

arte
SALES

SYNECDOCHE

PRESENT

THE FOUR SISTERS

FOUR FILMS BY
CLAUDE LANZMANN



These four women allow us to grasp the glowing core of what is most tragic and most noble in the human condition, and to me, this is more important than ever today.

Claude Lanzmann

NEW YORK FILM FESTIVAL
SPECIAL EVENTS



THE FOUR SISTERS

FOUR FILMS BY
CLAUDE LANZMANN

SHOOTING FORMAT 1.33 : 1
SCREENING FORMAT 1.85 : 1

SYNOPSIS

Paula Biren, Ruth Elias, Ada Lichtman, Hanna Marton: Four Jewish women, witnesses and survivors of the most insane and pitiless barbarism, and who, for that reason alone, but for many others also, deserve to be inscribed forever into the memory of humankind. What they have in common, beside the specific horrors to which each of them were subjected, is a searingly sharp, almost-physical intelligence, which rejects all pretense or faulty reasoning. In a word, idealism.

Filmed by Claude Lanzmann during the preparation of what would become *Shoah*, each of these four extraordinary women deserved a film in their own right, to fully illustrate their exceptional fiber, and to reveal through their gripping accounts four little-known chapters of the extermination.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE



Paula Biren, Ruth Elias, Ada Lichtman, and Hanna Marton; these four women, their faces, their voices, and their stories have never left me. And in a way, one can already detect their importance in the rest of my work. Paula Biren and Ruth Elias appear briefly in *Shoah*, although my decision to remain focused on the extermination process forced me to concentrate on the few surviving Sonderkommandos, who were exclusively male. Ada Lichtman and her husband are quoted by Yehuda Lerner in *Sobibor, October 14, 1943, 16PM*. As for Hanna Marton, she was very much in my thoughts during my preparatory work on the *The Last of the Unjust*.

The more I thought about these four women, the more the necessity to bring the spotlight on these female faces of the Shoah seemed important.

Each of them deals with a little-known chapter of the Holocaust, each from a unique point of view.

The essential Imperative for me was to find the right form to do justice to these four women, four distinct destinies in the face of total abjection, and four “sisters” through their incisive discourse and the power of their intelligence.

It quickly became apparent that it would not be possible to make a single film: Alternating between the words of one and another, depriving each of the continuity in their story by using them as elements relating to one another, was not an option. The incredible strength in each of them has to exist in its own right, and yet the exceptional quality they all share also had to come through – that searingly sharp, almost physical intelligence, and an irrepressible survival instinct which could not be extinguished, despite an apparently certain death awaiting them.

That is why this polyptych form in four portraits seemed most appropriate, and television the best medium.

But make no mistake, this is not a question of interviews or simple witness accounts. The power of these images comes first and foremost from the way they were filmed, almost 40 years ago. The whole challenge was to make possible this terrible story, which was often being expressed for the first time in a world that had not yet woken up to the reality of what was now called the *Shoah*. The aim was to capture with care the embodiment of these words, to accompany these women on another descent into the hells they had been through.

For what they give us, through their story and beyond, today and forever, to each of us, whoever we are, has no price. Their incredible courage in the depths of despair, their lifesaving ingenuity prompted by a visceral survival instinct, fierce intelligence and sensitivity enabled them to survive the petrification of annihilation.

PRODUCER'S NOTE

This work in four parts provides several radically new elements in the way the extermination of the Jews is seen.

Firstly, because it involves the voice of four women. While there are some major female figures known for surviving deportation, and who have given magnificent and gripping testimonies, the accounts from the heart of the extermination process are mainly masculine. These “four sisters”, their faces, their voices, their stories, are like a submerged continent that of the female reality of the extermination of the Jewish people, which they render intensely present. It is at once both astounding and deeply moving. But each of their individual stories also reveals a little-known chapter in the Shoah.

In the troubled times in which we live, when those who spread terror are attracting fresh followers, and when rightwing extremism had found a new platform of expression, while the Mediterranean turns into a graveyard, a world in which the place and representation of women is once again in question, the faces of these four liberated and strong women, with their piercingly accurate words, will I'm sure prove to be a lasting and valuable presence for younger generations, giving them the strength and courage to face the torment of contemporary life.

David Frenkel

BROADCASTER'S NOTE

The Four Sisters is not just some addition to Claude Lanzmann's filmography, but a series which gives meaning to his overall body of work, and which gives complete form to the universe that the director of Shoah has been painting over the past few decades. They are not additional films, but essential films.

Lanzmann has constructed a unique, singular universe, an irreplaceable element in the history of the century, and also in the history of cinema, and for the history of who we are. This universe is obviously that of the undertaking of the destruction of Europe's Jews. A moment in history which marked the lowest ebb in history itself.

These “four sisters”, through their specific contributions, perhaps provide the missing piece to the undertaking that began with Shoah – although it's difficult to talk in those terms about such a fundamental work.

With these films, Lanzmann's work can be seen in its totality. Through the multiple embodiments, the countless testimonies, he has put together a vision, one which brings out the full presence of the crime: No one can cover it up, either with lies or forgetfulness. This vision does not provide an answer to absolutely everything – an oeuvre is not simply a response, unequivocal and set in stone – but it tirelessly questions us, literally haunting our vision of the world with ever-renewed questions, making us face history, and in this case, ourselves.

ARTE has an unwavering commitment to these films, which we regard as an essential undertaking. These films, like Shoah and the films which followed, are central to our channel's mission to communicate, and can even be seen as emblematic in that sense.

Fabrice Puchault
Head of Society & Culture Department – ARTE France



RUTH ELIAS

THE HIPPOCRATIC OATH

RUNTIME: 89 MIN - LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

“When you are living in misery, you act like an animal, you follow your instincts. I’ve seen those animal instincts. The masks fell away, we were helpless, naked ; we had to show our true faces.”

Ruth Elias was 17 when the Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia in March 1939. An attractive young woman from Moravska Ostrava, a Czech industrial city blackened by coal mines, her family prospered thanks to her father’s non-kosher sausage factory.

After three years of hiding on a farm, the family was denounced and deported in April 1942 to the Theresienstadt camp. Reunited with her fiancé, Ruth immediately married. She stayed at the camp with her husband while the rest of the family was deported. Her father managed to get a letter to her from Poland, which she received thanks to the complicity of the Czech police, and which said: “We arrived in Poland, they separated the men and

women. Your mother didn’t want to be taken away from me, and she was executed before my eyes. Now I’m going to look for your sister Edith. If I can’t find her, I will commit suicide.”

Ruth Elias had to face death every night, having been assigned as a nurse in the barracks where the old were packed in in terrible conditions, described in detail by Benjamin Murelstein in *The Last of the Unjust*.

She managed to be hired in the kitchen since she could sing and was to be cheerful and uplifting. She could obtain a little extra food for herself, her husband, and her parents-in-law. When her husband became caretaker of the ghetto, he was allowed to live with his wife, who then left the overcrowded dormitories to live in a room with some other couples, allowing a degree of intimacy.

During the winter of 1943, Ruth found out she was pregnant. It was then that they learned they would be part of a convoy in December 1943 to Auschwitz. She was interred in what was called the “family camp”, which Rudolf Vrba and Philip Muller talk about in *Shoah*, a sort of quarantine for propaganda purposes within the perimeter of Birkenau, a few hundred meters from the gas chamber and crematoria. As her belly began to swell, she used every means she could to hide it. During a selection in June 1944, when she was eight months pregnant, she managed to be part of 1,000 women sent to clear rubble at a refinery that had been bombed in Hamburg, while the family camp was definitively liquidated. But an SS doctor spotted that she and another deportee were pregnant, and they were sent to Ravensbrück, and from there, back to Auschwitz.

Exploiting the administrative confusion, they passed themselves off as Czech political detainees and were sent to the women’s camp.

That was where Ruth Elias gave birth to a little girl. But Dr Mengele had noticed her, and ordered that her breasts be bound and the baby not fed. He wanted to know how long it would take a newborn to die without feeding. After several days and nights of her infant's pitiful moaning as she grew hopelessly weak, Mengele informed her that he would come and "take them" the following day. As she wept that night, a kapo woman doctor gave her a syringe of morphine for the baby. The woman could not administer the injection, she explained, because she had taken the Hippocratic oath which forbade her killing. Ruth had little choice but to deliver the fatal injection herself. Mengele was furious at not finding the baby, and not even her remains, which had been buried under that morning's pile of bodies. He told Ruth Elias that she would leave on the next transport.

She was sent to the camp at Taucha, a sub-camp of Buchenwald, from where she was liberated in 1945.



PAULA BIREN

BALUTY

RUNTIME: 63 MIN - LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

I met Paula Biren at the end of a winter's day in 1975 on a snowy sidewalk in New York. We were both sitting in on a three-day colloquium which brought together the top specialists on what was still called the Holocaust. In three days, I hadn't found a way to speak to her, to find out about her, or understand by what extraordinary good fortune she had managed to slip into our ranks of silent witnesses.

Two years later, we were a crew of nine. I had planned to meet Paula in Cincinnati, but the cost of the trip was beyond our means. She agreed to come to us, and we filmed for several days in the Florida sunshine, yet without banishing the drizzle of Lodz, so well was Paula able to transport us through space and time with her words and delivery. Of the hundreds of ghettos that dotted the Polish countryside, the one in Lodz existed

for longest. It was ruled with an iron fist by the president of the Jewish council of elders, Chaim Mordechai Rumkowski, known as “King Chaim”, who was convinced he could save part of the community by turning them into manpower to serve the Germans. As in the other ghettos, organized famine, exhaustion, and disease decimated the population packed into appalling housing. Almost 45,000 people died in the ghetto.

There are still archives, diaries, and even some photos of the Lodz ghetto, but witness accounts from survivors are quite rare. Paula Biren’s is all the more exceptional, since she was part of ghetto’s Jewish women police, and her account is underscored by her sharp eye for detail and her dazzling intelligence.

Paula remained until the end and was loaded onto the last “transport” to Auschwitz. Her mother and younger sister were gassed upon arrival. Her father, picked for work detail, died after a few days. What jumps out is Paula’s unwavering frankness.

She recounts the most appalling events with a sardonic cynicism. She never lies to herself, embellishes nothing, and her answers, sometimes a single word, are extraordinary lessons in truth.



ADA LICHTMAN

THE MERRY FLEA

RUNTIME: 51 MIN - LANGUAGE: GERMAN - SUBTITLES: ENGLISH

Ada Lichtman was faced with absolute horror from the start. On the day Germany invaded Poland, all the men in the little town of Wieliczka where she lived, 14 kilometers from Krakow, were rounded up by the Germans at five o’clock in the morning, driven to a nearby forest, and executed. These killers were artists and wanted people to know. They laid out the blood-soaked bodies in a semi-circle, feet together and heads around the edge, and started to take photos. Ada Lichtman’s father, a cobbler and shoe-decorator, was among those killed, along with some of the family’s friends and neighbors. From that moment on, Ada was haunted by one single question: Not “will I live or die?”, but “how will I be killed?” Death, for Ada, was a certainty; the way the Germans were going to kill her was the problem, to which she didn’t have the key. After many appeals to the town hall, the families were allowed to bury their dead, but the agony was set

to continue. Every day, the Germans took people away for forced labor and savagely killed them. They rounded up the Jewish men and shaved them with knives until they bled, sometimes tearing the skin from their faces. The Germans invented games which amused them greatly. For example, they would put a whip in the hand of a Jew, who had to pretend to whip a German. Later on, they issued an order for Jews to wear a badge on their arms, a white band with a blue star. After her father's death, Ada's fiancé, who had previously fled the German advance towards the USSR, returned to Russia. They were married, but contrary to their hopes, they could not get to the other side of the river Bug and had to stay in Poland.

After the constant struggle to find food, Ada and her comrades were driven from village to village, sometimes on foot, sometimes in carts, then in a train of cattle wagons, the doors locked shut by the guards. They had neither air nor water. Then the train was stopped and everyone was ordered to strip naked for disinfection. They were taken from one wagon to another, passing under a scalding hot shower, then an icy one. Then the German soldiers came and put them into whatever couples they liked. For example, old Jewish men with young girls, all naked, forced to dance. And more besides, which they were forced to witness. This continued until their arrival in Sobibor, which was the terminus of the journey, and where more than 250,000 Jews from across Europe were murdered in the gas chambers. Ada Lichtman arrived in Sobibor in the summer of 1942, and was assigned to the laundry, where she stayed until the revolt of October 14, 1943 when she managed to escape.

She is part of the 50 people who survived. She can therefore provide a rare insight into the daily life of a woman in the heart of a camp entirely dedicated to extermination for almost the entire duration of its lifespan.



HANNA MARTON

NOAH'S ARK

RUNTIME: 68 MIN - LANGUAGE: HEBREW/FRENCH - SUBTITLES: ENGLISH

I've never heard an account that is as constantly, relentlessly painful as the one that Hanna Marton gave me when I filmed her during the shoot for *Shoah* in her Jerusalem apartment. I was trying to understand how she had been part of the train which, with Eichmann's agreement, saved hundreds of Hungarian Jews, while at the same time, some 450,000 of their kin were dying in the gas chambers of Birkenau, or else being burned alive in the open air because the crematoria could not keep up the pace that the Nazi killers demanded.

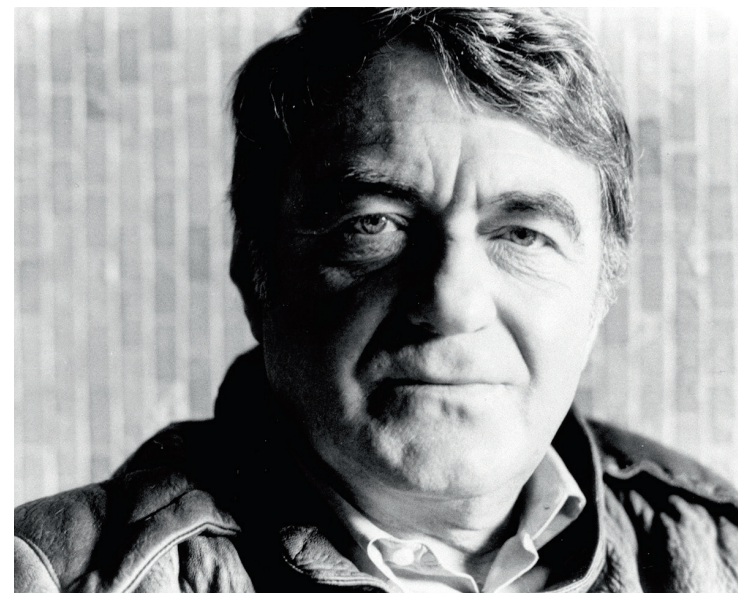
Rudolf Kastner was a Zionist leader of the Aide and Rescue Committee (Vaada) founded in January 1943 to help Jewish refugees who had come to Hungary. In 1944, when the Nazis were starting to deport Jews, Kastner negotiated with Eichmann and with Kurt Becher. Himmler's personal economic

representative in Hungary to secure a train with 1684 Jews to go to a neutral country in exchange for payment. Of these, 388 people came from Kastner's native city of Cluj, including Hanna Marton and her husband and also Dr Jozsef Fischer, member of the Judenrat in Cluj and Kastner's father in law.

The train left Budapest on the 30th of June, but was halted for three days in a siding at Mosonmagyaróvár, a small town near Hungary's borders with Austria and Slovakia, where the passengers were gripped with panic when the rumor spread that in fact, they were headed for Auschwitz. The train finally moved on and arrived on 9 July at Bergen-Belsen, where the passengers were interned in barracks to one side, before 318 of them left for Switzerland on 18 August, followed by the remaining 1,350 on 4 December. The latter group crossed the border on 7 December 1944 at St. Margrethen.

Kastner, himself a Zionist, had mainly chosen other Zionists to make up the convoy, which also included some of the very rich, along with some writers and artists. In short, the elite. This was all unbearable, and Hanna Marton's moving tears are ample proof.

DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Claude Lanzmann was born in Paris, into a family of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. He joined the French resistance at the age of 17 and fought in the Auvergne. He lectured at Berlin University during the Berlin Blockade of 1948-9 and first met Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir in 1952. They befriended him, and he contributed to their journal *Les Temps Modernes* – of which he is now the chief editor. Until 1970, he divided his time between journalism and writing for *Les Temps Modernes*.

Lanzmann began making films in 1970. His first film, *Israel, Why* (1973) explored the question of Jewish identity via a subjective journey through a country, a memory and a condition.

Almost 30 years after Jean-Paul Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew*, it reopened a debate whose terms had been profoundly altered by the Holocaust and the birth of the state of Israel.

He took the exploration further in his groundbreaking work *Shoah*, which made cinema history and had worldwide repercussions following its release in 1985. His 1994 film *Tsahal* focused on the Israeli army, while *Sobibor, Oct. 14, 1943, 4 p.m.* (1997) and *A Visitor from the Living* (2001) continued the work he had begun with *Shoah*.

On February 14th, 2013, the Berlin Film Festival awarded Lanzmann with a Golden Bear in recognition for his life's work. In *The Last of the Unjust*, presented at Cannes in 2013, he tackled the issue of the Jewish Councils and examined the unique role assigned to Theresienstadt in the plans for the Final Solution.

Napalm – his eighth film, presented in the 2017 Cannes Film Festival's Official Selection – is the story of a brief but life changing encounter in 1958 between Claude Lanzmann – French member of the first delegation from Western Europe to be officially invited to North Korea after the devastating Korean War that left 4 million civilians dead – and a nurse of the Korean Red Cross Hospital in Pyongyang.

In 2009, he published an autobiography titled *The Patagonian Hare: A Memoir*; it was awarded with several prizes and translated in more than ten languages.

In 2012, he published *The Tomb of the Divine Diver*, a collection of texts written over the span of 60 years of his lifetime.

In 2017 a collective book is published in his honor: "*Claude Lanzmann, Un voyant dans le siècle*", in which filmmakers like Arnaud Desplechin, Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne; philosophers such as Marcel Gauchet, Patrice Maniglier, Axel Honneth or Eric Marty; writers like Philippe Sollers and Boualem Sansal, among others, deliver their perception and admiration of Claude Lanzmann's achievements in cinema, literature, philosophy, its importance and international prestige.

Claude Lanzmann was awarded the French Resistance Medal with rosette; he is a High Officer of the Legion of Honor and a Grand Cross of the National Order of Merit.

FILMS BY CLAUDE LANZMANN

- *ISRAEL, WHY* (1973)
- *SHOAH* (1985)
- *TSAHAL* (1994)
- *A VISITOR FROM THE LIVING* (1997)
- *SOBIBOR, OCTOBER 14th 1943, 4 pm* (2001)
- *THE KARSKI REPORT* (2010)
- *THE LAST OF THE UNJUST* (2013)
- *NAPALM* (2017)
- *THE FOUR SISTERS* (2017)

arte
SALES

AUDREY KAMGA
A-KAMGA@ARTEFRANCE.FR

ALEC HERRMANN
A-HERRMANN@ARTEFRANCE.FR

SALES.ARTE.TV