s the freight yards of the Auschwitz railroad station contained forty-four parallel tracks (Hilberg, 1998, p. 172).

#### **Auschwitz I**

Around the turn of the century, the town of Oświęcim built a camp for seasonal workers which consisted of twenty-two brick houses. Under German occupation, this barracks compound underwent construction and was transformed into a concentration camp in the spring of 1940

(Steinbacher, 2005, p. 11). By the end of 1940 the camp site expanded and further zones were added, until the zone of interest covered about 40 square kilometers (Steinbacher, 2005, p. 27). During the summer of 1941, Zyklon B gas was introduced as a means for mass murder. Zyklon B gas was first tested at Auschwitz I on September 5<sup>th</sup> 1941 in basement cells of Block 11. 900 Soviet prisoners of war were murdered, and their bodies were burned in the crematoria (crematoria I).

### **Monowitz (Auschwitz III)**

In the spring of 1941, IG Farben built a new factory close to the Auschwitz concentration camp. IG Farben was a Limited Company, which was a conglomerate of a number of large German industrial manufacturers, such as Bayer and BASF. The majority of its board members joined the National Socialist party, which created a link between private industry and the involvement of the party in the economy. The board created installations, primarily based on good railway connections as well as cheap workforce, such as slave laborers. Initially, prisoners from Auschwitz I had to commute between the plant and the main camp, but eventually, the company decided to build its own camp (Monowitz or Auschwitz III).

### **Birkenau (Auschwitz II)**

In October 1941 the construction of a large camp complex at Brzesinka, ca. 3 km away from the main camp was initiated; this was Birkenau (Auschwitz II). Some brick-built barracks stood on bare boggy ground without heating or electrical light, but the vast majority of barracks were simple wooden sheds. The plan was initially to house Soviet prisoners of war at Birkenau, but the plan changed to deport Jews to this camp for forced labour (Steinbacher, 2005, p. 95). The mass extermination in Birkenau occurred in phases: the first mass murders took place in Birkenau in two small former farmhouses during May 1942. The gassings in these two buildings took place until spring 1943, when crematoria II, III, IV and V were built to increase gassing

capacity. All the crematoria were some distance away from the prisoner barracks and disguised by vegetation and electrified barbed wire (Steinbacher, 2005, p. 100).

By 1943 Auschwitz-Birkenau had become the center of the mass extermination as some of the other death camps further east were abandoned. Between May 15<sup>th</sup> and July 9<sup>th</sup>, 1944, 438,000 Hungarian Jews arrived at Birkenau; approximately 15 per cent of these deportees were used as slave laborers; all others were killed immediately (Steinbacher, 2005, p. 108). The last transport to Auschwitz arrived on October 30<sup>th</sup>, 1944 carrying 2,000 Jews from Theresienstadt (Steinbacher, 2005, p. 109).

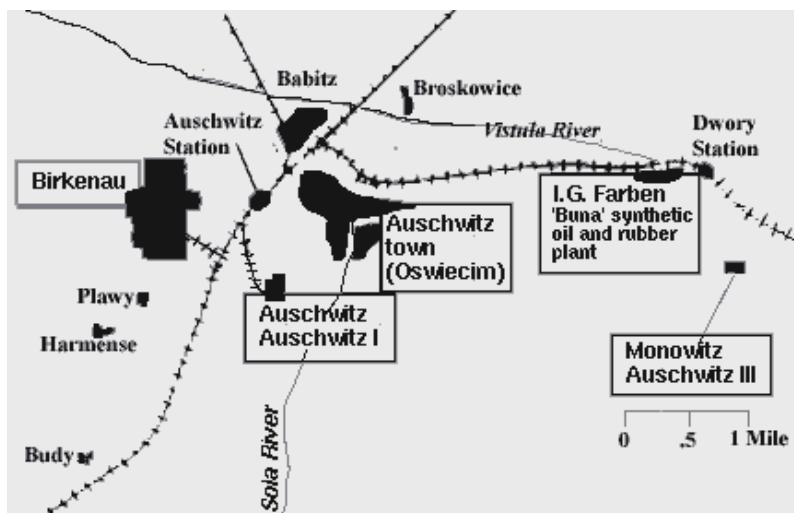


Fig. 1 Map of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp complex. Online. >[http://isurvived.org/AUSCHWITZ\\_TheCamp.html](http://isurvived.org/AUSCHWITZ_TheCamp.html)<. Accessed Nov.1 2015.

## Liberation

In July 1944, Soviet troops were 200 km away from Auschwitz and the systematic dissolution of the camp began. Large amounts of the personal belongings of the victims were transported to Germany between summer 1944 and January 1945. Mass evacuations from the Auschwitz camp complex began on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 1945, with about 58,000 prisoners (Steichbacher, 2005, p. 125); 15,000 died on the brutal marches. The SS burned the camp records, destroyed the crematoria, and set fire to the warehouses that were full of victims' personal effects. Some of the crematoria equipment was dismantled and shipped to other camps in Germany. When the

Red Army entered the grounds of the Auschwitz camp complex on January 27<sup>th</sup>, 1945, they encountered about 7,000 prisoners.

### **The victims**

It is approximated that the number of victims in the Auschwitz concentration camp complex between 1940 and 1945 amount to: 1,095,000 Jews (of whom 960,000 died); 147,000 Poles (of whom 74,000 died); 23,000 Roma (of whom 21,000 died); 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war were deported and died; and other nationalities (25,000 deported, of whom 12,000 died) (USHMM website).

The Nazis exploited their victims in every respect: deportees were allowed to bring with them between 30 – 50 kilos of luggage, which included food, household goods, clothes, medicine, furniture, carpets, currency, clocks and jewelry. Money and precious metals were sent to the Reichsbank, while textiles, shoes and household goods were given to Germans. Gold from teeth extracted from the corpses was melted; human hair was spun into thread and turned into felt; ash was used as fertilizer as well as filling materials in the building of roads (Steinbacher, 2005, p. 103).

Upon liberation, the allies found approximately 370,000 men's suits, 837,000 women's coats and dresses, huge amounts of children's clothing, 44,000 pairs of shoes, prostheses, toothbrushes, household goods, and, in the former leather factory near the parent camp, 7.7 tons of human hair (Steinbacher, 2005, p. 128).

## **2. The State Museum Auschwitz Birkenau at present day**

Visitors to the State Museum Auschwitz Birkenau will likely arrive by taking highway DK 44 westbound from Kraków. The museum consists of two main sites: Auschwitz I and Birkenau. These are two distinctly different locations and the distance between both sites is approximately 3km. The entire museum area consists of 9,724 m<sup>2</sup>, of which 6,146 m<sup>2</sup> comprise Birkenau, and 3,588 m<sup>2</sup> Auschwitz I (Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum website). The majority of visitors begin their tour at Auschwitz I: this site consists of a built environment and a museum

exhibit. Visitors purchase their tickets and begin their tour in the visitor center, which was the building where prisoners at Auschwitz I were “registered, tattooed, robbed, disinfected” (Van Pelt and Dwork, 1996, p. 362).



Fig. 2 Aerial view of Auschwitz I with crematoria I in the foreground. Online. ><http://auschwitz.org/en/gallery/memorial/><. Accessed Nov.1 2015.

Visitors take a guided tour that leads them along gravel paths which are framed with double-rows of barbed wire fence. They pass under the well-known sign ‘ARBEIT MACHT FREI’ and enter the main road leading between rows of two-storey red brick barracks. Along this main road are tall poplar trees planted on well-tended grass patches.



Fig. 3 Entrance gate Arbeit Macht Frei inside Auschwitz I camp. Online. ><http://auschwitz.org/en/gallery/memorial/><. Accessed Nov. 2, 2015.



Fig. 4 Double rows of electrical barbed wire fence with watch towers at Auschwitz I. Online. ><http://auschwitz.org/en/gallery/memorial/><. Accessed Nov.1 2015.



Fig. 5 Main road at Auschwitz I. Online. ><http://auschwitz.org/en/gallery/memorial/><. Accessed Nov.1 2015.

As visitors move in and out of some of the barracks, they see archival photographs, some of them mural-sized; they learn about the Holocaust in general as well as about the history of the camp, the victims and the perpetrators; they will see artefacts on display in different barracks or 'Blocks'. Block 5 contains the gallery Evidence of Crimes: human hair and cloth made of hair; suitcases; artificial limbs; glasses; children's toys; hair brushes; tooth brushes; shaving brushes; pots and pans; containers for Zyklon B; shoes.



Fig. 6 Display of victims' suitcases found at liberation, Auschwitz I. Online. ><http://auschwitz.org/en/gallery/memorial/><. Accessed Nov. 2, 2015.



Fig. 7 Display of victims' spectacles found at liberation, Auschwitz I. Online. ><http://auschwitz.org/en/gallery/memorial/><. Accessed Nov. 2, 2015.

In Block 11, the last barracks on the left side, visitors see the starvation and standing cells, and in the court yard, the wall at which thousands of prisoners were shot. The visitors then return along the main road, and view crematoria I, which was reconstructed and consists of a small gas chamber and two crematoria ovens.



Fig. 8 Crematoria I and gas chamber at Auschwitz I. Online. ><http://auschwitz.org/en/gallery/memorial/><. Accessed Nov. 2, 2015.



Fig. 9 Ovens at Crematoria I, Auschwitz I. Online. ><http://auschwitz.org/en/gallery/memorial/><. Accessed Nov. 2, 2015.

Upon leaving Auschwitz I, visitors can either take a shuttle bus or walk the approximately 3 km to Auschwitz II – Birkenau.

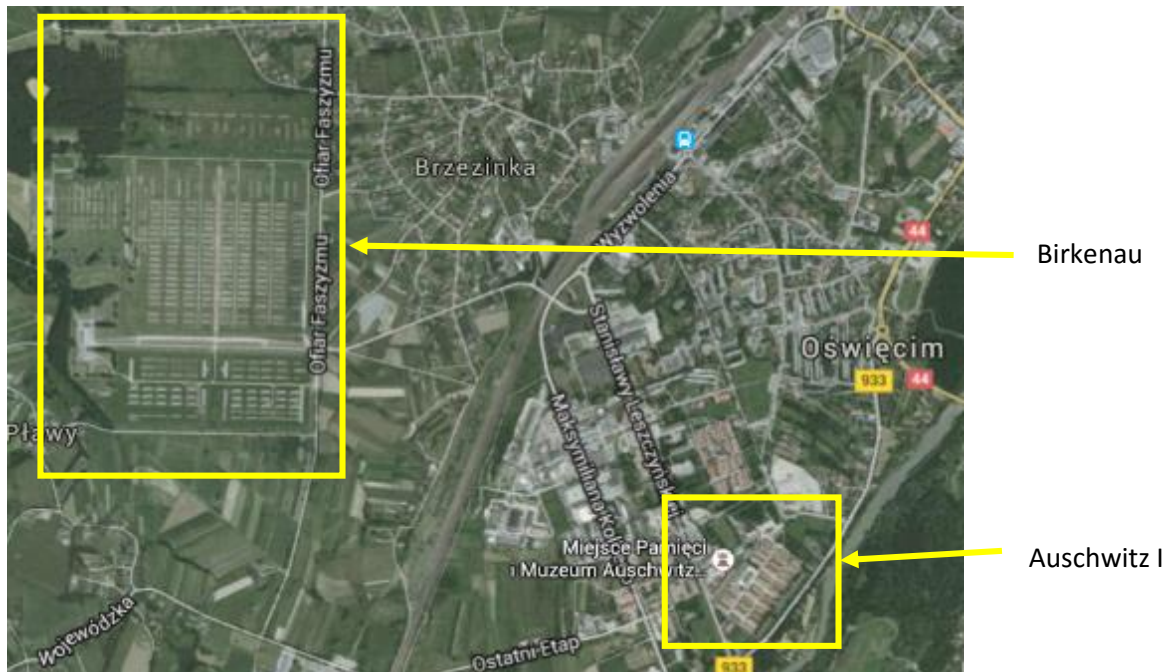


Fig. 10 Aerial view showing location of Auschwitz I and Birkenau in today's Oswięcim. Online. ><http://googlemap.com><. Accessed Nov. 2, 2015.

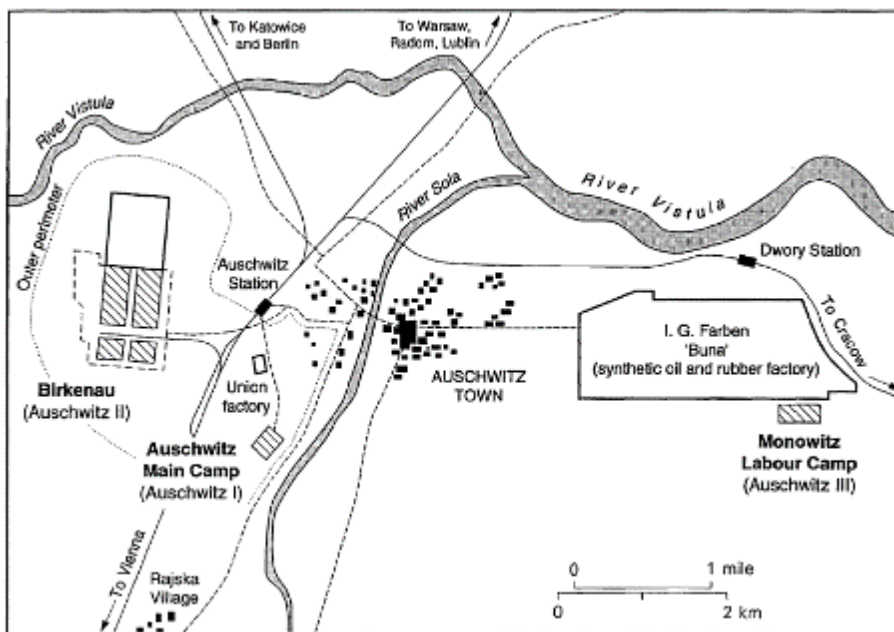


Fig. 11 Map showing Auschwitz I, Birkenau, Monowitz and Auschwitz Station (location of *Alte Judenrampe* or second ramp). Online. ><http://ushmm.org><. Accessed Nov. 2, 2015.

The topography of Birkenau is drastically different from Auschwitz I. Whereas Auschwitz I consists of architectural structures and is surrounded by contemporary buildings, Birkenau is located on a vast, flat plain. The most dominating architectural structure is the well-known wooden, arched entrance gate, which is flanked by a brick barrack on each side.



Fig. 12 Railway tracks leading through the Birkenau main gate into the camp. Online. >  
><https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/aupictoc.html><. Accessed Nov. 2, 2015.

Railway tracks lead through the arched gate towards a ramp. A main road runs parallel to the railway tracks, with drainage ditches on each side.



Fig. 13 Railway inside Birkenau camp and ramp (*Neue Judenrampe* or third ramp). Online. >  
><https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/aupictoc.html><. Accessed Nov. 2, 2015.

The landscape of the former camps site is interspersed with crumbling brick chimneys and foundations of the former wooden barracks. Some barracks have been reconstructed.



Fig. 14 Brick chimneys, remains of fence posts, reconstructed barracks, Birkenau. Online. ><http://auschwitz.org/en/gallery/memorial/><. Accessed Nov. 2, 2015.

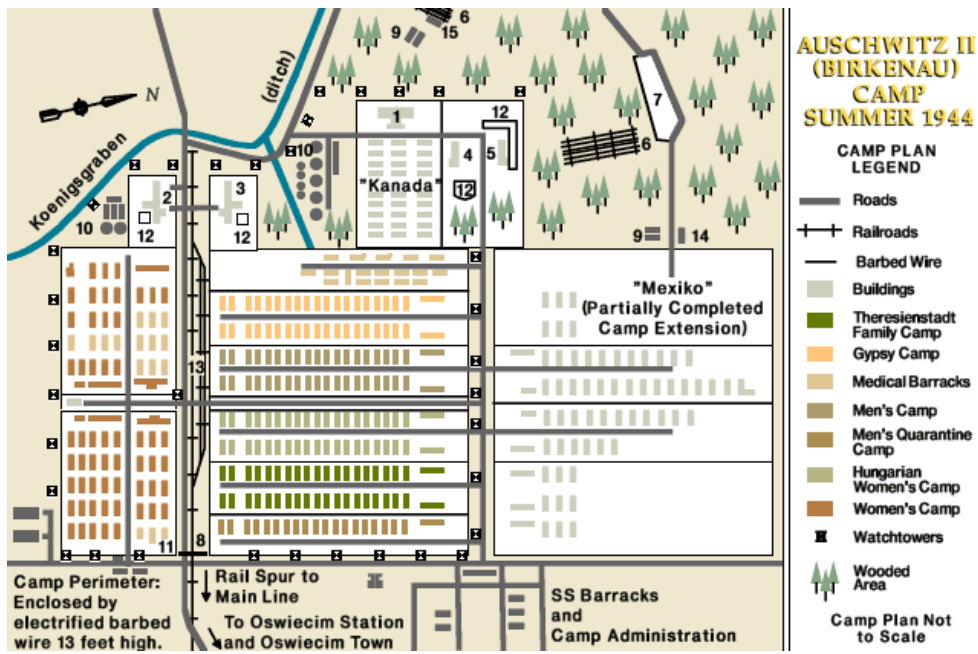


Fig. 15 Map of Birkenau as it would have been in 1944; the main gate is at the bottom of this image crematoria II, III, IV, V and Kanada at the top. Online. ><http://auschwitz.org/en/gallery/memorial/><. Accessed Nov. 2, 2015.



Fig. 16 Ruins of crematoria and gas chamber II, Birkenau. Online. ><http://auschwitz.org/en/gallery/memorial/><. Accessed Nov. 2, 2015.

Once visitors have walked to the end of the main road, which runs parallel to the railway track, they encounter the ruins of crematoria and gas chambers II and III on each side of the road.



Fig. 17 Ruins of crematoria and gas chamber III, Birkenau. Online. ><http://auschwitz.org/en/gallery/memorial/><. Accessed Nov. 2, 2015.

The dirt road leads past crematoria II and III, and turns to the right. It runs through a little cluster of birch trees, and then the landscape opens up again.



Fig. 18 Birch grove, Birkenau. Online. ><http://auschwitz.org/en/gallery/memorial/><. Accessed Nov. 2, 2015.

In the area behind the birch trees were crematoria and gas chambers IV and V as well as the collection site *Kanada*. In this area are also the fields of ashes and the pond of ashes.

The interpretation throughout the Birkenau site is minimal. Unobtrusive signs with a small amount of informational text and archival photographs provide visitors with context of specific buildings or areas.



Fig. 19 Example of interpretive sign, Birkenau. Online. ><http://auschwitz.org/en/gallery/memorial/><. Accessed Nov. 2, 2015.

### 3. Representation of 'Auschwitz' in the TV mini-series *Holocaust*

The TV mini-series *Holocaust* (1978, NBC) was among the first popular American films that represented the Holocaust as a specifically Jewish experience (Doneson, 2002, p. 149). The making of the mini-series can be perceived to be a result of the success of the TV mini-series

*Roots*: both programs represent a shift in the ethnic awareness of the United States, “the strengthening of ethnic identification that renewed itself in American life during the days of the black struggle for civil rights in the early 60s” (Doneson, 2002, p. 145). Not only did *Holocaust* help to popularize the history of the Jewish persecution in the Third Reich, but it generated many related activities, such as the Carter Commission, which called for a national memorial and museum dedicated to Holocaust commemoration (Doneson, 2002, p. 191). Initially, permission was granted to film in Eastern bloc countries; however, this permission was withdrawn due to a concern about perceived political messages (related to the uprising of the Jewish ghetto as well as to Rudi’s emigration to Israel). The filming of *Holocaust* took place in Germany and Austria (Doneson, 2002, 155).

A significant connection exists between archival photographs taken during the time of operation of the camps, archival photographs and documentary footage taken at the liberation of the camps, which were subsequently published and distributed, and the *Holocaust* mini-series: the TV production uses original archival images and footage during specific sequences. I would like to point out the use of photographs taken by SS during May 1944 at Birkenau that depict the arrival and selection process of Hungarian Jews, which is juxtaposed with a verbal description given by Erik Dorf to Ernst Kaltenbrunner about the processes at ‘Auschwitz’. The photographs were taken by an SS man although the purpose of the pictures is unclear. They show the arrival of Jewish deportees from Carpatho-Ruthenia. Many of the photos were taken at the ramp. The deportees underwent a selection, and those considered fit for work were sent into the camp, while the rest was sent to the gas chambers. The photographs show victims as they walk towards the area of the camp where the gas chambers were located. Numerous pictures show the deportees waiting in a small wood nearby the gas chambers (Yad Vashem, online photo archive).

By contextualizing the archival photographs of Birkenau with ‘Auschwitz’ in *Holocaust*, the images lend a documentary quality to the series. Furthermore, the use of the photographs creates a connection with the archival images and footage taken at the time of liberation, which were used as evidence during the Nuremberg trials.

I will begin my discussion of the TV mini-series *Holocaust* (1978, NBC) with a brief summary of the key characters and specific plot elements, before I will focus in more depth on certain aspects of the series. Marvin Chomsky directed the series, and Gerald Green, an American author, wrote the script, which he later adapted into a novel. The main characters are: the German-Jewish middle class family of Dr. Josef Weiss and his wife Berta; their children Karl, Rudi and Anna; Karl is an artist and married to the German Inga. Erik Dorf is a member of the National Socialist party who rises quickly through the ranks to a position of power. The Weiss family as well as the Dorf family live in Berlin. Karl is deported to the concentration camp Buchenwald. Inga manages to stay in contact with him through letters. Karl is transferred to Theresienstadt where Inga can join him, but he is then deported to Auschwitz where he is forced to work in the *Sonderkommando*. He finally dies from exhaustion. Inga stays in Theresienstadt, where she gives birth to Karl's son, and decides to leave Germany after the end of the war. Anna is raped and remains traumatized and disturbed after the event. Her family sends her to Hadamar, a sanatorium, where Anna is gassed with carbon monoxide upon arrival. Dr. Weiss is deported to the Warsaw ghetto in Poland, where he is later joined by Berta. They are deported from Warsaw to Auschwitz, where they both perish.

Rudi leaves his home and travels east. In Czechoslovakia he meets Helena, and together they move further east to the Ukraine, where they witness the killings at Babi Yar. Rudi and Helena join the partisans in the forest, but Helena is killed during a shooting. At the end of the war Rudi makes his way back to the West and decides to go to Palestine. Erik Dorf, who was in charge of the mass executions, kills himself during questioning by the Allies. The two narratives frequently cross over as the figure of Erik Dorf represents the progressive implementation of genocidal policies and actions, whereas the Weiss family represents the experience of the victims and the impact on their lives.

For the purpose of this chapter I will investigate the following aspects of the TV series *Holocaust*: first, I will explore the representation of 'Auschwitz'; and second, I will investigate the representation and role of transport and transit in the TV series *Holocaust*. Transportation and transit are at the core of the implementation and the experience of the Holocaust for the

vast majority of victims. Visual representations of masses of people being herded into boxcars and being transported to camps or ghettos is one of the iconographic images of the Holocaust in popular culture and in Holocaust-related films (Zelizer, 2001). The emergence of these images in is part due to wartime photography depicting deportees weighed down by luggage moving towards a train station, passengers at departure or at arrival. Yet, in the cinematic representations of the Holocaust the experience of deportees during transit and inside the trains is usually presented as a generic journey, restricted to external images of closed boxcars in motion with the camps as the deportation's destination (Gigliotti, 2010, p. 13). What is less commonly illustrated is that the deportation itself resulted in death for large numbers of the victims and furthermore that the railway tracks became killing sites. The very architecture of the spaces of the boxcars facilitated genocide (Sturdy Colls, 2015) in that large numbers of people who were crammed into a restricted space, without food or water, oftentimes for several days on end, exposed to freezing winter or scolding summer temperatures. The sheer length of the journey along with the physical deprivations and the mental agony was intended to weaken the deportees' strength and their power to resist (Sturdy Colls, 2015).

The location 'Auschwitz' in the TV mini-series *Holocaust* is constructed through layers of events surrounding the increasingly industrialized murder of the European Jews. The viewer follows the destiny of the Jewish victims through the narratives of the different members of the Weiss family as they witness or experience stages or events that occurred during the Holocaust. Sequences of the Weiss family are interspersed with elements that follow the narrative of Erik Dorf, who is closely associated first, with Reinhard Heydrich, and later on with Ernst Kaltenbrunner, who implemented the Final Solution. The systematic persecution of the Jews is portrayed through the deportation of different members of the Weiss family, their incarceration in the ghetto and in camps, where they subsequently learn about systematic mass shootings and finally mass killings by gas in extermination camps. The viewer learns about the death camp Treblinka, where 6,000 people a day are gassed to death from a conversation between a member of the Jewish resistance and a member of the Polish resistance who followed the train to the Treblinka camp and returned to report his observations.

The name 'Auschwitz' is mentioned the first time by Karl, who has been transferred to the camp Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia: he has heard of "a place in Poland called 'Auschwitz'". During an office meeting, Dorf, Heinrich Himmler and Rudolf Höss, commandant of Auschwitz, discuss the plan on expanding the camp to twice its size, in order to surpass other camps such as Treblinka or Belzec. At this point, the victims are killed with carbon monoxide. However, Dorf seeks to find a more cost-effective method to murder the victims, and learns about the pesticide Zyklon B. At a later meeting with Kaltenbrunner, who has replaced Heydrich, Höss explains how Jews are currently "processed" in Auschwitz: upon arrival those fit for work are selected for IG Farben; the rest are sent to gas chambers which are fitted with shower heads; here, they are gassed with Zyklon B. Dorf shows photographs to Kaltenbrunner which are actual archival images:

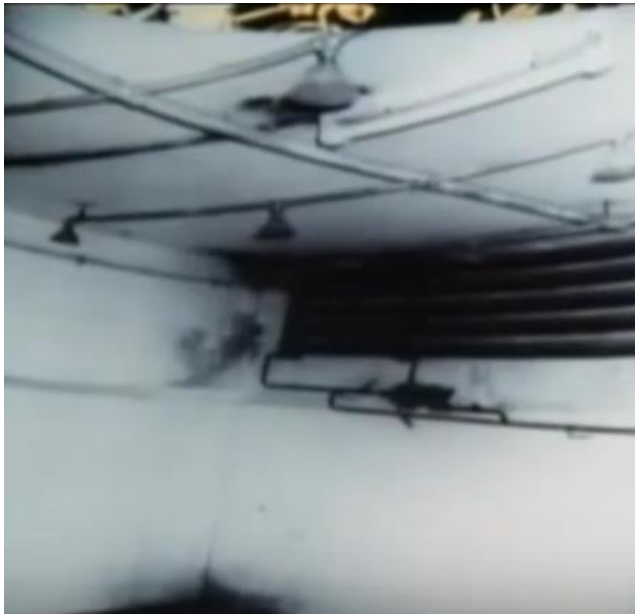


Fig. 20 Archival photograph from the gas chambers at Mauthausen, used in TV mini-series *Holocaust* to illustrate fake shower system in gas chamber at Auschwitz. NBC (producer), 1978, *Holocaust* [TV mini-series]. USA.

Dorf furthermore explains: "They wait in a line outside, and by now they have undressed" as he shows a slide of an archival picture taken at Auschwitz-Birkenau of piles of the victims' belongings left behind on the unloading ramp. On the right hand side is a row of boxcars, and in the background are trucks onto which the belongings are loaded. Dorf continues, as he switches slides: "Their clothing is sorted, all the laborers are Jewish – special teams."



Fig. 21 Archival photograph used in TV mini-series *Holocaust* showing piles of victims' belongings at Auschwitz. NBC (producer), 1978, *Holocaust* [TV mini-series]. USA.

Dorf switches slides and explains: "The selection process, those who work to the right, those for special handling to the left."



Fig. 22 Archival photograph used in TV mini-series *Holocaust* showing a selection at the ramp at Birkenau, summer 1944. NBC (producer), 1978, *Holocaust* [TV mini-series]. USA.



Fig. 23 Archival photograph used in TV mini-series *Holocaust* showing a selection at the ramp at Birkenau, summer 1944. NBC (producer), 1978, *Holocaust* [TV mini-series]. USA.



Fig. 24 Archival photograph used in TV mini-series *Holocaust* showing women selected for work after getting their hair cut off, Birkenau, summer 1944. NBC (producer), 1978, *Holocaust* [TV mini-series]. USA.



Fig. 25 Archival photograph used in TV mini-series *Holocaust* showing deportees waiting at the ramp in Birkenau, summer 1944. NBC (producer), 1978, *Holocaust* [TV mini-series]. USA.

Dorf continues to explain the process “inside one of the chambers before the Zyklon B is dropped”, however, no picture is shown. And furthermore, “during” (the gassing) – again, with no picture shown – and finally “afterwards”. Dorf continues to change slides, and the last image shows an archival picture secretly taken by a member of the *Sonderkommando*, likely from the door of the gas chamber, showing the burning of the bodies in Birkenau in large pits.



Fig. 26 Archival photograph used in TV mini-series *Holocaust* showing the burning of bodies in open pits in Birkenau. NBC (producer), 1978, *Holocaust* [TV mini-series]. USA.

Dorf continues: “special teams go in, and remove the bodies, removing teeth, cutting hair” as he shows a photograph of crematoria ovens.



Fig. 27 Archival photograph used in TV mini-series *Holocaust* showing crematoria ovens. NBC (producer), 1978, *Holocaust* [TV mini-series]. USA.

In the next sequence, the viewer sees the ‘real Auschwitz’. ‘Auschwitz’ in the TV mini-series consists of architectural structures built of grey stone with barbed wire along the top of high walls. In the background are watchtowers; the camp grounds are interspersed with patches of green, mowed grass. The name “Auschwitz”, which is briefly blended in at the bottom of the screen, informs the viewers of the location.



Fig. 28 The Auschwitz camp in the TV mini-series *Holocaust*; the series was filmed at the concentration camp Mauthausen. The structure of the watch tower in the background in the context with the gateway resembles to some extent the Birkenau gate. NBC (producer), 1978, screenshot from *Holocaust* [TV mini-series]. USA.



Fig. 29 Crematoria ovens at Auschwitz in the TV mini-series *Holocaust*. NBC (producer), 1978, screenshot from *Holocaust* [TV mini-series]. USA.



Fig. 30 The fake shower heads at Auschwitz in the TV mini-series *Holocaust*. NBC (producer), 1978, screenshot from *Holocaust* [TV mini-series]. USA.



Fig. 31 Karl passes through the gate *Arbeit macht frei* as he is deported to Auschwitz. NBC (producer), 1978, screenshot from *Holocaust* [TV mini-series]. USA.

As Karl is deported to Auschwitz he passes through an arched gate stating “Arbeit macht frei”. It is not clear from the film if Karl passes this gate as he is leaving Theresienstadt or entering Auschwitz.



Fig. 32 Women inmates wearing prisoner uniforms in a wooden barracks with bunk beds at Auschwitz. NBC (producer), 1978, screenshot from *Holocaust* [TV mini-series]. USA.

In Auschwitz, Berta and Josef are in separate wooden barracks and are wearing the striped prisoner uniform. Some of the women have cropped hair, while others still have their long hair.

The main elements we can gather from the representation of 'Auschwitz' in the TV mini-series *Holocaust* are: as Nazi genocidal ideologies were gradually implemented into policies, the mass murder of the European Jews increased. Jews were killed in large numbers by shooting in the East, but in an unorganized fashion. In order to carry out the mass murder in a more organized fashion, a number of camps were created in the East where Jews were systematically killed by shooting or with carbon monoxide gas. Finally, the camp Auschwitz was created, where the vast majority of Jews were murdered by Zyklon B gas and their bodies were burned in crematoria ovens. The camp 'Auschwitz' is one location, which was at some point expanded to twice its size. The camp is located in the country side and consists of a architectural structures built of grey stones, surrounded by tall walls with barbed wire and watch towers; there may be an arched gate stating "Arbeit macht frei" through which inmates pass; at Auschwitz, inmates are housed in wooden barracks with bunk beds; the camp has a gas chamber with fake shower heads through which Zyklon B is released; before entering the fake shower room, the inmates have to undress; their belongings are collected and the corpses are burnt in crematoria ovens by special work commandos.

We can thus see how specific structural features as well as archival images from the actual site of Auschwitz-Birkenau were selected and assembled in the TV series to create 'Auschwitz'. The built environment of 'Auschwitz' refers to the architectural structures of Auschwitz I, although those buildings consist of red brick. The specific view of the watchtower and the entrance gate at 'Auschwitz' in Fig. 24 may be perceived to resemble the main gate at Birkenau. The arched gate "Arbeit macht frei" is a feature of Auschwitz I. Although wooden bunk beds were used in Auschwitz I and Birkenau, the combination of a wooden barracks and wooden bunk beds likely refers to Birkenau. The gas chamber with the fake shower heads, and the use of Zyklon B refers to the gas chambers at Birkenau. The crematoria ovens were used at Birkenau, however, specifically during the summer of 1944, bodies were frequently burned in open pits, as seen in Fig. 22. By using the name 'Auschwitz' to refer to the camp, and by omitting the name Birkenau altogether, the camp is represented as only one specific site. The use of actual archival photographs, which were taken at Birkenau (and were integrated into the fictitious narrative), lend a degree of 'truth' to *Holocaust*: the archival images and footage which were taken at the

liberation of the camps and used as evidence during the Nuremberg trials had become iconographic “signposts” (Zelizer, 2001).

## **II. Analysis of the site Birkenau**

The site of the State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau is geographically a vast, diverse space; the material remains at Auschwitz I and Birkenau are numerous, with complex histories and each deserves a thoughtful, thorough analysis. For the purpose of this chapter, I limited myself to specific aspects of the site of Birkenau. I am not ascribing more importance to some structures or objects over others. My main objective is conduct an object-based analysis of specific iconographic items and to explore the context and discourses of these items. I will begin my analysis of the ramp and railway tracks at Birkenau by first exploring the representation of this aspect of the extermination camp in the TV mini-series *Holocaust*; second, I will discuss the ramp and the railway tracks at the present-day Birkenau through an object- and materiality focused approach.

### **1. Transit and Transport in the TV mini-series *Holocaust***

Transport (of the victims) is represented in the TV mini-series *Holocaust* primarily through two forms: by railway and on foot. The first scene in which railroad transportation is featured is the deportation of Dr. Josef Weiss to Poland. The viewer sees columns of people carrying luggage entering a train station, while a loudspeaker voice urges passengers to board the train. A train whistle blows at intervals. Berta, Anna, Rudi and Inga are all accompanying Josef to say good-bye. While Berta clings to her husband’s arm in tears, he seeks to reassure his family and expresses an optimistic view of the future. In the following sequence the viewer sees a border crossing in the countryside, and caption informs that this is the German-Polish border. A column of people walks along a country road towards the crossing, carrying their luggage. Josef Weiss is amongst the group of people, and he is met by his brother Moses on the Polish side of

the border. Together, they walk along with the long column of people slowly moving along the endless-seeming road which cuts through meadows and agricultural fields.

In a following sequence, a train has just arrived at a Warsaw train station. The viewer sees a locomotive, which releases plumes of white steam and a whistle blows. Masses of people are departing from a long row of boxcars, and walk along a platform, carrying luggage. Dr. Josef Weiss, who now resides in the Warsaw ghetto is at the train station to meet the new deportees, encounters Rabbi Koch who says it is a miracle that they survived. He then states that "there is a dead infant in that car, the mother won't leave it." The viewer sees a young woman sitting in the corner of the boxcar, cradling her infant and singing to it. As Dr. Weiss approaches the young woman to take her into the city, she begins to scream. It is not until she is approached by an older woman who promises to take care of her and the baby, that the young mother agrees to leave the car. As Josef walks along the unloading platform, the viewer sees a desolate, poor and industrial area.

Soon, Berta follows Josef to Warsaw, and he meets her at the train station. Again, the viewer sees a locomotive, billowing white steam, a row of boxcar, and masses of people getting off the train, carrying their luggage.

The Jewish council of the Warsaw ghetto is being told by an SS officer that deportations from the ghetto to family camps in Russia will begin the next day. 6,000 Jews will have to gather at the rail station every day.

In a following scene the viewer witnesses a secret meeting between a member of the Jewish resistance (Moses Weiss) and of the Polish resistance which takes place at the rail station. It is dark, and a locomotive pulling boxcars has just entered the station. The Polish resistance fighter, who apparently secretly rode on that train, tells Moses that the trains are not going to Russia, but instead they are going to Treblinka. He elaborates that this is a death camp. When the Jews leave the train they have to go into a building which they are told is for delousing. The victims are gassed at a rate of 6,000 a day.

In a further sequence, the viewer sees masses of people gathering at the Warsaw train station. Many of them are sitting on their luggage. Bertha and Josef Weiss are supposed to be deported

to a family camp in Russia. As they are boarding the train the camera moves to a young German soldier who tells the train conductor: “Treblinka is full, you’re going to Auschwitz”. The boxcars are sealed, the train whistles, the wheels begin to turn, and the train leaves the station. Faces are looking out of the tiny windows. Plumes of white steam drift along the train as it gains speed.

After Rudi parts from partisan fighters in the wake of the Sobibor uprising, he follows the railway tracks towards the West.

In the TV mini-series *Holocaust* the central role of the railway system in the implementation and the experience of the Holocaust is clearly represented. The experience of transportation and deportation in *Holocaust* reflects the increasing impact of the genocidal policy of the Nazis on Jewish lives, beginning with a displacement from their home, family, social position to being moved to ghettos and to camps to death (Gigliotti, 2010, p. 13). Train stations and platforms were usually the beginning of the transport by train and deportees were often forced to spend hours or even days in those locations. The central role of the Warsaw train station, the masses of people either getting off trains or boarding trains, waiting at the station represents the extent to which these structures shaped the experiences of the deportees. The experience of the transportation itself – the conditions in the trains – was profoundly traumatizing (Gigliotti, 2010), and for many deportees ended in death. This aspect is eluded to in the portrayal of the young mother who refuses to give up her deceased infant. *Holocaust* draws from, recreates and perpetuates specific images and perceptions about transit and transportation: transportation is represented through images of locomotives pulling long rows of boxcars, train whistles and plumes of steam, people crammed into the boxcars and being transported to either ghettos or camps. Yet, transportation is represented as an “in-between” experience between the life in the ghetto and the finality of the arrival at the camp. *Holocaust* thus creates and contributes to perceptions and narratives about the role of transportation and transit during the Final Solution in popular culture representations.

## **2. The unloading ramp and the train tracks at Birkenau**

I selected the unloading ramp and train tracks at Birkenau for my analysis for two reasons: first, the ramp at Birkenau and the railway tracks have assumed a central role in Holocaust memorialization and iconography. Second, the complex history of the ramp and the tracks are commonly misrepresented or simplified in Holocaust narratives and their role has perhaps been taken for granted. Visitors to Birkenau may be inclined to not attach any further meaning to the railway tracks or the ramp beyond the fact that they were the arrival point of the deportees in the camp.

Transportation and mobility – either on foot or by train – were key elements of the implementation of the Final Solution from the perspective of the perpetrators as well as in the victims’ experiences: first, it has been firmly established that the railroads were an indispensable part of the Final Solution (Hilberg, 1998); through the critical allocation of resources laws and measures were implemented which progressed from segregation to expulsion to relocation and finally to murder (Gigliotti, 2010, p. 4). Second, the lives of the victims were increasingly shaped by the implementation of such policies in that they endured ongoing displacements, and suffered in a “permanent state of existential and residential crisis” (Gigliotti, 2010, p. 13). The tracks leading up the ramp were the last stretch of an excruciating journey and the ramp was physically the last stop for deportees before they were herded into the gas chambers. The ramps were not simply the location at which the trauma of the transport ended, but the arrival at the station “represented termination, separation and powerlessness” (Gigliotti, 2010, p. 28). The ramp was the deportees’ first impression of the camp when the doors of the boxcars were unsealed; before anybody had time to orient themselves, they were met by armored SS officers who terrorized the deportees with shouting and brutality. Men, women and children had to line up in rows of five, and underwent selection, during which an SS physician decided over immediate death in the gas chamber or life in the camp as either a ‘guinea pig’ for medical experiments or for forced labor under excruciating conditions. The traumatic events which took place at the ramp at Birkenau has fused the memories of survivors who underwent selection with the iconographic imagery of the Birkenau main gate, the looming crematoria chimneys and the terrified masses of people. As the selections were carried out under extreme time pressure to keep everything

moving along 'smoothly', involuntary separations took place as families and couples caught a last glance or gesture (Hoffmann, 1998, p. 286).

As we consider how the railway tracks and the ramp were designed and built in such a way that they facilitated a set of consequences, we can see these structures encompassed purposes beyond the common uses of tracks and unloading ramps (Winner, 1980, p.125). I will illustrate the relationship between the racial ideology and the materiality of the railroad tracks and the ramp at Birkenau by drawing from Winner's exploration of the role of technology, Humphrey's analysis of the relationship between ideology and architectural structures and finally through excerpts of survivor testimonies of their arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau. An analysis of the histories of the tracks and the unloading area does allow us to understand how these structures were designed to achieve a particular social effect and had implicit political purposes (Winner, 1980, p. 124). Charlesworth argues that in the historical processes of the Holocaust, it is precisely the permanence of structures that enable to potentially 'speak' of the event they witnessed. Yet, they also speak of the processes involved which translate plans into physical realities. According to Winner, systems of modern material culture can embody specific forms of power; this perspective is confirmed by Humphrey, who suggests that "ideology is not found only in texts and speeches; it is a political practice that is also manifest in constructing material objects" (p. 39). Applying this approach to the railroad tracks and the ramp at Birkenau, we clearly see how these structures and the system of the railroad are a physical exercise of the power of the Third Reich as well as arrangements of specific technological systems to settle an issue – in this case the 'Jewish Problem'.

The processes of mass exterminations at Birkenau occurred in phases, depending on further implementations of policies, availability of technical installations and changes in killing techniques as well as logistical plans (Steinbacher, 2005, p. 96). The general area of the town Oświęcim became a railway junction in 1900, and, at the time of German occupation, had become a strategically important railway station (Steinbacher, 2005, p. 9, 15). For the purposes of Auschwitz I as a concentration camp as well as for the operations of IG Farben, the railway connection was crucial.

The first unloading platform – or ramp – was adjacent to Auschwitz I. It was in use throughout the time of the camp operation and was mainly utilized for arrivals to the main camp. Until 1942, before IG Farben built a sub-camp near its site, prisoners who worked as forced laborers, boarded a train at this platform that took them to the worksite.

As constructions began for Birkenau in the fall of 1941, and larger numbers of prisoners would be transported to Auschwitz I as well as Birkenau, a second ramp was built on the grounds of the Oświęcim freight station. This ramp (*Alte Judenrampe*) was located in an open field approximately half-way between Auschwitz I and Birkenau. A spur was built off the freight yard and initially a wooden construction was built as a platform. However, it collapsed under the weight of the large numbers of deportees and was replaced by a concrete platform. Parallel to the tracks were a number of brick buildings used as storehouses.



Fig. 33 The *Alte Judenrampe* outside of the Birkenau camp. Allied aerial image, June 26<sup>th</sup> 1944. Online. ><http://www.kiga-berlin.org/Dokumentationen/auschwitz/Pages/fo26.html><. Accessed Jan. 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2016.



Fig. 34 Location of the *Alte Judenrampe*; the Birkenau site is visible on the left side. Online. >google.maps.com<. Accessed Jan. 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2016.

It is at this ramp that the majority of transports of Jews arrived between 1942 and 1944, as well as transports of the Roma people beginning in February 1943. This change in procedures coincides with the Wannsee conference, which took place in January 1942. At this meeting, SS officials decided on the implementation of *Operation Reinhard*, which aimed to systematically murder Jews in death camps in occupied Europe. Furthermore, this date also marked a new stage in the way concentration camps functioned: the Jewish deportees would be utilized for slave labor in Germany's war economy. As a consequence, selections would take place in order to determine who was fit enough to work. The two worlds of the concentration camps and the extermination camps met at Auschwitz-Birkenau. A transport of Slovakian Jews was the first to undergo selection at the *Alte Judenrampe* on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1942. The selections which took place at Birkenau set this ramp apart from the ramps at the Operation Reinhard camps: at the extermination camps, no selections took place as nobody was supposed to live in these places for extended periods of time (Hoffmann, 1998). Instead, individuals were selected randomly to 'process' the new arrivals, sort their belongings, burn the bodies and dispose of the ashes.

Prior to the arrival of transports at Auschwitz-Birkenau the area was secured by SS officers. When trains arrived at night, sometimes up to five at the same time, the ramp was always brightly lit. With the first arrivals of deportation trains destined to Birkenau, special work commandos were created – *Rampenkommandos* – in order to clear the personal belongings of

the deportees from the ramp and take them to the sorting area inside the camp (Hoffmann, 1998). From survivor testimony, we can gather a sense of the disorientation and foreboding experienced by the deportees upon arrival. Susan Beer describes that she “disembarked at a nondescript little train station named Oświęcim” from where she and the other deportees were marched to Birkenau where the “landscape was utterly barren; no grass, no flowers, no trees, no birds, no sign of life” (Gigliotti, 2010, p. 178). Others “saw fire from far away” (Gigliotti, 2010, p. 186).



Fig. 35 Archival photograph of the *Alte Judenrampe* half-way between Auschwitz I and Birkenau. Online. ><http://www.wollheim-memorial.de/en/deportationen/><. Accessed Nov. 12, 2015.



Fig. 36 Memorial at the *Alte Judenrampe* present day. Online. ><http://www.wollheim-memorial.de/en/deportationen/><. Accessed Nov. 12, 2015.

By 1943, Auschwitz-Birkenau had become the center of the mass extermination as some of the other death camps further east were abandoned, and crematoria II, III, IV and V were built to

increase gassing capacity. While deportation trains still arrived at the *Alte Judenrampe*, and selections took place here, planning was underway to extend a spur into the Birkenau camp to facilitate the faster transportation of deportees selected for immediate death straight to the gas chambers (see Fig. 15). The railway tracks leading straight into the camp omitted the necessity to march the masses of new arrivals across the open fields to the camp; instead, the deportees would now be transported almost directly to the gas chambers. Construction for the *Neue Judenrampe* inside the Birkenau camp began on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1943. A special work group – *Arbeitskommando Gleisbau* – was formed of initially 102 prisoners. In March 1944, Heinrich Himmler ordered the extermination of the Hungarian Jews, and by May Rudolf Höss returned to Auschwitz. In order to accommodate the expected transports from Hungary, Höss ordered a faster completion of the railway connection. On May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1944 the spur was not fully completed but the first transport from Hungary arrived at the camp at 1pm, and all workers of the *Gleisbaukommando* have to leave the site (Hoffmann, 1998, p. 281). While the unloading of the deportees and their subsequent selection and murder took place inside the Birkenau camp, the concrete platform at the *Alte Judenrampe* was being dismantled. The next day, the *Gleisbaukommando* was increased to 553 members and by May 19<sup>th</sup>, 1944 all construction work was completed: a three-tiered spur led through the Birkenau main gate into the camp and ran parallel to a large empty area with a width of 10 meters. The railway tracks extended as far as crematoria II and III.



Fig. 37 Aerial photograph taken by allied pilot. The unloading ramp and the crematoria are visible. A transport has arrived and deportees are walked to the crematoria. Online. ><http://auschwitz.org/en/gallery/historical-pictures-and-documents/extirmination,11.html><. Accessed Jan. 23rd, 2016.

The deportees would anticipate their arrival at Birkenau by catching glimpses through the tiny windows of the boxcars, the slowing of the speed of the train and the sound of the whistle. Survivor Olga Lengyel describes her experience inside the car as they train pulled into the camp: bright lights illuminated the unloading ramp at night. “I saw a veritable forest of barbed wire, which was illuminated at intervals by powerful search lights .... where were we and what fate awaited us?” (Gigliotti, 2010, p. 178). Recollections of the arrival at the camps reflect the confusing, overwhelming impressions and experiences of the deportees as the doors opened: the deportees had a first opportunity to connect their experiences in the boxcar with a visual impression of the landscape they encountered, but the emotional impact of the terror of the arrival was overpowering. Survivor Ernst Michel describes that he

“heard voices yelling and the train came to a halt. I heard dogs barking. Angry dogs. Dogs that meant trouble...the beatings began as we jumped from the train...as far as I could see there were endless rows of cattle cars being emptied. The old, the infirm, men, women, children, babies, create a seething mass of inhumanity. It was mayhem.”  
(Gigliotti, 2010, p. 188)

Elie Wiesel has described that the loss of the “cherished objects we had brought with us this far”, which he was forced to leave behind in the train, also represents the surrender of any illusions (Wiesel, 2006, p. 26).

The complex history of the railway tracks and the ramp at Birkenau can perhaps be best disseminated through a careful analysis of the relationship between technical construction and purpose. Detlef Hoffmann (1998) illustrates how – from the point of view of regulated architectural structures – the platform and the railway tracks at Birkenau are a paradox. Railway architecture has specific requirements for the accommodation of passenger traffic versus unloading ramps, which are usually constructed to facilitate the loading and unloading of heavy freight, cattle, vehicles and military. The width and length of passenger platforms is usually based on the expected volume of railway traffic. The design of the ramp and railway tracks at Birkenau resemble the rationally planned unloading area of a private, industrial complex, who regularly ships or receives products and raw materials: the considerable width of the ramp (10 meters) between the tracks – which would accommodate the loading processes of large goods – and the overall length of the tracks were clearly designed to facilitate smooth processes. The design of the area, which did not include passenger platforms, suggests that this was not a structure intended for human travelers. Yet, we know that this was precisely the purpose of the ramp and the railway tracks. The logic of the architectural structure indicates that this area was built to accommodate the ‘processing’ of large numbers of people as freight; no equipment, such as stairs or rails, was available to facilitate the unloading of the train. While being terrorized by the armed SS officers, the deportees were forced to jump off the boxcars and the distance was at times up to 1-meter high. For many of the exhausted and disoriented young children, the sick, the weak and the elderly, this meant serious injuries or death.

In order to ensure that the continual arrival of new transports, their selection and the subsequent mass murder would be as quick and efficient as possible, the SS created special *Rampenkommandos* to move humans, bodies and belongings through the camp complex.

The ramp and the railway tracks at Birkenau represent the pivot point between Nazi ideology, the social system of the concentration camps and the processes of genocide. The coordinated planning of the expansion of Birkenau in conjunction with the creation of new unloading areas and extensions of railway tracks as well as the systematic selection illustrate the planned extermination of the European Jews. The railway tracks were only planned and built in the context with the gas chambers and the crematoria. The ramps were built specifically for the process of selection and for the convenient collection of the deportees' belongings. These material structures, which were designed and built as a result of racial ideologies as well as a way of ordering human activity, established a framework of structure and order for the transactions surrounding the arrival of deportees, such as the selections, the separation of families, the collecting and removal of the victims' personal belongings, and the transit to the gas chambers. With an increasing centralization of the mass killings and a factory-like system of murdering people while also disposing of their bodies, the transportation infrastructure at Birkenau changed in order to facilitate the ideology of the Final Solution. In addition, in order for the execution of the Nazi ideologies to be successful, an extensive coordinated effort of correlating timetables in conjunction with financial considerations was necessary to enable the transportation of large numbers of humans across the European continent. Thus, a technology, which allowed all-weather transportation across extensive geographical areas, became the structural framework for ideology and genocide

The iconographic imagery of the Birkenau camp – a train driving through the arched gateway of the main gate, a locomotive stopping at the ramp, deportees climbing from the boxcars – emerged as a result of artistic photographs. In the 1960s, photographers participated in a competition for a memorial at Birkenau and the increasingly dramatized images drew public attention to the site. Photographs assembled specific features of the site and effects: for example, the photographer Adam Kackzowski took a picture of the main gate and the extending

railway track is partially shrouded by a layer of fog (or smoke?), suggesting a continual stream of deportees moving towards the crematoria – symbolized by the fog.



Fig. 38 Photograph by Adam Kaczkowski in Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1970 (Kaczkowski and Smolen, 1970).

The photographer Adam Bujak (Hoffmann, 1992, p. 290 – 292) published a photograph of the main gate overshadowed by darkened clouds, which appear to elude to the plumes of smoke rising from the crematoria chimneys.



Fig. 39 Photograph by Adam Bujak in Hoffmann, 1998, p. 301.

Over the following decades increasing numbers of photographs were publicized and distributed, featuring the main gate at night, illuminated from the inside or the building against a sunset – creating the association of the architectural structure with the fire of the crematoria (Hoffmann, 1998, p. 301). These photographs in association with filmic images and survivor testimony about their experiences at the ramp contributed to the emergence of the Birkenau main gate and the ramp inside the camp as iconographic unifying the complex histories of the multiple ramps.

### III. 'Auschwitz' as a translocal assemblage

Applying the concept of translocal assemblage (McFarlane, 2011) to the site of Auschwitz-Birkenau, considering its history; its geographical environment; its visual representation in the TV mini-series *Holocaust*; and finally in the larger context of Holocaust memorialization, a complex web of relationships and connections becomes visible.

First, the highly complex history of the camp complex clearly poses a representational challenge. Only a nuanced, comprehensive analysis can potentially elude the multitude of changes, experiences, meanings and discourses of the historical site. Thus, any visual

representation of the historical context of the Auschwitz-Birkenau site will always be compromised by focusing on specific phases, places and lives. Second, the vastness of the camp complex, including its different geographical primary and sub camps, the different structural environments as well as the different purposes can easily create confusion for an audience not very familiar with the site. Therefore, a visual representation of the geography of the camp would likely draw from specific key aspects of the entire camp complex.

In *Holocaust*, we thus see a translocal assemblage: certain iconographic elements of the camp's history and geography are combined in order to create an imaginary camp. First, the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp complex is represented as one specific place. This is reinforced through the labeling of 'Auschwitz' as one place only, instead of referring to several places. Auschwitz is depicted as consisting of a built environment; this representation relates to the architectural structures at Auschwitz I. In reality, the buildings at Auschwitz I are brick barracks, and the camp is surrounded by rows of barbed wire, while 'Auschwitz' in *Holocaust* consists of a fortress-like structure built of grey stone with tall walls. In the film, the victims enter 'Auschwitz' by passing through the arched gateway stating "Arbeit macht frei". This reference point is also drawn from Auschwitz I; in reality, the vast majority of Jewish victims would have never seen this sign, as they were directly transported to the Birkenau camp. Yet, the sign is one of the most iconographic objects of the entire camp complex. The wooden barracks depicted in *Holocaust* are drawn from Birkenau, as the majority of prisoner housing in this camp consisted of primitive wooden structures, whereas Auschwitz I had brick buildings. The striped prisoner uniform worn by camp inmates in the film refers to the entire camp complex, as well as to other concentration or extermination camps, as this was the standard clothing. However, the vast majority of deportees to Auschwitz-Birkenau were transported directly to the gas chambers, and never received a uniform. The gas chamber and the crematoria ovens in *Holocaust* are likely a reference to the crematoria/gas chambers at Birkenau. Even though the gas chamber and crematoria in Auschwitz I were used, the technologically more advanced crematoria in Birkenau 'processed' the majority of victims. The killing of the inmates at Auschwitz in *Holocaust* is performed through Zyklon B gas. In reality – although Zyklon B indeed became the SS's preferred method of killing at Birkenau – inmates

at the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex died in many different ways, depending on the time and the length of their imprisonment, in which camp they were incarcerated, their age and gender etc. Finally, 'Auschwitz' is represented as a particularly Jewish experience, while in reality many other groups of victims were murdered at the camp complex and in the context of the Holocaust as well. Hence, historical timelines and events as well as geographic distances are crossed, in order to create a visual assemblage of meaning.

An analysis of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp in a broader context through the lens of translocal assemblage illustrates the complex web of relations and connections in which the site exists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The camp complex of Auschwitz-Birkenau which was created in the context of National Socialist ideology ascribed entirely new meaning to already existing places. Specific aspects of the topography of the location were key elements in the establishment of the vast camp complex, but it was particularly the centrality as well as the well-established railway connection which made the site appealing for the purposes of industrialized genocide. Through the railroad connection Auschwitz-Birkenau was embedded in the vast network of ghettos and camps; it also became a central part of the European railway systems, along which victims from across the European continent were transported to this site in southern Poland, while their possessions were shipped back to the German Reich along similar routes. Thus, multiple layers and dimensions of connections existed which span across all of Europe. A relatively large number of survivors were liberated and were able to give testimony at trials. Photographs and footage taken at Auschwitz-Birkenau upon liberation were published after the trials, and have since become iconographic representations of the Holocaust, with the "Arbeit macht frei" sign in Auschwitz I and the main gate and the railway tracks at Birkenau being amongst the most recognized images. For example, the two archival images below (Fig. 34 and 35) were taken after liberation in 1945:



Fig. 40 Photograph of main gate and tracks leading into the camp, Birkenau, 1945. Online.  
>[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bundesarchiv\\_Bild\\_175-04413,\\_KZ\\_Auschwitz,\\_Einfahrt.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bundesarchiv_Bild_175-04413,_KZ_Auschwitz,_Einfahrt.jpg)<. Accessed Jan. 4, 2016.



Fig. 41 Auschwitz I after liberation, 1945: inmates leaving the camp. Online.  
><http://collections.yadvashem.org/photosarchive/en-us/photos.html><. Accessed Jan. 4, 2016.

The same iconographic images are used as reference points or to create context, for example in cinematic representations or museums. For example, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has a photographic mural of the Birkenau main gate and also references the brick structures of the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex architecturally. Furthermore, the sign “Arbeit macht frei” is placed at the beginning of the section of the exhibit featuring the camps.



Fig. 38 Photographic mural, main gate, Auschwitz II (Birkenau); 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, USHMM, Washington, D.C. Source: ><http://ushmm.org><. Accessed Jan. 22, 2015.



Fig. 42 Architectural feature, brick, metal, Hall of Witness, USHMM, Washington, D.C. Source: ><http://ushmm.org><. Accessed Jan. 22, 2015.



Fig. 43 Sign "Arbeit macht frei", USHMM, Washington, D.C. Source: ><http://ushmm.org><. Accessed Jan. 22, 2015.

The documentary *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann (1985) as well as the cinematic film *Schindler's List* by Steven Spielberg (1993) use the iconographic image of the Birkenau main gate with the railway tracks leading into the camp and the ramp.



Fig. 44 Birkenau ramp inside the camp and main gate with railway tracks. Claude Lanzmann (director), 1985, screenshot from *Shoah* [documentary]. France.



Fig. 45 Birkenau main gate with train arriving at ramp inside camp. Steven Spielberg (director), 1993, screenshot from *Schindler's List* [cinematic film]. Universal Pictures, USA.

The image of the Birkenau main gate, the railway tracks and the ramp inside the camp have become well-recognized images of the Holocaust. What particularly struck me was the imagery of smoke or steam, and occasionally flames or fire, as symbolic of the crematoria. The image of steam (emerging from the locomotive) emerges throughout the TV mini-series *Holocaust*, and the same symbolic image is used in the film *Shoah*. Through the combination of this symbolic feature with specific aspects of the Birkenau site a direct linkage has been created between the arrival of trains *inside* the Birkenau camp and the subsequent murder and burning of the bodies in the crematoria. Yet, as the dissemination of the camp's complex history as well as its representation has demonstrated, the experiences of the deportees at Auschwitz-Birkenau

correlated with specific developments and time periods. The layers of multi-directional and diverse histories, meaning, and purposes of the site of Auschwitz-Birkenau, which continue to evolve with passing time, are difficult to capture fully and satisfactorily. Yet, in order to illustrate an aspect of the complex web of connections the concept of translocal assemblage is particularly well suited to explore this site.

## Chapter 3:

### Płaszów– *Schindler's List*

#### Introduction

Previously, I have analyzed the cinematic or documentary representation (*Shoah; Holocaust*) of the Holocaust memorial sites Treblinka and Auschwitz-Birkenau. One of the aspects I explored in each of the two sites was the role of ‘material witnesses’ at each location (Charlesworth, 2004); for example, I elaborated on historical structures at Auschwitz-Birkenau, and the memorial at Treblinka which serves as a symbolic witness.

In this paper I will further explore the role of ‘material witnesses’ as well as the production of witnesses through films and movies (Torchin, 2012). Photographs and documentary film taken at the liberation of the concentration and extermination camps provided documentary evidence of the genocidal crimes at the Nuremberg trials after the end of the Second World War. At the same time, these visual representations allowed the public to ‘witness’ the historical events. Through the perpetual use and repurposing of specific iconographic images by mass-media, an iconography of the Holocaust began to emerge (Torchin, 2012; Zelizer, 1997). The significant link between iconographic images of the Holocaust and the notion of ‘witnessing’ is particularly evident in the making and the imagery of Steven Spielberg’s blockbuster movie *Schindler’s List* (1993). Spielberg’s movie is remarkable in that it provided (and provides) an experience of “retro-active witnessing” (Liss, 1998, p. xi) to millions of viewers across international boundaries. Furthermore, the film contributed to international travel to Holocaust-related sites in Eastern Europe and generated new forms of tourism. For example, since the release of the movie a surge of tourism-based economic activity began to emerge in Kraków: specific tours were (and are) offered to visit sites where the historical events took place as well as locations where the movie was filmed. When Steven Spielberg filmed the movie in locations in Kraków, he chose the site of the old Jewish Quarter in Kraków – Kazimierz – over the rather impoverished suburb Podgórze, where the actual Jewish Ghetto was created during the 1940s. Spielberg preferred the “cinematic picturesque” flair of the Kazimierz streets (Pollock, 2003, p. 176). Due to the more centrally located area of Kazimierz (whereas Podgórze

is located across the Vistula river) and remembering the persuasive images from the film, visitors tend to be more interested in the locations where the movie was filmed, rather than in the actual site of historical events. The experience of seeing the actual locations, which the visitor 'recognize' or 'remember' from the movie in Kazimierz, provides an authentic emotional experience – the visitor is not simply looking at a building or an object, but an internal process of remembering is taking place. Drawing on Charlesworth's Torchin's and Liss' explorations of witnessing, I argue that participants of "Schindler Tours" thus experience multiple forms of witnessing: first, the permanent structures in the Kazimierz area 'witnessed' the era during which the events of the Holocaust took place – thus, they provide a tangible link with the past. Second, the film *Schindler's List* played a key role in the production of witnesses by allowing the audience to observe the (re-enacted) events. Third, by remembering specific locations from the movie and recognizing them in the contemporary city of Kraków (and juxtaposing them with events depicted in the film) Schindler Tour participants have the experience of remembering the 'real' past.

I suggest that a similar process, yet with a disappointing outcome, takes place if Schindler Tour participants visit the site of the former concentration camp Płaszów. The actual Płaszów site does not resemble what visitors remember from the movie set in the film; in fact, the contrast between the recreated Płaszów site in the film – with its watch towers, barbed wire, barracks and the prominent villa of Amon Göth – and the real Płaszów – a vast green space of rolling hills – may be confusing and disappointing. It is possible that the disappointment of visitors is a reason that tour guides do not actively promote a visit to the Płaszów site or dedicate no more than ten minutes to the visit (Charlesworth, 2004; Charlesworth and Addis; my own research at Płaszów, 2012).

For the purpose of this paper, I will analyse the site of the former concentration camp Płaszów in Kraków, Poland and the cinematic representation of the site in the film *Schindler's List* by Steven Spielberg (1993) as a case study. First, I will demonstrate by applying the concept of translocal assemblage (McFarlane, 2011) how the highly successful movie created indeed a complex, multi-dimensional web of connections across national and cultural boundaries and

historical eras; second, I will explore how specific persuasive images of the film have facilitated a translocal assemblage in which the imaginary Płaszów of the film outshines the real Płaszów. I will analyze one specific aspect of the real Płaszów site – the Red House – and contrast and compare it with the imaginary counterpart in the film – the commandant’s villa. I suggest that the concept of translocal assemblage can be applied in two ways: first, it allows us to illustrate manifold interconnections which are created between remote locations and events; second, it furthermore enables us to explore how specific historical stories become more visible than others (Trouillot, 1995).

In Section I, I will first provide a historical summary of the Płaszów concentration camp. Second, I will provide an overview of the Płaszów site as it exists in present day Kraków, Poland. Third, I will explore how the Płaszów site is represented in the film *Schindler’s List* by Steven Spielberg. In Section II, I will analyse a specific aspect of the Płaszów site: the villa of the camp commandant. This house features prominently in the film, and it still exists at the contemporary site. In the summary section, I will discuss the network of dynamic and complex relationships and discourses which have developed and continue to emerge between the cinematic representations of the site, audience and visitor responses, and the tangible and intangible aspects of the contemporary Płaszów site.

## **I. Overview of the site of the former concentration camp Płaszów**

### **1. Historical Summary of Płaszów**

Since the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the historical district of Kazimierz in the Old Town of Kraków, Poland, had been a primarily Jewish quarter. At the beginning of the Second World War, Kraków had a population of 60,000 Jews. By March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1941 the German occupying forces relocated the Jews into the newly established Kraków ghetto, which was across the Vistula river in the district Podgórze, approximately 4km south-east to Kraków’s Rynek Główny, the city’s central square. Construction of the *Arbeitslager* (labor camp) Płaszów, also in Podgórze, in began in October 1942: the location was chosen as it was in a relatively secluded location and in close proximity to the Kraków ghetto, a nearby railway station, industrial plants and quarries. The camp was

built on the premises of two Jewish cemeteries: the new Jewish cemetery of the Kraków Jewish community on ul. Abrahama 3, and the old Jewish cemetery at ul. Jerozolimska 25. The cemeteries were razed to the ground, and the gravestones used for building purposes. Hills were leveled, roads, water supply systems, and a sewage system were constructed by slave laborers. Barracks were built on top of graves. The bodies, which were uncovered during the destruction of the cemeteries, were thrown into mass graves.

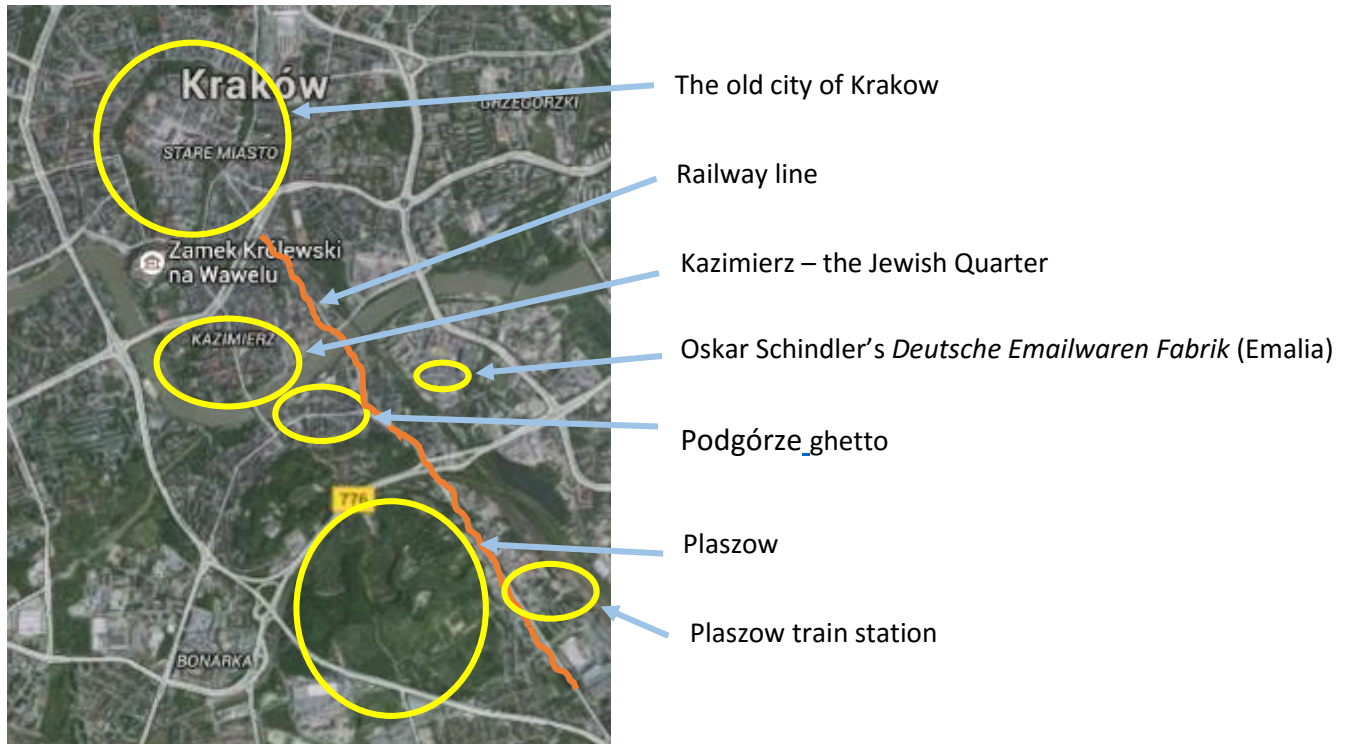


Fig. 1 Aerial view of the city of Kraków. Online. ><https://www.google.ca/maps><. Accessed Oct. 15, 2015.

Initially, the camp held between 2,000 to 4,000 prisoners and the camp’s size expanded to approximately 10 hectares. With a continually increasing prisoner population, the camp continued to grow in size, and by 1944 covered approximately 79 hectares. The camp was divided into three areas: a residential part for prisoners, including an assembly square; an area for workshops and store houses, including sites for mass executions; and an area for the camp officers, commandant and staff. The areas were divided with barbed wire fences and gates, and the entire camp was surrounded with double-barbed wire fences and twelve watch towers. Two quarries were nearby, which were exploited for rocks and gravel. One quarry was located within the camp compound; the Liban quarry is adjacent to the camp. The Liban quarry was

established in 1873 by the limestone company "Liban and Ehrenpreis", two Jewish industrial families from Podgórze. From late fall 1942 onwards, a group of slave labors called *Barrackenbau* were housed directly at the Liban Quarry in unfinished barracks without sanitary facilities. Another smaller quarry was located directly within the camp, and groups of slave laborers were forced to pull wagons loaded with stones and soil with ropes along a narrow railway spur (Malvina, 1989; Bau, 1996; Kotarba, 2014).

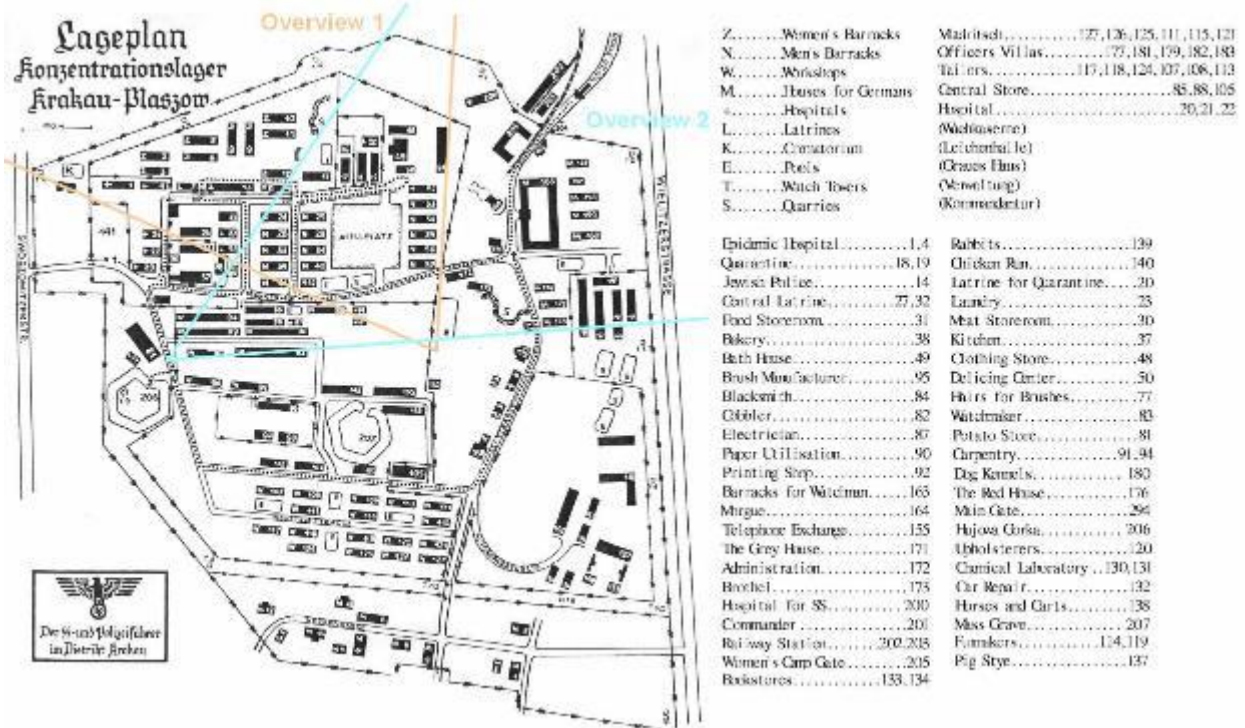


Fig. 2 Map of Płaszów concentration camp. Online. >Holocaustresearchproject.org<. Accessed Nov. 16, 2015.



Fig. 3 Płaszów camp main entrance. Yad Vashem Photo Archive. Online. >Holocaustresearchproject.org<. Accessed Nov. 16, 2015.



Fig. 4 View over Płaszów camp. Yad Vashem Photo Archive. Online. >Holocaustresearchproject.org<. Accessed Nov. 16, 2015.



Fig. 5 Płaszów camp, Poland, 1943. Jews on forced labor detachment. Yad Vashem Photo Archive. Online. >Holocaustresearchproject.org<. Accessed Nov. 16, 2015.



Fig. 6 Płaszów camp, Poland, 1943. Jews on forced labor detachment. Yad Vashem Photo Archive. Online. >Holocaustresearchproject.org<. Accessed Nov. 16, 2015.

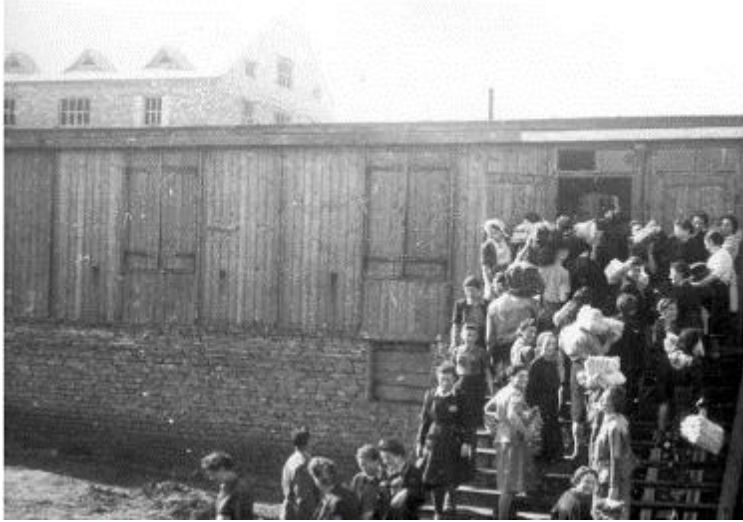


Fig. 7 Płaszów camp, Poland, 1943. Female inmates at the entrance to a barrack. Yad Vashem Photo Archive. Online. >Holocaustresearchproject.org<. Accessed Nov. 16, 2015.

The camp was originally intended for Jewish prisoners: the majority of inmates originated from the Kraków ghetto, but also from many smaller ghettos and evacuated labour camps. From July 1943 onwards, the camp was also used as a “labor re-education camp” for Poles (Kotarba, 2014, p. 21). Beginning in spring 1944, Płaszów was also occasionally used as an interim camp for transports from Hungary on their way to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

As the SS liquidated the Kraków ghetto, as well as ghettos in the rural areas, the camp population rose to 12,000 inmates in the fall of 1942, and increased to 24,000 by early summer 1943. In order to deal with the increasing numbers of prisoners, the camp regularly sent transports to other concentration and extermination camps. It is estimated that around 150,000 people, the majority Jews, passed through the camp. The Płaszów camp was the second largest camp after Auschwitz-Birkenau in the district of Kraków. Amon Göth governed the camp in a brutal manner: he shot prisoners randomly, conducted public hangings, whipped and beat people to death, applied collective punishments in cases of escapes. Göth had two maids (slave labourers from the camp) who were forced to live in his house; one of the maids (Helena Horowitz) testified that Göth kept rifles in his home (the Red House) and that she observed him “firing at a group of people working at a distance of maybe 200 metres from the apartment window” (Holocaust Research Project). The other maid (Helena Jonas Rosenzweig)

testified: “first thing in the morning, a six o’clock, I would hear shooting. He had the urge to kill. Like an animal” (Inheritance, 2006). Eyewitnesses testified at Amon Göth’s trial that mass killings of camp inmates as well as prisoners and civilians from Kraków were performed frequently at Płaszów. Victims, such as 4,000 dead from the liquidation of the Kraków ghetto, were buried in mass graves nearby the barracks. In the summer of 1943, killings and burials were moved to the hill Hujowa Górka, in the south-eastern area of the camp. According to eyewitness testimonies, people were brought on trucks from outside the camp almost daily and shot here (Holocaust Research Project). In late 1943 and throughout the summer of 1944, the bodies of the victims were exhumed and incinerated by prisoners, who unearthed thousands of corpses from the mass graves. Once this mass grave was full, the area was leveled and barracks built over it. In February 1944, the killings and burials were moved to another area, Cipowy Dolek, in the south-western area. Here, the bodies were cremated immediately (Kotarba, 2014, p. 44). Eyewitnesses and survivors estimate that the total number of victims was between 8,000 and 10,000. In 1944, 17 truckloads of human ashes were scattered over the sites which were nearby the original mass graves (Kotarba, 2014, p. 50) Although it is likely that the majority of bodies were buried in the mass graves, countless victims lay in the vicinity of the Płaszów site in the woods, and it appears that they were not moved to the mass graves. During several excavations near Płaszów since the end of WWII, human remains were discovered which may stem from the time of the camp’s operation (Malvina, 1989; Bau, 1996; Kotarba, 2014).

With the approach of the Russian Army in the summer of 1944, the SS dismantled the camp in order to destroy evidence. On 14 January 1945, one day before the liberation of Kraków by the Red Army, the last prisoners - 178 women and 2 boys - were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The Red Army did not liberate the Płaszów camp; they encountered an abandoned site and the remainders of the camp’s property. Some fragments of the former camp still existed, such as prisoner barracks, roads, building foundations, fences, some of the former SS buildings, as well as the Grey House and the Red House. In the area of the quarry in the camp, a road fragment laid with Jewish gravestones was found, which were stolen and sold during the post-war era (Kotarba, 2014, p. 53).

Göth was arrested shortly after the end of the war by the American army. He was handed over to the Polish authorities in Kraków, where he was tried for genocide and crimes against humanity by the Supreme National Tribunal. He was sentenced to death by hanging and executed on 13 September 1946 in Kraków (Malvina, 1989; Bau, 1996; Kotarba, 2014).

## **2. The site of the former concentration camp Płaszów today**

The site of Płaszów at present-day is confusing and alludes to its multitude of discourses and meanings through its incoherent materiality: the area consists of park-like areas with overgrown ruins; several memorials; remainders of a cemetery; some industrial use of the area. Until the late 1980s, the site of the former concentration camp was perceived to be part of the outskirts of Kraków, but with increasing urbanization after 1989, the area became part of the center (Sendyka, 2014).

An uninformed visitor may perceive this space to be an urban green area, particularly because locals use the area for recreational purposes. A handful of information boards along the periphery of the camp area allude to the history of the site, yet, without providing specifics. The former Płaszów concentration camp is surrounded by residential and industrial areas of suburban Kraków. Some of the former camp areas have been turned into single-family homes and apartment blocks. Much of the area is a mainly unmanaged, vast green space with various gravel roads and narrow paths cutting through the landscape; scattered throughout the entire area are countless ruins of former structures, such as foundations of barracks, half-demolished buildings, and partial remainders of the rows of double barbed-wire fencing and abandoned railway tracks – some of these remnants are ruins of camp structures, while others belong to the former Jewish cemeteries; there is also a nature reserve and a sewage waste treatment plant.



Fig. 8 Area of Płaszów camp, Poland. Online. ><https://www.google.ca/maps><. Accessed Dec. 4, 2015.



Fig. 9 Płaszów camp, Poland, section of barbed wire fence. My own pictures, i-witness Holocaust field school, May 2012.



Fig. 10 Płaszów camp, Poland, ruins of former buildings within the camp area. My own pictures, i-witness Holocaust field school, May 2012.



Fig. 11 Płaszów camp, Poland, view over former camp area. My own pictures, i-witness Holocaust field school, May 2012.

At various locations around the site the visitor encounters monuments: the most dominating one is the large stone monument at Cipowy Dolek, the former execution site and mass grave, at the south edge of the site (Fig. 12 and 13). The memorial in the form of an expressive sculpture representing “people with their hearts torn away” was erected during the communist era in 1964. Its inscription states: “In honour of the martyrs murdered by Nazi perpetrators of the genocide in the years 1943 – 1945”. It is devoted to all victims of Płaszów.



Fig. 12 Largest memorial from 1964, Płaszów camp, Poland, Historical Guide to the German concentration camp in Płaszów 1942 – 1945. Online. >[https://ipn.gov.pl/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/145900/Kotarba-R\\_-\\_A-Historical-Guide-to-the-German-Camp-in-Płaszów-1942-1945.pdf](https://ipn.gov.pl/__data/assets/pdf_file/0019/145900/Kotarba-R_-_A-Historical-Guide-to-the-German-Camp-in-Płaszów-1942-1945.pdf)<. Accessed Nov. 28, 2015.



Fig. 13 Largest memorial from 1964 overlooking one of the mass graves at Płaszów camp, Poland, Historical Guide to the German concentration camp in Płaszów 1942 – 1945. Online. >[https://ipn.gov.pl/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/145900/Kotarba-R\\_-\\_A-Historical-Guide-to-the-German-Camp-in-Płaszów-1942-1945.pdf](https://ipn.gov.pl/__data/assets/pdf_file/0019/145900/Kotarba-R_-_A-Historical-Guide-to-the-German-Camp-in-Płaszów-1942-1945.pdf)<. Accessed Nov. 28, 2015.

Nearby this large memorial are two smaller monuments: one was erected by the Jewish community in Kraków shortly after the war, featuring a plaque in Polish and Hebrew, commemorating the Jewish victims of the camp (Fig. 14); and a small plaque dedicated to the Hungarian Jewish women who passed through the Płaszów camp on their way to Auschwitz-Birkenau (Fig. 15).



Fig. 14 Memorial to the Jewish victims murdered at Płaszów, Poland. Historical Guide to the German concentration camp in Płaszów 1942 – 1945. Online. >[https://ipn.gov.pl/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/145900/Kotarba-R\\_-\\_A-Historical-Guide-to-the-German-Camp-in-Płaszów-1942-1945.pdf](https://ipn.gov.pl/__data/assets/pdf_file/0019/145900/Kotarba-R_-_A-Historical-Guide-to-the-German-Camp-in-Płaszów-1942-1945.pdf)<. Accessed Nov. 28, 2015.



Fig. 15 Memorial to the Hungarian Jewesses who passed through the Płaszów camp on their way to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Płaszów, Poland. Historical Guide to the German concentration camp in Płaszów 1942 – 1945. Online. >[https://ipn.gov.pl/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/145900/Kotarba-R\\_-\\_A-Historical-Guide-to-the-German-Camp-in-Płaszów-1942-1945.pdf](https://ipn.gov.pl/__data/assets/pdf_file/0019/145900/Kotarba-R_-_A-Historical-Guide-to-the-German-Camp-in-Płaszów-1942-1945.pdf)<. Accessed Nov. 28, 2015.

Further to the eastern side of the camp from here, the visitor encounters the other mass execution site, Hujowa Górka. The location is marked by a wooden cross (Fig. 14 and 15).



Fig. 16 Mass grave site Hujowa Górka, Płaszów, Poland. My own pictures, i-witness Holocaust field school, May 2012.



Fig. 17 Mass grave site Hujowa Górka, Płaszów, Poland. Online. >[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amon\\_Goeth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amon_Goeth)<. Accessed Nov. 28, 2015.



Płaszów camp, Poland, the Grey House. My own pictures, i-witness Holocaust field school, May 2012.

Fig. 18

In a residential area along the eastern periphery of the camp area remain two intact structures from the time of the camp's operation: ul. 3 Jerozolimska, the "Grey House" - this was the administrative building of the SS during camp operation, and the location of Amon Göth's office. The basement contained holding and solitary confinement cells, as well as standing cells. About 20 meters behind the Grey House is the Monument to the Victims of the Crime of 10<sup>th</sup> September 1939: on this day 13 Polish locals were shot by the German perpetrators. This monument was unveiled in 1984.



Fig. 19 Monument to the Victims of the Crime of 10<sup>th</sup> September 1939, Płaszów, Poland. Historical Guide to the German concentration camp in Płaszów 1942 – 1945. Online. >[https://ipn.gov.pl/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/145900/Kotarba-R\\_-A-Historical-Guide-to-the-German-Camp-in-Płaszów-1942-1945.pdf](https://ipn.gov.pl/__data/assets/pdf_file/0019/145900/Kotarba-R_-A-Historical-Guide-to-the-German-Camp-in-Płaszów-1942-1945.pdf)<. Accessed Nov, 28, 2015.

The second still intact structure is at ul. 22 Heltmana, the "Red House", which was the villa of the former camp commandant Amon Göth.



Fig. 20 The Red House, Płaszów, Poland, West-facing façade, with semi-circular bay and balcony, patio leading into the backyard, ca. 2006. James Moll (director), 2006. *Inheritance* [documentary]. US: Allentown Productions.

### 3. Representation of the Płaszów camp in the movie *Schindler's List*

The Australian author Thomas Kenneley's book "*Schindler's Ark*" was released 1982 in Britain, and as "Schindler's List" in the United States. The book is a historical fiction, based on real events and persons. Kenneley learned about the story from Poldek Pfefferberg, a Holocaust survivor, and conducted additional research for his book. In 1993 Steven Spielberg adapted the book into a feature film. Spielberg was an internationally established and recognized American film director and producer, who had gained fame through such entertainment movies as *Jaws* (1975), *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), *Indiana Jones* (1984, 1989) and *Jurassic Park* (1993). He had a vision that by making *Schindler's List* he wanted to create a movie which would depict the 'truth' and realized this desire with great effort by re-creating the historical milieu through the use of scenographic elements, and by filming within the "authentic landscapes" (Charlesworth, 2004, p. 300).

*Schindler's List* became an incredible success for Spielberg: the movie won seven Oscars at the Academy Awards; the film won further awards at the British Academy awards as well as Golden Globes and Grammys. The movie would be featured on the *Time* magazine's 100 Greatest Films Centenary Poll. The Vatican named it as one of the 45 top films ever produced. The Library of Congress deemed the film as "culturally significant" (Decent Films Guide).

In order to create an authentic 'feel' for the audience, Spielberg used specific cinematic techniques, such as handheld cameras and the mimicking of documentary-style footage by shooting the film mainly in black and white (Classen, 2009, p. 93). Spielberg stated that his own imagination of the Holocaust had "largely been stark, black-and white-images" and he thus felt that the deliberate utilization of this feature would underline the "cinéma vérité, documentary feel" (Classen, 2009, p. 92). Through the use of specific techniques Spielberg not only achieved that the audience felt they were witnessing the actual events; the staged recreation of the historical events in a realistic, documentary-style manner became 'proof' to an international audience "that the Holocaust occurred" (Manchel, 1995, p. 87).

The film *Schindler's List* begins with one of the few, select scenes in color: a pair of hands holding a match lights a pair of Shabbat candles as the viewer listens to a Hebrew prayer. The candles gradually burn lower, until the match is absorbed by the melted wax in the candle holder. The flame is extinguished, a column of smoke rises from the wick, and the scene cuts to a plume of steam released from a locomotive (the image is now in black-and-white). The setting is a train station in Kraków with vast numbers of Jews arriving and being registered. Oskar Schindler, a Czech manufacturer and former factory owner of German origin has come to Kraków and seeks to secure money from Jewish investors in order to set up a factory. He is a profiteer and exploits the fact that he can return the payment through items rather than cash. He initiates contact with Kraków's Jewish community where he meets Itzhak Stern, a former accountant. With Stern's advice, Schindler buys the enamelware and cookware company *Deutsche Emailwaren Fabrik* (Emalia), where he soon employs Jewish slave laborers, initially, because they are cheaper than Poles; the workers are deemed essential which provides preliminary protection from deportation. Stern begins to use his position as Schindler's accountant to hire more Jews to protect them. Schindler socializes with high-ranking SS officials and buys their influence and support through rare items he purchases on the black market. The Jews from the Kraków ghetto are either deported or forced into the nearby Płaszów labor and concentration camp: the camp commandant Amon Göth lives in a villa which overlooks the Płaszów camp; from here, he casually shoots inmates. Schindler manipulates and flatters Göth

and gains his approval to build his own subcamp to house his Jewish slave laborers. Schindler begins gradually to take a personal interest in saving and protecting the Jewish workers, and he uses his fortune to bribe and manipulate decision makers. In 1944, Germany is losing the war and the Red Army is closing in from the East. Göth receives orders to exhume and incinerate the bodies of victims, which had been thrown into mass graves. The Jewish inmates are forced to dig up the bodies, carry the corpses to funerary pyres, where they are lit. Schindler learns about this event from the ashes which fall from the sky in Kraków.

As Göth begins to send increasing numbers of camp inmates on transports, Schindler realizes that his Jewish workers are in imminent danger of being deported as well. On a blazing summer day, Schindler witnesses the suffering of masses of Jews locked up in cattle cars at the Płaszów train station. He uses his influence with SS officials to have water hosed over the cars, so that the people inside can get a relief from the heat and thirst. Schindler decides to open his own factory in his hometown Brännlitz, Czechoslovakia for the manufacture of military shell-casings and he utilizes his money to buy the Jews from Göth. Men and women are sent on two separate trains to Czechoslovakia, and the women's train is mistakenly diverted to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Schindler, again, utilizes his money and influence to bribe SS officials to allow the women to leave the extermination camp and to be sent to Czechoslovakia. At the end of the war Schindler is a hunted war criminal, as he profited from Jewish slave labor, and he flees together with his wife after receiving a gold ring from the factory workers. The final scene of the movie shows all the actors of the movie in a line walking over the top of a hill; as the scene changes to color, a group of Holocaust survivors (the former Schindler Jews) walk across a field. They enter a cemetery in Israel, where they place rocks on Schindler's grave.

## **II. Analysis of the Płaszów site**

### **1. Analysis of the Red House**

I will begin my analysis of the Red House by exploring the representation of Amon Göth's villa in the movie *Schindler's List* and examining the actual Red House in present-day Kraków. I will

then draw from Colin McFarlane's approach of 'translocal assemblage' to illustrate the diverse network of interrelations between the imaginary villa and the real house.

The representation of Amon Göth's villa in the film *Schindler's List* is – to some extent - based on archival photographs of the actual house in which the commandants resided, as well as on eyewitness testimony. In the movie, the villa - which Göth dismisses as "just a house" (*Schindler's List*, 1993) - is depicted as sitting on top of a cliff, overlooking the Płaszów camp below. I suggest that it is significant that the house is built specifically for the commandant: the villa is located on a cliff overlooking the camp, and the patio and balcony provide a very convenient lookout. Thus, the architectural structure of Amon Göth's villa in itself, as well as the commandant as part of the structure become a panopticon (Foucault, 1995): the structure represents a system which is all observing, an examining gaze of power. The power of the Nazis, as well as Göth's sadistic nature are expressed through the material form of the villa.

The house in the movie is a two-story building with a mansard roof. The first floor – or ground level – is built of grey stones. The façade facing the camp is centered by a semi-circular bay with French doors, which open onto a semi-circular patio. On the second story, the bedroom opens with French doors onto a semi-circular balcony, which is surrounded with a concrete railing.



Fig. 14 The commandant's villa at the Płaszów camp, Poland. Screenshot from *Schindler's List*. Steven Spielberg (director), 1993 [cinematic movie]. USA.



Fig. 15 Amon Göth shooting at prisoners from his balcony of his villa. Screenshot from *Schindler's List*. Steven Spielberg (director), 1993 [cinematic movie]. USA.

The balcony provides Göth with a convenient location from where he can overlook the camp – what Foucault (1995) refers to as a gaze - and, at times, shoot prisoners with a rifle. The villa atop of a cliff is the most dominating structure of the camp, physically as well as psychologically, as it looms authoritatively and provides a comfortable lookout for Göth's sadistic impulses. A long, straight staircase leads to the camp below, which is enclosed by cliffs. Göth's ultimate power over life and death of the prisoners is not only manifested in his position as camp commandant, but also in his physical vantage point. The prisoners are physically located below him and surrounded by the physical barrier of the cliffs. The inmates are thus exposed to Göth's all-encompassing gaze without any possibility of escape.



Fig. 16 Amon Göth shooting at prisoners from his balcony of his villa, with partial view of camp below. Screenshot from *Schindler's List*. Steven Spielberg (director), 1993 [cinematic movie]. USA.



Fig. 17 Partial view of camp from Amon Göth's balcony. Screenshot from *Schindler's List*. Steven Spielberg (director), 1993 [cinematic movie]. USA.

The actual house where Amon Göth resided between 1943 – 1944 is located at ul. Heltmana 22 and was built in 1934. Göth ordered the eviction of the owner of the house and remodeled the interior of the house based on his preferences. The Red House is a two-storey brick building with a mansard roof. Archival photographs of the Red House provide evidence of features of the site of the time of Amon Göth's residency, and can assist in determining changes that have occurred after 1945. The aspects of the site which are most significant in view of the historical events are: 1. the relationship between the landscape of the camp and the location of the building with its West-facing façade and backyard; 2. the location of a balcony, patio and yard, which offered a convenient and comfortable location from where to view the on-goings in the camp; and 3. the paint colour red, which gave the house the name "the Red House" and thus identified it as the commandant's house. The archival photographs show that the view from the patio, balcony and backyard towards the camp (West) was entirely unobstructed during the time of Göth's residence. The patio was surrounded by grass, and no trees or shrubs hindered the view of the camp.

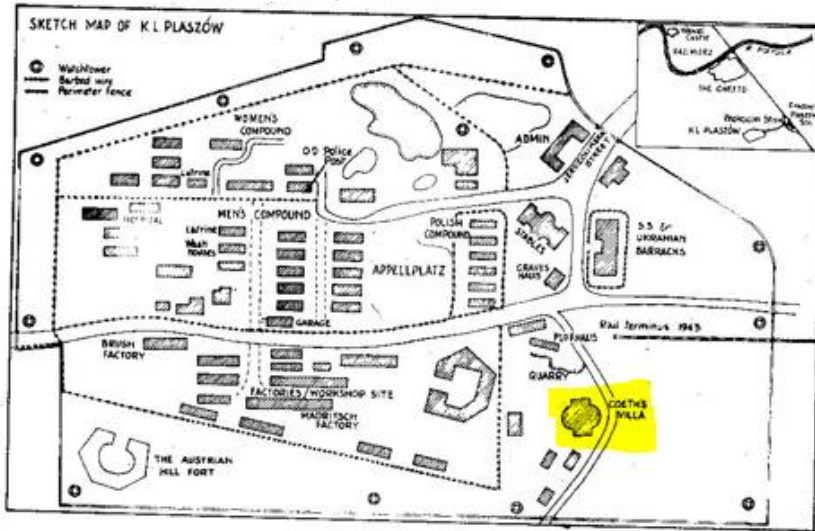


Fig. 17 Map of Płaszów camp, Poland. Holocaust Research Project. Online. Fig. 10 Map of Płaszów, Poland. Holocaust Research Project. ><http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/othercamps/galleries/Płaszówperiod/Płaszów%20map%20-%20202.html><. Accessed Nov. 16, 2015.



Fig. 18 The Red House, Płaszów, Poland. West façade facing the camp, 1945. Ghetto Fighters House Archive. Online. ><http://www.infocenters.co.il><. Accessed Nov. 16, 2015.



Fig. 19 The Red House, Płaszów, Poland. South and East façade, backyard facing the camp, 1934. Ghetto Fighters House Archive. Online. > <http://www.infocenters.co.il><. Accessed Nov. 16, 2015.



Fig. 20 Amon Göth on the patio of the Red House, Płaszów, Poland, between February 1943 and September 1944. Yad Vashem Photo Archive. Online. > <http://www.collections.yadvashem.org/photoarchive/en-us><. Accessed Nov. 16, 2015.



Fig. 21 Amon Göth on the patio of the Red House, Płaszów, Poland, between February 1943 and September 1944. Yad Vashem Photo Archive. Online. > <http://www.collections.yadvashem.org/photoarchive/en-us><. Accessed Nov. 16, 2015.

Although archival photographs exist of Amon Göth with a rifle on his patio and numerous eyewitnesses testified to his unpredictable and random shooting of prisoners, no direct account specifically indicates that Göth shot inmates from his balcony. Nevertheless, the location of the balcony, patio and back yard of the house provided Göth with a partial view of the camp from where he would have been able to watch and possibly shoot inmates at random. Göth had several dog kennels on his property. Witnesses have testified that he trained his dogs in the yard and sent them to attack prisoners. Witnesses referred to the house as the “Red House”. Helena Jonas Rosenzweig identifies the colour of the front door (a deep red) as being the same colour as during Göth’s residence. The colour red is furthermore visible in the archival pictures as distinctly darker than other areas of the house, and are along the ground level, along the eaves, and on the pediment (Inheritance, 2006; Holocaust Research Project).



Fig. 22 The Red House, Płaszów, Poland, East-facing front façade, ca. 2012. Online.  
> <http://adoncasterladabroad.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/571.jpgAugust2012><. Accessed Nov. 16, 2015.



Fig. 23 The Red House, Płaszów, Poland, West-facing front façade, with semi-circular bay and balcony, ca. 2011. Online.  
> <http://bobemajse.blogspot.ca/2011/05/czas-zbeczczenia-ii.html><. Accessed Nov. 16, 2015.



Fig. 24 The Red House, Płaszów, Poland, West-facing façade, with semi-circular bay and balcony, patio leading into the backyard, ca. 2006. Online. James Moll (director), 2006. *Inheritance* [documentary]. US: Allentown Productions.

The discourses of the Red House are diverse and complex: the building, along with the entire Płaszów site, has been designated as a historical monument by the Government of Poland in 2002, and is thus under specific protection, which entails numerous restrictions. Yet, although protected under the Polish Government, legally, the property remained under private ownership. The owner of the site approached Kraków authorities for years to purchase the villa, but Polish authorities had and continue to have no intention to buy the Red House as it was the seat of a German war criminal (Szufnarowski, 2007). Professor Andrzej Chwalba, a historian at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland, recommends that the Red House should be included in the development plans for the Płaszów site in order to avoid it becoming an attraction for neo-Nazis (Zawada, 2010). Foreign visitors, who take an interest in the building as a result of watching *Schindler's List* frequently come to the house, either for touristic or commemorative purposes (Charlesworth, 2004). As the house remains unoccupied, the owner currently offers private tours for visitors.



Fig. 25 Clock-wise from the top left: the Grey House and the Red House, Płaszów, Poland. Two images of the commandant's villa from the movie *Schindler's List*.

I suggest that a network of interlaced variegated multi-dimensional links exists between depictions of Göth's villa in the film and the historical house in Kraków. The analytical tool 'translocal assemblage' will allow me to illustrate these connections.

First, I suggest that the villa in *Schindler's List* is a combination of elements of the Red House and the Grey House at the Płaszów site: the villa in the film has key features of the Red House; for example, it is a two-story house with a mansard roof, and the camp-facing façade of the house has a central, semi-circular bay and balcony with the French doors. Yet, the historic Red House appears less imposing in comparison to the Grey House, which is a two-story building plus an attic, with columns of grey stone, which give the building a sturdy appearance. While architectural details, such as the pediment above the balcony were included, other details, such as the slender metal railing on the Red House were replaced with a more solid concrete pillar railing. Finally, the actual Red House is located at the bottom of a slope and the view from the balcony or patio would have not provided a full, but a partial view of the camp; in the film, the villa overlooks the entire camp from its outlook on top of a cliff. Through a combination of specific physical features and location details (an imposing structure, an outlook that provided a

clear advantage to sharp-shoot the helpless inmates below) an imaginary Amon Göth villa was created for the film. The villa was not “just a house” where the commandant lived, but it personified and facilitated Göth’s tyrannical and sadistic actions.

I suggest that the creation of an imaginary villa for the film, specifically drawing from two existing structures, has led to a discourse in relation to the Red House, which is reflected in confusion, evident in online travel posts and – at times – even in online archival collections: the Grey House is frequently mistaken for the Red House; or: the Grey House is frequently thought to be the villa where *Schindler’s List* was filmed; for example:

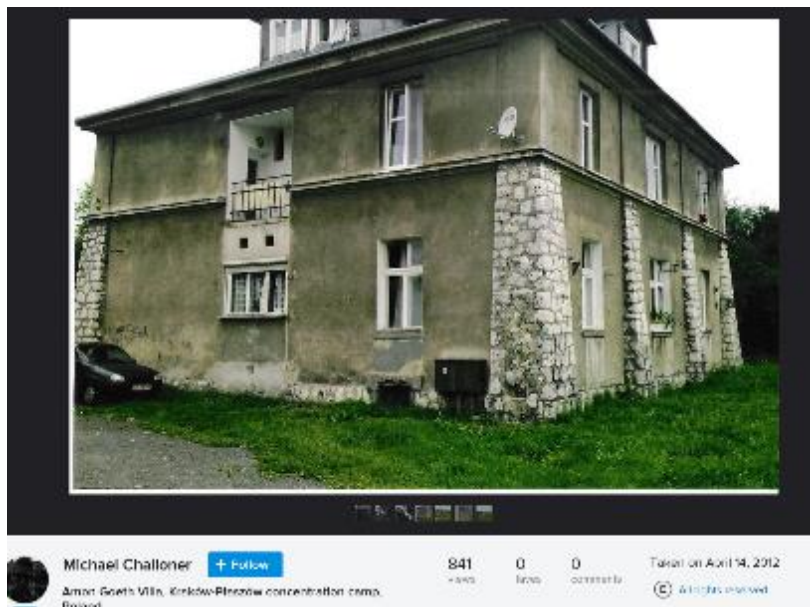


Fig. 26 Photograph of the Grey House on flickr.com labeled as “Amon Goeth Villa”, posted in April 2012. Online. ><https://www.flickr.com/photos/michaelchalloner/7076060533/in/photostream/><. Accessed Dec. 1, 2015.



Fig. 26 Archival photograph of the Grey House on Ghetto Fighters House Archives labeled as “the house of Amon Leopold Goeth”. Online. >[https://www.infocenters.co.il/gfh/notebook\\_ext.asp?book+5997&lang=engh&site+gfh](https://www.infocenters.co.il/gfh/notebook_ext.asp?book+5997&lang=engh&site+gfh)<. Accessed Dec. 1, 2015.

### Plaszow Concentration Camp Photo: villa von Amon Göth-dem Henker

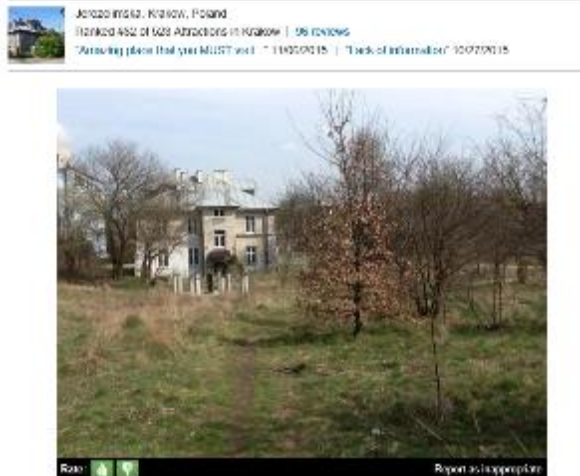


Fig. 26 Photograph of the Grey House posted on tripadvisor.com labeled as “villa of Amon Goeth, the hangman”. Posted on November 6<sup>th</sup> 2015. Online. >[http://www.tripadvisor.com/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g274772-d1206588-i94639132-Plaszow\\_Concentration\\_Camp-Krakow\\_Lesser\\_Poland\\_Province\\_Southern\\_Poland.html](http://www.tripadvisor.com/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g274772-d1206588-i94639132-Plaszow_Concentration_Camp-Krakow_Lesser_Poland_Province_Southern_Poland.html)<. Accessed Dec. 1, 2015.

The question I would like to pose in this context is: why do visitors want to see the Red House? Some visitors may be interested in seeing the house as a historical location; others may hope to

see the house that is depicted in the film. I suggest that a translocal assemblage exists between the iconographic imagery of Amon Göth, the imaginary house in *Schindler's List*, the archives of memories of individual visitors and their personal motivations for seeking out the house, and the actual location in Kraków. Thus, a mesh of multi-directional correlations which surrounds the Red House stretches across national boundaries, spans across decades, connects cinematic images, filmmakers' visions and real historical events. The Red House in current-day Kraków is no longer "just a house", but it exists in the shadow of the iconographic imagery of the commandant's villa in the film as well as the collective memory of the Holocaust.

Third, the tremendous success of the film *Schindler's List*, along with an opening of the borders in Eastern Europe and increasingly easier travel generated a rapid increase in foreign visitors to Kraków. For example, the number of foreign visitors to Kraków grew from 500,000 in 1992 to 8,950,000 visitors in 2012 (Municipal Office of Kraków, 2014). This increase specifically of visitors to Kraków with an interest to visit sites associated with *Schindler's List* is referred to as 'Schindler-Tourism' (Lennon, Foley, 2000). Local businesses began to offer *Schindler's List* tours: these include the visitation of some sites related to the formerly vibrant Jewish life of Kraków as well as sites where Spielberg filmed the movie (which are not necessarily the sites of the actual historical events). The actual historical events and locations related to the Płaszów camp have been replaced by the movie-version of the events, and due to the seeming authenticity and plausibility of iconographic imagery from the film visitors are drawn to recognizable structures. I suggest that the movie *Schindler's List* is part of a translocal assemblage which exists as a complicated texture of exchanges, associations and interconnections between nations, eras, communities and specific individuals, global developments and trends, local, national and international interests, economies and technologies.

### **III. The Red House as a translocal assemblage**

The analytical tool 'translocal assemblage' provides a novel view of the complex web of relations which exists between the site of Płaszów in Poland and the film *Schindler's List*. In my analysis above, I have explored the continuity between the Płaszów site as it existed during the time of its operation as a labor and concentration camp and the site in present-day Poland. I

analyzed the representation of Płaszów in the film *Schindler's List*, and illustrated the translocal assemblage, which exists between locations, times, and imaginations. This complexity of relations and dependencies is highly complex, multi-dimensional and fluid, and cannot be fully captured in only a few sentences, yet, I will explore some of these relationships in this paragraph: the site itself has a long-standing history with Kraków's and Podgórze's pre-war Jewish communities in that it was the location of two Jewish cemeteries. During the operation of the Płaszów labor and concentration camp tens of thousands of individuals of different nationalities, ethnic backgrounds and places of origin passed through this place, thus, linking the micro-cosmos of the camp with locations across the European continent. Photographs taken of the camp during 1943 – 1944, eyewitness and survivor testimony given after WWII, the evidence recorded by the Red Army of their findings in January 1945 created an archival and visual record of the historical events which took place at the Płaszów camp, thus, linking locations, events, which occurred at different times, individuals, judicial systems and technological advances. An Australian author took an interest in the memories of a Płaszów survivor and produced a best-seller in the UK and the USA, thus, connecting local memories with an international audience, crossing geographical, temporal and cultural boundaries and linking them with mass media, while also drawing from the previously created archival and visual records. An American film maker decided to turn the best-seller into a movie, and created a movie set close to the original location, where he filmed shortly after the fall of Communism, thus connecting the historical location in Poland with an international audience through the use of mass media, drawing from archival and visual records, individual survivor and eyewitness memories and his own vision as well as his expertise as a filmmaker. The incredible international success of the film created a surge of interest in travel to Poland, the sites where the original historical events had occurred, locations where the movie had been filmed, which, in turn generated a local economy catering to tourists' needs and interests, thus connecting mass media, mass travel, international visitors with local communities, historical locations in present-day places, economic interests and developments, archival and visual records with imaginary representations through iconographic imagery. Furthermore, the surge of foreign visitors' interest in sites related to the story of Oskar Schindler and in locations where

the movie had been filmed is also connected with larger movements, such as the March of the Living (an annual educational program in which students from around the world travel to Poland to visit Holocaust memorial sites) and with touristic developments, such as heritage tourism, cultural tourism, dark tourism<sup>5</sup> and identity seeking. Day trips from Kraków to the former concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau are highly popular among foreign visitors: since 2011 the number of visitors to Auschwitz-Birkenau has increased by 40% (UNESCO website). Thus, the site of Płaszów (and many other historical Holocaust-related sites in Eastern Europe) are connected with individuals and communities from around the world; visitors individually interact and engage with local sites, drawing from their personal memories and experiences, and, through this processual relationship, create highly dynamic, interactive, fluid connections.

I have only explored very few, key points of connections of the translocal assemblage around the site of Płaszów in order to illustrate the immense complexity of relationships. Many more relations exist and continue to form and evolve.

Returning to my initial exploration of the role of ‘material witnesses’ and the production of witnesses through films and movies in the context of Holocaust memorialization, my case study provides insight into the complex processes of Holocaust memorialization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Generally speaking, the purpose of Holocaust memorialization lies in the commemoration of those who perished and an appreciation of the enormous loss which humanity as a whole suffered; both notions rely on an emotional engagement of the visitors with Holocaust memorial sites. In the case of the Płaszów site, specific circumstances have contributed to the incoherent state of the area as a Holocaust memorial site: the scattering of the ashes of thousands of victims in mass graves but also across the entire site; the destroyed Jewish cemeteries; the dismantling of the camp in 1944 by the SS, and the absence of survivors at the actual camp site upon arrival of the Red Army in 1945. The absence of a strong Jewish community in Kraków during the first decades after WWII, the fact that Poland is a

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<sup>5</sup> Dark tourism refers to forms of tourism which involve travelling to places which are historically associated with death and tragedy (Lennon and Foley, 2000).

predominantly Catholic country and the difficulty of travel to Poland prior to 1989 likely contributed to disjointed efforts of commemoration and maintenance which have been made at the site.

After the release of *Schindler's List* international interest in and travel to Holocaust-related sites in Europe increased drastically. The site of Płaszów could have potentially benefited from the increase in public interest and funding – after all, Płaszów is embedded in a triangle of tourism “hot spots”: the Old City of Kraków (distance to Płaszów approx. 4km); Oskar Schindler-related sites in Kraków, such as the nearby Schindler Factory (distance to Płaszów approx. 3.4km); and Auschwitz-Birkenau (distance to Kraków approx. 79km). I suggest that my analysis of Płaszów and *Schindler's List* may provide insight why some sites “fail” to attract the same extent of public and/or touristic interest. In comparison to the site of Auschwitz-Birkenau which offers material structures and formal interpretation to the “tourist gaze” (Urry, 2011) the site of Płaszów with its lack of interpretation, its confusing topography, its unmarked mass graves and its scattered and evasive memorials offers very little to capture the interest of tourists or visitors. Visitors who may come to the Płaszów site have likely explored the historical Old Town of Kraków, seen the Schindler Factory Museum and possibly even traveled to Auschwitz-Birkenau. All these locations stimulate and appeal to the desire of travelers to “see” something. At many sites related to the Holocaust, however, no visible traces have remained; both Treblinka and Płaszów do not have any obvious features, except for the monuments. Nevertheless, if visitors can take the time to walk around the site, they will encounter remaining elements dating back to the time of the site’s operation: for example, in some areas of the Płaszów site are entire sections of the barbed wired fence still in place; at Treblinka, subtle differences in the local vegetation can indicate possible burial sites.

The film *Schindler's List* brought the Płaszów camp to the attention of an international audience, but it is specifically the persuasive, iconographic imagery of the film which has engaged the audience’s imagination. Visitors to the Płaszów site may recall the representation of the camp in the movie – Göth’s villa on top of the hill, the cliffs surrounding the camp, the road of tombstones, the gate and the barbed wire fences – but the actual topography of the

site is quite different. Instead of identifiable structures, visitors encounter the tall communist memorial which overlooks a vast green space, and visitors may experience a disconnect with the images they recall from the film.

The analytic concept translocal assemblage enables us to understand the network of connections between the historical events at Płaszów in the past, the site as it exists in the present, the representation of the camp in *Schindler's List*, and how the expectations and memories of visitors to the site are informed by the film. In addition to these interactions, other groups perceive Płaszów from a different perspective; for example, survivors, their families and descendants may come to this site to commemorate those who suffered and perished. Those who experienced the Płaszów concentration camp as victims, perpetrators or bystanders have memories of the historical site, and it is through their recollections that we can “read” the present-day local landscape.

We can see from the example of Płaszów that the complex history of such sites raises numerous challenging questions about Holocaust commemoration. The particular context of Holocaust-related sites in Central and Eastern Europe - countries which suffered tremendously under German occupation – adds additional layers of complexity in that the daily lives of local residents are perpetually impacted by a legacy over which they had and have relatively little control.

## Chapter 4:

### Analysis

I will begin this chapter with a brief summary of key aspects of the three case studies. Next, I will identify emerging key themes and reoccurring images, and subsequently I will explore the relationship between the key themes and images, the actual sites and Holocaust commemoration.

#### 1. Summary of sites

**Treblinka:** the extermination camp was well connected with the railway system. An additional spur was laid from the Treblinka station into the camp. The incoming trains would wait at the station, and a locomotive would drive the boxcars into the camp to the unloading ramp. The deportees were murdered by carbon monoxide in gas chambers, and their bodies buried in mass graves. These corpses were exhumed beginning in November 1942 and incinerated on large “roasts”. The ashes were buried and scattered around the landscape. The present-day memorial at the site features specific elements of the original site, such as the railway spur, the ramp, the gas chamber and the burning pit. A large symbolic graveyard represents the areas where the ashes were buried.

**Auschwitz-Birkenau:** the concentration and extermination camp was extremely well connected. As Birkenau began to operate as the main extermination center across Eastern Europe a spur and ramp were built closer to the site. By spring 1944, the spur was extended to lead into the camp. Due to the large number of arriving victims, the crematoria ovens could not keep up with the incineration of the bodies, and corpses were burned in large open pits. The ashes were poured into nearby rivers and onto fields. Today, Auschwitz I is the main museum with exhibits in a built environment. Birkenau is a short distance away and consist of a few rebuilt barracks, the main gate with its watchtower, the ramp, the spur and the destroyed gas chambers. The Pond of Ashes is located at the far end of the camp.

**Płaszów:** the labor and concentration camp is located close to a railway junction. This station was largely used for departures to the extermination camps. The majority of the inmates were from the nearby Kraków ghetto and were marched to the site. Other deportees arrived at the small station and were taken to the camp from there. Inmates died from the horrid conditions in the camp, forced labor, or from random mass shootings. Their bodies were buried in mass graves. By late 1943 to 1944, the corpses were exhumed and incinerated in large open pits. Today, Płaszów is a vast open green space in suburban Kraków. Five memorials are scattered throughout the site, and two mass graves are marked with a large memorial and a wooden cross. Two structures have remained: the Grey House (former SS administrative building) and the Red House (former house of SS camp commandant Amon Göth).

## **2. Summary of filmic representations – overview and themes**

### **a. Overview**

**Shoah:** Lanzmann's film is about witnessing and testimony. Through the testimony of different eyewitnesses and images of the associated sites in the present, he connects memories with sites. Lanzmann follows the journey of the victims from the experience of transportation and arrival to the entering of the gas chamber. He uses the images of trains and plumes of smoke from the stack as metaphorical images of the victims which elude to their fate.

**Holocaust:** the TV mini-series follows the lives of the Weiss family as they experience key events of the Holocaust. The series integrates archival footage as well as photographs, which lends a documentary quality. Images of trains, locomotives, railway stations, masses of people waiting to board a train represent the progressive displacement and persecution. Images of plumes of smoke and steam as well as juxtapositions with images of fire elude to the fate of the victims.

**Schindler's List:** the film tells the story of Oskar Schindler and the rescue of 1,100 Jews. The filmmaker used black-and-white film as well as cinematic techniques, such as hand-held cameras, to lend the movie an archival feel and reference to the first newsreels about the camps. The commandant's villa features as a metaphor for the power of the Third Reich.

Throughout the film, trains, locomotives, train stations, masses of people waiting for trains, a scene featuring a parked train with the suffering inmates, and views of the Schindler's Jews during their transport from inside the boxcar, represent the importance of the railway system in the persecution of the Jewish people. Smoke and plumes of steam feature along with images of trains; in addition, direct representations of ashes and burning bodies reference to the victims' fate.

## b. Themes

Between the three films as well as the three sites, a number of recurring themes emerged.

**Ramps and Transportation:** in *Shoah* as well as in *Schindler's List* the unloading ramps represent a key role. In *Shoah* the ramp at the Treblinka camp as well as the ramp at Birkenau are shown as they are in present-day Poland. Eyewitnesses describe their experiences of being inside the boxcar as it drove into the camp, the opening of the doors and the chaos upon getting off the train. In *Schindler's List*, it is the ramp of Birkenau (featured as 'Auschwitz') where the women who were accidentally transported to the camp are forced off the train. The audience sees the black silhouette of the prominent Birkenau main gate, the re-enacted chaos as the deportees get off the train and the blinding search lights. One of the women gazes up at a tall chimney with flames leaping into the night sky and thick plumes of dark smoke, from which the flakes of ashes fall to the ground. Thus, the filmmaker draws a direct connection between the arrival of the trains at 'Auschwitz' and the burning of the bodies of the victims.

In *Shoah* transportation is referred to frequently through images of locomotives, whistles, the noise of wheels clacking along tracks, boxcars, driving trains, standing trains, railroad tracks, railroad junctions, stations and ramps. The survivors speak of their experience upon arrival in the camp, as the sealed doors of their car were opened, and furthermore, once they lived inside the camp, about the arrival of other deportees. Lanzmann focuses on the observations of locals as the trains were sided for hours or even days at the Treblinka station before they would enter the camp. Through the testimonies of the locals and the train conductor, the viewer can

imagine the suffering that was endured by the victims locked up in the boxcars. No direct testimony is provided about the experience inside the boxcar during transit.

In the TV-miniseries *Holocaust* images of locomotives, trains, whistles, boxcars and train stations are frequently used to represent the progressive exclusion, displacement and deportation of the Jewish victims. Each time a Weiss family member experiences persecution and as they lose their home, social status, family, and finally their lives, the transition between the “before” and “after” is represented through the gathering of crowds at a railway station, the boarding or getting off trains, and driving trains. Although the audience does not witness the experience of the Weiss family inside the boxcar, the traumatic experiences during transit are represented in the form of the young mother who refuses to give up her dead infant.

In *Schindler's List* the film opens with a shot of a thick plume of smoke released from the stack on a locomotive, accompanied by a whistle. The scene is set at a rail station. Further scenes follow as Jews from Kraków are deported, depicting train stations, crowds of people waiting for trains, sealed boxcars with arms reaching through the small windows. Schindler rescues Itzhak Stern at the last minute from a deportation train. On a blazing summer day, masses of deportees are locked up in boxcars at the Płaszów train station, suffering from the heat and thirst. As Oskar Schindler's workers are transported to his factory in Czechoslovakia, the camera shows shots of the men inside the boxcar, lifting a little boy up to the small window to reach out and break off icicles to melt into water. As the train pulls into the Brännlitz train station, the viewer looks out of the window from the perspective of those inside the boxcar, catching a reassuring glimpse of Schindler standing at the platform. As Oskar Schindler's female workers ride on their separate boxcar, they also gaze out of the window at the wintery landscape. As their train drives into 'Auschwitz' night has fallen, and the women are blinded by bright search lights. As the train pulls into the camp, the viewer watches the arrival from the platform. The view changes again to inside the car, beams of bright lights penetrating the darkness, illuminating the anxious faces of the women, waiting silently for the train to stop. The clacking of the wheels on the tracks, the whistling and the squealing of the breaks are deafening. As soon as the doors are unsealed, chaos erupts. In a following scene, once the women have been released again to Oskar Schindler, they hurry onto the waiting boxcars. As their train pulls out

of 'Auschwitz', the camera swings across the platform and shows columns of new deportees being herded into the camps.



Fig. 1 The women inside the boxcar as the train arrives at 'Auschwitz'. Screenshot from *Schindler's List*. Steven Spielberg (director), 1993 [cinematic movie]. USA.

**Ashes:** *Shoah* begins with the survivors Simon Srebnik (Chelmno), Motke Zaidel and Itzhak Dugin (Vilna) describing the burning of bodies. The survivors then describe how bodies were initially buried. Motke Saidel and Itzhak Dugin were forced to dig up the bodies (Motke recognized members of his own family during the process). All three survivors describe in more detail the burning of the bodies in pits. Simon Srebnik testifies to the treatment of the charred remains:

“There was a concrete platform some distance away, and bones that hadn’t burned, the big bones of the feet, for example, we took. There was a chest with two handles. We carried the bones there, were others had to crush them. It was very fine, that powdered bone. Then it was put into sacks, when there were enough sacks, we went to the bridge on the Narew River and dumped the powder. The current carried it off. It drifted downstream.” (Lanzmann, 1995, p. 10/11).

In *Holocaust*, the audience learns about the burning of bodies as Erik Dorf explains the “processing” of victims at 'Auschwitz'. During this scene, archival photographs of Birkenau are shown. The most remarkable image is an archival picture that was taken in secret by a member of the *Sonderkommando*. It shows the piles of corpses lying outside the gas chamber, with a large cloud coming from a pit in the ground in the background. The following image shows a

row of crematoria ovens (an archival photograph likely from the Mauthausen concentration camp).

In *Schindler's List* the audience 'discovers' the ashes first with Oskar Schindler. In a seemingly innocent scene, a number of children are playing on a playground, as thick flakes begin to fall from the sky. Although the leaves on the trees and the clothing of the children indicate that it is not really winter, the flakes initially appear like snowflakes. A woman stops in her step and with a puzzled look gazes at the sky. Oskar Schindler walks towards his car, and also looks up, opening his hand to catch some of the flakes. As he moves closer to his car, he reaches to the fender and scoops a small amount of a dark-grey powder into his hands. He rubs the powder between his fingers, and gazes up again at the sky.



Fig. 2 Oskar Schindler reaches out to touch ashes which have fallen onto his car. Screenshot from *Schindler's List*. Steven Spielberg (director), 1993 [cinematic movie]. USA.

In the next scene, the audience sees the digging up of the bodies in the Płaszów camp, the loading of the bodies onto a conveyer belt which transports the corpses on top of the huge burning pile.



Fig. 3 The incineration of the corpses at Płaszów. Screenshot from *Schindler's List*. Steven Spielberg (director), 1993 [cinematic movie]. USA.

As the women arrive at 'Auschwitz', thick flakes fall from the night sky, and at first they might be mistaken as snow, as the ground is snow covered. However, at this point the audience knows that this is not snow, but instead the delicate clusters are the ashes. As one of the women looks up into the sky she soon sees that the flakes stem from the tall chimney. As the women proceed into the camp, the flakes continue to fall to the ground. The woman turns around and watches as another group of deportees are lead to an underground room, and decent the staircase. The flakes and the flames emerging from the chimney clearly indicate the destiny of these people.

### **Ramps and Transportation during the Holocaust**

Robin Jones states that "railway platforms were among the last things that people ever saw" (Jones, 2013, p. 4), and it is also one of the first elements of the camps the deportees would encounter upon arrival. Survivor testimony consistently experienced a profound alienation immediately upon arrival at the unloading platform. The ramps were places of traumatic encounters. Simone Gigliotti asks "[h]ow did scenes of selection – the separation and isolation that dominated actions on the platform, its energy, visibility and its genocidal rupture – defy the deportee's capacity for witnessing and representation?" While the arrival at the platform signified the end of the trauma of the transport experience, it also marks the shock of entry upon the first encounter with the camps and their alien geography and inexplicability (Gigliotti, 2009, p. 180). At the ramp, the disoriented and exhausted deportees had their first impression

of the camp's structural "incarnation of state control of the body by ideology architecture and industry" expressed through its system of terror (Gigliotti, 2009, p. 179).

The expansive railway system in Germany but also across Europe enabled Nazi Germany to deport communities across vast distances with a singular purpose: murder. The railway tracks spatially connected cities, towns and villages with the camps and ghettos. Over the course of a three-year period between October 1941 and October 1944 the Deutsche Reichsbahn and its railway affiliates transported over five million Jews to the extermination camps; it is estimated that approximately 2,000 trains were used to move these deportees (Hilberg, 1998, p. 171).

While the deportation of the Jews to extermination centers in the East was one implementation of the Final Solution, the same trains and railway tracks were utilized to transport the expropriated goods of the victims back to Germany. For example, Franciszek Zabecki, a train dispatcher at Treblinka, testified to the departure of one thousand freight cars from the extermination camp to Germany:

"... men's suits, children's clothing, women's wardrobes – dresses, blouses, seaters, caps and hats; boots, male, female, and children's shoes. Men's, women's, and children's underwear...swaddle cloths, pillows, cushions...suitcases filled with pencils, fountain pens, and glasses, umbrellas and canes...spools of thread of all kinds and colors. Leather for the production of shoes, bags, clothes...shaving utensils, razors, hair-cutting clippers, mirrors, even pots and pans, washbasins, carpentry tools, saws, planes, hammers...women's hair." (Gross, 2011, p. 5).

While the role of the Deutsche Reichsbahn has lately received more scholarly attention (see Hilberg, 1998; Gigliotti, 2009; Jones, 2013) specific elements of the experience of transport have been understudied: for example, transportation was a key feature in the implementation of genocidal policy in that on the one hand personal mobility was severely restricted prior to 1939, while at the same time, Jews were identified as deportable freight (Gigliotti, 2009, p. 2); restrictions to mobility; death occurred while waiting for trains at stations and platforms, boarding trains, during transport, upon unloading, as a result of forced labor undertaken along railway lines as part of construction or for repairs; yet these deaths are underrepresented in

scholarly research - the experience of the deportees during transport has only recently received attention from a small number of scholars (see Sturdy Colls, 2015; Gigliotti, 2009; Jones, 2013). A critical look at the experience of deportation, transport and transit from the victim's perspective is crucial in order to understand the immediate impact of genocidal policies (Gigliotti, 2009, p. 2). In her research, Simone Gigliotti illustrates, that studies have largely focused on ghettoization and camp experiences, yet, the in-the-train experience has been neglected. The trauma of the transport tends to be limited to references to the physical infrastructure, such as trains and railway tracks. Yet, from the perspective of survivors, the transportation experience represents ongoing displacement, captivity, disorientation, separation and powerlessness (Gigliotti, 2009, p. 28). Primo Levi has stated that "almost always, at the beginning of the memory sequence, stands the train which marked the departure towards the unknown, not only for chronological reasons but also for the gratuitous cruelty with which these otherwise innocuous convoys of ordinary freight cars were employed for extraordinary purposes" (Levi, 1988, p. 5). As deportees were sometimes transported several times over varying time periods and distances, across diverse and foreign landscapes, they progressively lost all connections with their community and family (Gigliotti, 2009, p. 16). The experience in the boxcars was profoundly invasive and traumatizing.

Survivor testimonies illustrate this enormous range of traumatic experiences associated with transport and transit. Many of the experiences were a direct result of random and mundane changes in the administration and operation of the railway system; for example, as locomotives became scarce and needed to be used in the war effort, trains were lengthened and the boxcars loaded to the hilt. The weight of the train slowed them down, and subsequently, circuitous routes were devised to avoid congestion (Hilberg, 1998, p. 170). Raul Hilberg illustrates that operational problems, such as repairs on railway lines could lead to last-minute decisions in terms of the final destination of thousands of victims: hundreds of thousands of Jews from the Warsaw ghetto, who were supposed to be transported to the Sobibor extermination camp, were instead sent to Treblinka, as the Sobibor railway line was closed for repairs (Hilberg, 1998, p. 171).

## The victims' ashes

Beginning in the summer of 1942, the Germans began to implement *Operation 1005* – the code name for the clearance of all mass graves in order to erase evidence of genocidal crimes. The method of disposing of bodies, which was found to be most successful by SS *Standartenführer* Paul Blobel, involved creating funeral pyres in large pits made of railway tracks. The bodies were piled onto the “roasts”, doused with fuel and set alight, and remaining bones were crushed. In order to deal with the enormous task special units – *Sonderkommandos* - were created. Leon Wells, a survivor forced to serve in the Janowska *Sonderkommando* testified at the Eichmann trial. After they dug up the bodies from mass graves, they had to grind the bones that had remained intact after burning in a special bone grinding machine (Guttman, 1990, p. 11-14).



Fig. 4 Jewish prisoners forced to work for a *Sonderkommando* 1005 unit pose next to a bone crushing machine in the Janowska concentration camp. The photograph was taken by members of a Soviet war crimes commission in August 1944. Online.><http://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa5052><. Accessed Jan. 10, 2016.

As the allied forces liberated camps across Central and Eastern Europe, they encountered mounds of ashes and charred bones in all sites. In some instances, the remains were in the vicinity of the crematoria ovens, while in many other cases large amounts of ashes were found in nearby pits.



Fig. 5 A heap of ashes and bones shoveled out of the crematoria ovens in Buchenwald, Germany, April 14<sup>th</sup> 1945. Online. ><http://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa23288><. Accessed Jan. 10, 2016.



Fig. 6 A heap of ashes and bones at the crematoria in Dachau, Germany, 1945. Online. ><http://collections.yadvashem.org/photosarchive/en-us/101235.html><. Accessed Jan. 10, 2016.



Fig. 7 Two survivors at one of the human-ash pits in the Dora-Mittelbau concentration camp, located near Nordhausen, Germany, April-May 1945. Online. >[http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media\\_ph.php?MediaId=489](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_ph.php?MediaId=489)<. Accessed Jan. 10, 2016.



Fig. 8 Treblinka, pits with ashes. Online. ><http://collections.yadvashem.org/photosarchive/en-us/54136.html><. Accessed Jan. 10, 2016.

When the American troops entered the Ohrdruf concentration camp, they discovered piles of bodies, some partially incinerated on pyres. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who visited the camp on April 12, with Generals George S. Patton and Omar Bradley, recounted:

“When we began to approach with our troops, the Germans thought it expedient to remove the evidence of their crime. Therefore, they had some of the slaves exhume the bodies and place them on a mammoth griddle composed of 60-centimeter railway tracks laid on brick foundations. They poured pitch on the bodies and then built a fire of pinewood and coal under them” (USHMM website).



Fig. 9 Photograph taken at liberation of Ohrdruf concentration camps, Germany. American soldiers view the charred remains of prisoners burned upon a section of railway tracks. April 1945. Online. ><http://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa7889><. Accessed Jan. 10, 2016.



Fig. 10 Photograph taken at liberation of Ohrdruf concentration camps, Germany. American soldiers view the charred remains of prisoners burned upon a section of railway tracks. April 1945. Online. ><http://www.ushmm.org/information/exhibitions/online-features/special-focus/american-responses-to-the-holocaust><. Accessed Jan. 10, 2016.



Fig. 11 Photograph taken at liberation of Ohrdruf concentration camps, Germany. American soldiers view the charred remains of prisoners burned upon a section of railway tracks. April 1945. Online. ><http://www.ushmm.org/information/exhibitions/online-features/special-focus/american-responses-to-the-holocaust><. Accessed Jan. 10, 2016.

The shock of the sheer amounts of ashes can be captured from the testimony of Matvey Gershman who liberated Majdanek with the Soviet 8<sup>th</sup> Guards Army in 1944: “Ashes, ashes...they stored people’s ashes the way they stored women’s hair” (*Night Will Fall*, 2014).

The photographs taken by the liberating allied troops confirm the use of railway tracks for the burning of corpses in open pits. The ashes of victims of the Third Reich are literally scattered and blended with the soil across Europe. Over the course of the decades following WWII the ashes have assumed the status of sacred relics. The Holocaust-related memorial sites in Central and Eastern Europe face the challenge to provide a tangible location for the ashes in order

create a space for commemoration and mourning, yet, in reality, due to the amount of ashes which were scattered and buried, the location for a memorial will inevitably be rather symbolic than accurate.

### **3. Ashes and railway tracks as palimpsests and translocal assemblage**

I suggest, after conducting the three case studies and analyzing key elements of the locations as well as the visual representations, that the victims' ashes and railway tracks are at the core of Holocaust commemoration and representation. In order to support my argument, I will discuss the ashes<sup>6</sup> as well as the railway tracks through the lens of palimpsests while also drawing from Benjamin Walter's writings on memory; furthermore, I will illustrate that the ashes as well as the railway tracks can be perceived to be elements of a translocal assemblage.

Although the concept of palimpsest is used in a range of different disciplines, it is generally interpreted as diverse layers or aspects which lay beneath the surface. Walter Benjamin and Edward Casey both suggest that memories are attached to places, if not "richly rooted in them and inseparable about them" (Benjamin, 1999; Casey, 1983, p. 86). Casey illustrates the connections between the individual person and the topography around them by suggesting that "place ... is one of the main ways in which my being-in-the-world manifests itself" (1983, p. 88) and furthermore, that it is not only oneself who inhabits a given landscape, but that the landscape itself inhabits the person, "place in its landscape being imparts itself on me, permeates me. And, as the 'spirit of place', the *genius loci*, enters me, the visible becomes increasingly invisible" (Casey, 1983, p. 88).

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<sup>6</sup>I would like to take this opportunity to briefly refer to the Jewish law (Halachah) which is unequivocal in that the dead must be buried in the earth. Only Reform Judaism permits cremation. Clearly, the implications of the incinerations of millions of Jewish victims, from this perspective, are tremendous and complex. I cannot do justice to this topic in the context of this thesis and have therefore decided to not elaborate on it. However, the importance of this aspect clearly must be acknowledged and must be discussed elsewhere with respect and in detail.

I suggest that the ashes of the victims of the Nazis are representative of memories that are contained in places. They materialize the intangible *genius loci* as well as the fragile membranes between the tangible and intangible traces of memory, remembrance, visible and invisible traces of the Holocaust. The materiality of the ashes itself is barely visible. It does not leave clear traces and its trace is lost as it is touched. The very nature of ashes is such that it disintegrates and scatters. As a fleeting, decomposing, disintegrating and unstructured mass the ashes remain in the present. The ashes are material and intangible at the same time. They have left traces and shaped the European landscapes, yet, they have also merged with the local soils and continue to impact vegetation. While ashes cannot be defined as a specific object or item, they are *something*. They cannot represent what was – yet, at the same time, they remain from what was.

The victims' ashes represent a material palimpsest while they also represent palimpsests of memories. The ashes are scattered across landscapes, mingled with soils, submerged in rivers. They exist beneath the surface, yet, if one would attempt to retrieve them, their very structure would disintegrate. The ashes can only continue to exist if they remain untouched.

The memories of the victims who experienced their death cannot be remembered or retrieved. No memories can exist of the events these individuals went through, as they did not survive. While Holocaust survivors, perpetrators and other witnesses have memories of the events, they did not experience their own death in these circumstances. Yet, the memories of the victims have merged with the location at which they were deposited in a material way. They have thus become the *genius loci*. I suggest, that as people visit Holocaust memorial sites and commemorate the victims of the Third Reich, it is this aspect of the location they are connecting with. Edward Casey illustrates the relationship between memory, place and remembrance. He argues that remembrance is always in the present, and while “remembering begins and ends in place even as it traverses the most distantly located personal pasts, a past it brings incisively into present place, into the now-and-here of remembrance” (1983, p. 95).

Railway tracks have a deep connection with the victims' ashes. Not only was the German railway system intimately involved with the murder and exploitation of the victims of the Third Reich, but the actual tracks became tools which were utilized in the destruction of the bodies. Tracks were used to create the funeral pyres on which the victims' bodies were burned. There were not only used on occasion, but they became part of a standardized method which was utilized in all camps and in all killing sites to destroy all physical evidence of genocidal murder. I have argued above that the railway tracks and ramp at Auschwitz-Birkenau (as well as at other extermination sites) were designed and built to achieve a particular social effect and political purpose. The political practice of mass murder manifested itself in the ways specific objects and structures were employed to exercise power.

While the ramp and the railway tracks leading into Auschwitz-Birkenau have become iconographic images of the Holocaust and sites of commemoration, the fact that they are a material manifestation of genocidal ideology and policy is perhaps overlooked. Furthermore, the intimate connection of the tracks itself with the destruction of the victims' bodies is also an aspect which has been neglected in scholarly research.

I suggest that relations and connections exist between each of the three sites as well as the three films I discussed in this thesis, and that these, in turn, are also a part of a broader web of a translocal assemblage which transgresses spacio-temporal boundaries. On the most surface layer, all three camps were created and operated within the context of genocidal and racial ideology. All three camps are located in Poland. All camps across Europe were part of the extensive railway system which spans across the continent. Millions of individuals from various regions of Europe were transported along the railway network, while tons of valuables and personal belongings were shipped along the same tracks. All three sites have become Holocaust memorial sites, and are locations that are sought out for commemorative rituals.

The filmic representations of the sites share metaphorical imagery, which is employed to allude to the fate of the victims. For example, in all three films locomotives, trains, train stations and

platforms, the noise of a whistle, the hiss of steam, the clacking of wheels along railway tracks, and the squealing of breaks, and most specifically boxcars, all signify – beyond the obvious aspect of deportation – finality, the power exercised by the Third Reich through technology and bureaucracy, captivity, powerlessness and terror. The plumes of smoke and steam emerging from the locomotives symbolize and foreshadow the death by gas and the subsequent incineration of the body. The smoke in the sky also evokes the flakes of ashes which would be carried by the wind and settle in the surrounding landscape.

### **Ashes and railway tracks in translocal Holocaust memorialization**

The ashes of victims have become incorporated in rituals and places for Holocaust commemoration around the world.<sup>7</sup> In 1961, Yad Vashem in Israel inaugurated the Hall of Remembrance. A stone crypt containing ashes of Holocaust victims is located in this ceremonial space. At the groundbreaking ceremonies of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum at the Mall in Washington, D. C. two milk cans containing soil and ashes from a number of the concentration and extermination camps were buried. At the Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris, urns inscribed with the name of the camps contain earth from the sites and ashes from their crematoria. The Broken Mirrors memorial in Amsterdam's Wertheim Park contains an urn with victims' ashes from Auschwitz.

Holocaust commemoration around the world has incorporated boxcars, railway tracks and train stations: for example, boxcars are on display in the United States Holocaust Museum, Washington, D.C.; in the Florida Holocaust Museum; at Yad Vashem in Israel; and at the Holocaust memorial center in Drancy, France. An increasing number of memorials are related to sites of deportation and focus on railway tracks and train stations.

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<sup>7</sup> For the purpose of this thesis I focus specifically on filmic and tangible representations of Holocaust commemoration, such as memorials, museums and sites. While Holocaust commemoration is expressed through a variety of other cultural forms as well, such as literature, music and art, to address the depth and breadth of these topics would go vastly beyond the frame of this paper.

## Memorials referring to or displaying the ashes at Holocaust sites in Poland



Fig. 12 Pond of Ashes at Birkenau. Online. ><https://israelightly.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/auschwitz-birkenau-2011-07-10-214.jpg><. Accessed Jan. 10, 2016.



Fig. 13 Mound of ashes at Majdanek. Online. ><http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/because-i-am-a-jew/><. Accessed Jan. 10, 2016.



Fig. 14 Mound of ashes at Sobibor. Online. ><http://www.timesofisrael.com/70-years-after-revolt-sobibor-secrets-are-yet-to-be-unearthed/><. Accessed Jan. 10, 2016.

## Memorials related to transport, deportation and railway tracks



Fig. 15 Memorial at Belzec. Online. ><http://www.belzec.eu/articles.php?acid=85&mref=43><. Accessed Jan. 23, 2016.



Fig. 15 Memorial to the Slovakian victims of the Holocaust. Zvolen, Slovakia. Online. >[http://images.google.de/imgres?imgurl=http%3A%2F%2F3.bp.blogspot.com%2F-HFWl-FVltpM%2FUcgD3iThgkl%2FAAAAAAABTho%2FPvWm8Uq8pA8%2Fs1600%2FDSC00760.jpg&imgrefurl=http%3A%2F%2Fbruckis-sammelsurium.blogspot.com%2F2013%2F06%2Fzvolen.html&h=800&w=600&tbnid=wsUZDTI9NGvX3M%3A&docid=RWBclqIkS2rxAM&ei=Q66SVvKUBcfD0gT13p7oDQ&tbm=isch&iact=rc&uact=3&dur=774&page=2&start=22&ndsp=29&ved=0ahUKEwiywpzc-p\\_KAhXHoZQKHxWvB90QrQMImwEwKA<\\_](http://images.google.de/imgres?imgurl=http%3A%2F%2F3.bp.blogspot.com%2F-HFWl-FVltpM%2FUcgD3iThgkl%2FAAAAAAABTho%2FPvWm8Uq8pA8%2Fs1600%2FDSC00760.jpg&imgrefurl=http%3A%2F%2Fbruckis-sammelsurium.blogspot.com%2F2013%2F06%2Fzvolen.html&h=800&w=600&tbnid=wsUZDTI9NGvX3M%3A&docid=RWBclqIkS2rxAM&ei=Q66SVvKUBcfD0gT13p7oDQ&tbm=isch&iact=rc&uact=3&dur=774&page=2&start=22&ndsp=29&ved=0ahUKEwiywpzc-p_KAhXHoZQKHxWvB90QrQMImwEwKA<_)Accessed Jan. 10, 2016.



Fig. 16 Memorial to the deported victims of the Holocaust at the Bubny Railway station in Prague, Czech Republic. Online.  
><http://www.radio.cz/en/section/curraffrs/prague-takes-first-step-towards-holocaust-memorial><. Accessed Feb. 18, 2016.



Fig. 17 Memorial to the deported Jews. Schipkau, Germany. Online.  
>[http://images.google.de/imgres?imgurl=https%3A%2F%2Fupload.wikimedia.org%2Fwikipedia%2Fcommons%2Fthumb%2F%2F%2FDenkmalSchipkau.JPG%2F320px-DenkmalSchipkau.JPG&imgrefurl=https%3A%2F%2Fde.wikipedia.org%2Fwiki%2FVerlorener\\_Zug&h=240&w=320&tbnid=qpfJhVGoxyf0nM%3A&docid=C28NKXfRQx0ziM&ei=hbCSVsi2OIm30ASqqrjQBg&tbn=isch&iact=rc&uact=3&dur=3634&page=1&start=0&ndsp=29&ved=0ahUKEwiljZ7w\\_J\\_KAhWJG5QKHSovDmoQrQMILDAF](http://images.google.de/imgres?imgurl=https%3A%2F%2Fupload.wikimedia.org%2Fwikipedia%2Fcommons%2Fthumb%2F%2F%2FDenkmalSchipkau.JPG%2F320px-DenkmalSchipkau.JPG&imgrefurl=https%3A%2F%2Fde.wikipedia.org%2Fwiki%2FVerlorener_Zug&h=240&w=320&tbnid=qpfJhVGoxyf0nM%3A&docid=C28NKXfRQx0ziM&ei=hbCSVsi2OIm30ASqqrjQBg&tbn=isch&iact=rc&uact=3&dur=3634&page=1&start=0&ndsp=29&ved=0ahUKEwiljZ7w_J_KAhWJG5QKHSovDmoQrQMILDAF)<. Accessed Jan. 10, 2016.



Fig. 18 Memorial at the former transit camp Westerbork, Netherlands. Online.  
><https://netherlaura.wordpress.com/2013/12/11/westerbork/><. Accessed Jan. 10, 2016.



Fig. 19 Memorial to the deported Jews and Sinti, Darmstadt, Germany. Online.  
>[http://images.google.de/imgres?imgurl=http%3A%2F%2Fgedenkorte.sintiundroma.de%2Fabbildungen%2F12%2FDarmstadt\\_G%2525C3%2525BCterbahnhof.JPG&imgrefurl=http%3A%2F%2Fgedenkorte.sintiundroma.de%2Findex.php%3FortID%3D12&h=647&w=900&tbnid=ry63eh6FQbdGZM%3A&docid=NokN\\_G1SQDIXFM&ei=GrGSVqCwMYi70gTg6pfQCg&tbm=isch&iact=rc&uact=3&dur=436&page=11&start=307&ndsp=30&ved=0ahUKEwignpZ23\\_Z\\_KAhWlnZQKHWD1Bao4rAIQrQMInzAR<\\_](http://images.google.de/imgres?imgurl=http%3A%2F%2Fgedenkorte.sintiundroma.de%2Fabbildungen%2F12%2FDarmstadt_G%2525C3%2525BCterbahnhof.JPG&imgrefurl=http%3A%2F%2Fgedenkorte.sintiundroma.de%2Findex.php%3FortID%3D12&h=647&w=900&tbnid=ry63eh6FQbdGZM%3A&docid=NokN_G1SQDIXFM&ei=GrGSVqCwMYi70gTg6pfQCg&tbm=isch&iact=rc&uact=3&dur=436&page=11&start=307&ndsp=30&ved=0ahUKEwignpZ23_Z_KAhWlnZQKHWD1Bao4rAIQrQMInzAR<_)Accessed Jan. 10, 2016.



Fig. 20 Memorial at Gleis 1 to the deported Jews, Heidelberg, Germany. Online.

>[http://images.google.de/imgres?imgurl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.heidelberg.de%2Fsite%2FHeidelberg\\_ROOT%2Fget%2F538405%2F13\\_bild\\_Gurs-Mahnmal2014\\_by\\_Rothe.jpg&imgrefurl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.heidelberg.de%2Fhd%2CLde%2F30\\_07\\_2014%2BMahnmal%2B erinnert%2Ban%2BDeportation%2Bnach%2BGurs.html&h=533&w=800&tbnid=IJHPQ77iryLGM%3A&docid=6-\\_935XTowgh6M&ei=OLOSVoDxG4ir0QSTlqhA&tbm=isch&iact=rc&uact=3&dur=1880&page=1&start=0&ndsp=25&ved=0ahUKEwiA7cC5\\_5\\_KahWIVZQKHRMLCggQrQMIHjAA](http://images.google.de/imgres?imgurl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.heidelberg.de%2Fsite%2FHeidelberg_ROOT%2Fget%2F538405%2F13_bild_Gurs-Mahnmal2014_by_Rothe.jpg&imgrefurl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.heidelberg.de%2Fhd%2CLde%2F30_07_2014%2BMahnmal%2B erinnert%2Ban%2BDeportation%2Bnach%2BGurs.html&h=533&w=800&tbnid=IJHPQ77iryLGM%3A&docid=6-_935XTowgh6M&ei=OLOSVoDxG4ir0QSTlqhA&tbm=isch&iact=rc&uact=3&dur=1880&page=1&start=0&ndsp=25&ved=0ahUKEwiA7cC5_5_KahWIVZQKHRMLCggQrQMIHjAA)<. Accessed Jan. 10, 2016.



Fig. 21 Memorial to the victims from the sub-camps of the concentration camp Buchenwald. Online.

>[http://images.google.de/imgres?imgurl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ruhrnachrichten.de%2Fstorage%2Fpic%2Fmdhl%2Fartikelbilder%2F5004867\\_1\\_dpa\\_148C5A00DFBA6CF1.jpg%253Fversion%253D1421166090&imgrefurl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ruhrnachrichten.de%2Fstaedte%2Fschwerte%2FDebatte-ueber-Fluechtlingsunterkunft-Boeckeluehr-aeussert-sich-am-Freitag-zur-SS-Baracke%3Bart937%2C2593322&h=599&w=900&tbnid=nQEM0pEGXgVf0M%3A&docid=zN4Z6RuAjHxDyM&ei=XLWSVqG8G4a80gTyy5XAAQ&tbm=isch&iact=rc&uact=3&dur=882&page=1&start=0&ndsp=25&ved=0ahUKEwih2ue-gaDKAhUGnpQKHfJIBRgQrQMIUDAR](http://images.google.de/imgres?imgurl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ruhrnachrichten.de%2Fstorage%2Fpic%2Fmdhl%2Fartikelbilder%2F5004867_1_dpa_148C5A00DFBA6CF1.jpg%253Fversion%253D1421166090&imgrefurl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ruhrnachrichten.de%2Fstaedte%2Fschwerte%2FDebatte-ueber-Fluechtlingsunterkunft-Boeckeluehr-aeussert-sich-am-Freitag-zur-SS-Baracke%3Bart937%2C2593322&h=599&w=900&tbnid=nQEM0pEGXgVf0M%3A&docid=zN4Z6RuAjHxDyM&ei=XLWSVqG8G4a80gTyy5XAAQ&tbm=isch&iact=rc&uact=3&dur=882&page=1&start=0&ndsp=25&ved=0ahUKEwih2ue-gaDKAhUGnpQKHfJIBRgQrQMIUDAR)<. Accessed Jan. 10, 2016.



Fig. 22 Memorial to the deported Jews Gleis 17, Berlin-Grünwald, Germany. Online.

>[http://images.google.de/imgres?imgurl=http%3A%2F%2Fbilder4.n-tv.de%2Fimg%2Fincoming%2Forigs15082311%2F5192739438-w1000-h960%2F328D5600E864D7BC.jpg&imgrefurl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.n-tv.de%2Fpolitik%2FZwei-Staaten-Loesung-ist-Thema-Nummer-eins-article15082351.html&h=665&w=1000&tbnid=\\_zplcROjvRM1-M%3A&docid=pMGck0gJlhZTTM&ei=c7eSVuHUMYPA0gSshb9o&tbn=isch&iact=rc&uact=3&dur=998&page=2&start=42&ndsp=50&ved=0ahUKewih2ou-g6DKAhUDQJQKHazCDw0QrQMI7AEwQw<](http://images.google.de/imgres?imgurl=http%3A%2F%2Fbilder4.n-tv.de%2Fimg%2Fincoming%2Forigs15082311%2F5192739438-w1000-h960%2F328D5600E864D7BC.jpg&imgrefurl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.n-tv.de%2Fpolitik%2FZwei-Staaten-Loesung-ist-Thema-Nummer-eins-article15082351.html&h=665&w=1000&tbnid=_zplcROjvRM1-M%3A&docid=pMGck0gJlhZTTM&ei=c7eSVuHUMYPA0gSshb9o&tbn=isch&iact=rc&uact=3&dur=998&page=2&start=42&ndsp=50&ved=0ahUKewih2ou-g6DKAhUDQJQKHazCDw0QrQMI7AEwQw<). Accessed Jan. 10, 2016.

Considering the vital role of trains, boxcars, locomotives, railway tracks and train stations in all three films as well as in Holocaust remembrance around the world, I argue that there is a clear connection between iconographic Holocaust imagery and Holocaust commemoration.

Furthermore, I suggest that the burning of bodies and ashes are frequently referred to symbolically as smoke or steam in all three films (as well as in the direct representations of ashes and incinerating bodies in *Schindler's List*); this is reflected in the role of ashes in Holocaust commemoration around the world.

The sacredness of the victims' ashes as well as the obvious role of the railway tracks in transporting the deportees to their death has been recognized in filmic representations of Holocaust sites as well as in Holocaust memorialization. Yet, the connection between the ashes and memory, and the chilling relationship between the ashes and railway tracks lies beneath the surface. It is perhaps the most fragile structure of the ashes that truly bears witness to the lost lives of the countless victims. Just as the lived lives of the victims, their relationships, emotions, dreams, hopes and fears have disappeared with them, a most delicate trace has remained. While the ashes at the Holocaust sites in many instances have become one with the

local soil, they are nevertheless *here* and allow present-day visitors to these places to connect with *them*.

The ashes at the Holocaust sites which are not only beneath the surface but have in fact merged with the local soils, thus, while they exist materially, they are not necessarily visible. Edward Casey argues that memory has more to do with absence than with presence: by implication, what is remembered exists in the past and is absent in the present (1981, p. 255). The act of remembering involves a temporal and spatial “fusion of horizons” (Casey, 1981). The ashes at the Holocaust sites – as well as in memorials around the world – represent a similar fusion of horizons in that they represent traces of something that is essentially absent. While tangible Holocaust objects and structures facilitate the act of ‘remembering’ the Holocaust through their materiality, the ashes are elusive, and, at the same time, profoundly representative of the individuals who lost their lives. The ashes are molecular fragments of bodies as well as of memories, and hence can be perceived to be the only remaining witnesses of an unwitnessed event (Felman, Laub, 1991). If the ashes are indeed witnesses – bearing witness to death – we, as we gaze at them at memorials, become witnesses.

Public interest and debate surrounding Holocaust commemoration and the witnessing of the Holocaust particularly through the cinematic representations has recently been revived through the release of two remarkable films: Andre Singer’s documentary *Night Will Fall* (2014) and László Nemes’ film *Son of Saul* (2015). These two films emerge at a point in time when recent research has established that approximately one-third of the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust did not die in camps, but rather in mass shootings across Eastern Europe (Desbois, 2008). These bodies were initially buried in pits and ravines, but in the *Sonderaktion 1005* many were dug up again and the decomposing corpses were incinerated and the ashes scattered or buried. The majority of these sites are unrecorded, and the history of the events and sites is currently collected through multi-disciplinary research carried out by coordinated efforts of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as well as local agencies and organizations.

In his film *Son of Saul* director László Nemes sought to move beyond the conventional techniques of filmmaking and succeeded in finding a new spectrum and a new cinematic language to represent the unimaginable experience through a visual format. Through the character of Saul, a member of the *Sonderkommando* at Auschwitz-Birkenau in the fall of 1944, the audience catches glimpses of the stages and processes of the industrialized killings in Birkenau. As Saul moves through the film – and through the micro-cosmos in which the *Sonderkommando* operated, including the gas chambers, the crematoria, the burning pits, the ware houses and their living space – the audience observes how the victims are ushered into the undressing room and further into the gas chamber; how the bodies are dragged from the gas chamber, piled onto an electrical hoist, which brings them to the ground level where they are burned in the crematoria ovens; how the ashes are shoveled into the river. Saul discovers a young boy who he believes is his son among the dead and he is determined to find a rabbi to give the boy a burial. Saul's story is set in the larger historical context of the planned uprising, and Saul's desperate mission is closely interwoven with the ensuing events.

Nemes' film is intensely focused on the phenomenological and emotional experiences of the protagonist. Instead of the conventional third-person point of view, the audience shares Saul's point of view and can therefore not escape from seeing what he is seeing. The depth of field is shallow, the frame close-up consisting of long unbroken shots of Saul's face with the background an out-of-focus blur. This perspective heightens the tunnel vision experienced by Saul. Saul is continually surrounded by a cacophony of noises: the constant shouting of the SS officers and Kapos<sup>8</sup>; the barking of dogs; gun shots; trucks driving past; a multitude of languages; the deafening screams of the victims in the gas chamber. The members of the *Sonderkommando* are continuously threatened, beaten, shouted at and forced to move and work at a high pace. This sense of terror is heightened by the random acts of killings and brutality. The viewer is trapped with Saul in the moment, and the camera does not offer any relief, which is reminiscent of a nightmare one is unable to awake from. This claustrophobic

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<sup>8</sup> Kapos were camp inmates who were assigned as guards by the SS over the other prisoners to, for example, supervising forced labor.

experience is in sharp contrast with the glimpses of lush green trees, reflections of sunlight on the river and the singing birds.

Géza Röhrig's (as Saul) performance is at a low-key level, his face is dehumanized. Any communications with other characters are conducted in urgent, hoarse whispers. Yet, there are brief moments throughout the film where Saul's humanity appears, for example, when – for a heartbeat – Saul pauses and takes in his surroundings; as he tenderly and gently washes the boy's body; in the subtle softening of his features as he gazes at the boy's face; through deliberate deep breaths as he seeks to control his emotions, and finally in his relentless, single-minded determination to treat the boy's dead body with dignity and respect.

The film does not use any of the usual imagery of the Holocaust, such as the Birkenau gate, boxcars or chimneys. Instead, through the intense focus on the phenomenological experience of the protagonist in a disorienting environment, exposed to constant terror and sensory overload the film succeeds in communicating the incomprehensible.

Nemes' film exemplifies Casey's notion of the "fusion of horizons": through the cinematic techniques of the film the viewer experiences a fusion of horizons between their own position in 2016 in the audience of a movie theater, and the character of Saul, a member of the *Sonderkommando* in Birkenau in 1944. The format and language through which Nemes narrates the story of Saul transgresses the boundaries between the images on screen and the audience. The sensuous process involved in watching the film resembles the experiences of the protagonist in that it leaves the viewer utterly overwhelmed and disoriented.

The new format and language which Nemes forged for his film transgresses the boundaries between the unimaginable events of the Holocaust and the post-Auschwitz generation: rather than depicting the Holocaust as an abstract event from a third-person's perspective, he places the viewer at Saul's side. By holding the gaze watching as the horrors unfold, Nemes resembles to some extent Lanzmann's determined listening to the survivors' testimony. Through this process – the direct gaze and the focused listening – the viewer and the listener fuse horizons with the witness.

The unmarked mass graves of the Holocaust as well as *Son of Saul* confront us with the reality of perfected mechanisms of dehumanization and suffering which was inflicted by the Nazis with the intention to destroy the victims' humanity and body to the extent that the last traces of their existence were literally ground into the soil. However, the very aspects which the Nazis sought to erase – the evidence of the victims' existence and lives as well as their memories – have survived in the microscopic particles of ashes which are distributed throughout the European landscape as well as around the world. The ashes serve as a reminder of the actual efforts made by the Nazis to erase lives, and they may perhaps also remind us of the layers of destruction which were suffered by the victims.

## Conclusion

In this thesis I explored the symbiotic relationship and dialogue between iconic visual representations of Holocaust films and Holocaust sites and the role of these two subjects in the experience of 'witnessing' the Holocaust as well as in processes of Holocaust memorialization. By drawing from a selection of interdisciplinary theoretical concepts I illustrated how Holocaust films are relating to an archive of memories which was created through documentary film and photographs taken at the liberation of the concentration and extermination camps of the Third Reich, subsequently widely published and broadcasted. I investigated how Holocaust films represent Holocaust sites through a variety of cinematic strategies. I discussed the role of Holocaust sites as material witnesses, not only through their obvious, visible structures or memorials but also because the remains and memories of the victims have fundamentally merged with the material aspects of the sites. As I analyzed the continuities between the history of the sites, the sites in the present and their representation in the related film a common 'language' began to emerge not only between the three Holocaust films, but also between the three sites and across sites, films and Holocaust commemorative culture: the images of plumes of smoke or steam represent and are related (materially as well as metaphorically) with the ashes of the victims.

What emerged as a result of my research was the realization that what we – as the post-Auschwitz generation – 'remember' when we commemorate the Holocaust are first, our own experiences of 'witnessing' (and learning about) the Holocaust through films and images and perhaps eyewitness testimonies, but we also engage in a very subtle way with the memories of the victims: the images of smoke allude to the burning of the bodies as well as to the ashes which have merged with local soils. It is essentially the ashes of the victims that are the most profound, yet, at the same time, most fragile and elusive carrier of memories. Whether we watch a Holocaust film with its symbolic language or walk around a Holocaust site, the ashes (and memories) of the victims are always just beneath the surface. They are not visible, such as intact structures or objects, but they exist as traces and in a very material way – and it is this elusive, dark and remote aspect of the Holocaust which we engage with.

When I began the in-depth research of the three case studies I had a roughly formed idea – or perhaps expectation – of parallels I would find between the films and the sites, and the relationships which exist between iconographic images and objects and people’s ‘memories’ of the Holocaust in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What gradually emerged as I continued to probe and explore the dark recesses of the materiality and the memories of the Holocaust was a chilling experience. Due to my longstanding interest in the Holocaust, a consciousness of the victims’ ashes – and the associated previous processes, such as the persecution, deportation, murder and incineration – always existed. However, I had not previously explored the detailed, mundane steps taken by the perpetrators to destroy the very molecular structure of their victims. As I read the details of the planning processes and subsequent execution of *Sonderaktion 1005* I frequently had to pause in my research and writing. Through the process of writing my thesis I, too, have engaged in the processes of Holocaust memorialization. While Holocaust commemorative culture is highly diverse and some forms of representation or expression have stirred much debate it is nevertheless through the continued exploration of the intangible aspects of memory that we can pay our respect to the victims.

Perhaps no other metaphor is more suitable to describe the agency of the ashes than palimpsests. Not only are the ashes a palimpsest in a material sense, but also in that sense that they carry in their very structure the fragments of past lives and memories, yet, these traces are so fragile and elusive that they can never truly be retrieved.

A similar situation emerges in the three Holocaust films I discussed in the context of this thesis: the three films represent different levels of transparency and ‘tangibility’: for example, *Schindler’s List* depicts the burning of the corpses and the ashes falling from the sky. *Holocaust* evokes the death by gas and the incineration of the bodies through symbolic imagery, such as smoke and steam. Both films rely on re-enactment of historical events to create a narrative. *Shoah* weaves a fabric of intersecting, multi-dimensional memories through the oral testimony of eyewitnesses, while continually relating the past, as it emerges from memory, with the materiality of the sites in the present.

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