

# The Holocaust Historiography Project

Remarkable Nonsense about the Holocaust

## Nazi Eye Drops

TELEVISION REVIEW

### Bearing witness to the Holocaust

By John Koch, Globe Staff, 5/25/2000

Proliferating knowledge about the Holocaust can cause horror-overload and shock-fatigue. Historical information and images intended to deepen our awareness of the horrors sometimes have a conversely desensitizing effect.

But the very special "The Last Days," an Academy Award-winning documentary having its TV debut tonight on HBO, breaks through this barrier. It goes straight to the heart with its searingly intimate and often poetically detailed and charged remembrances of five Holocaust survivors. Confronted with this first feature released by Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation, we can't turn away from even the most ghastly acts of sadism and mass murder. To do so would seem tantamount to denying the humanity of the remarkable, resilient men and women at the core of it.

Just consider Renee Firestone's vivid girlhood memories. In a concentration camp where she had been deported, Renee is given eyedrops by a Nazi doctor, then confined in a dark dungeon with other girls. **The groundwater rising to their ankles serves as both latrine and well. The eye medication that blinds some of the young people for days turns out to be part of a failed experiment in altering human eye color.**

Elsewhere, another Holocaust survivor, **California Congressman Tom Lantos, explains how at the end of the war, the Nazis constructed special burn pits "using Jews' own fat as fuel" to expedite the Reich's hurry-up killing schedule.**

"The Last Days" is the story of the rapid, rabid late 1944 Nazi assault on Hungary's Jewish population. Even as they were staring at defeat, the Germans speeded up efforts to erase Europe's remaining Jews. With the aid of indigenous Nazis and cooperative noncombatants, Hitler's killing machine did to Hungary's Jews in four months what had taken more than a decade to do to Germany's Jewish population.

The substance of this unforgettable film is the on-camera recollections of five Hungarian survivors, all now Americans. The specificity of personal detail gives their horror stories a puzzled, deeply human face that wrenches them out of history and into reality. Never, for example, have the death camp-bound trains jammed with Jewish families seemed so immediate. A woman remembers the stink in her bolted-shut and darkened cattle car: The pail serving as a toilet overflowed with human waste.

There is an unselfconscious eloquence to the way each survivor expresses him- or herself in accented English, conceivably having something to do with their shared native tongue. "They took away my parents; they took away my identity; they took away my possessions," is Irene Zisblatt's starkly rhythmic recounting of her one-woman revolution against Nazi oppression. "There is something that they want from me, and then I thought of my soul -- and I said, 'They're not going to take my soul.'" She then vowed to herself to fight and "not become ashes."

Her resistance was solitary and interior. Lantos and Bill Basch speak of more conventional, though no less courageous, acts of resistance. Both worked in the Budapest underground aiding Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg's efforts to save Hungarian Jews. Both endured Nazi captivity. Basch, like so many other survivors, is haunted by his good fortune. "Why did God spare me?" he says, pondering the day he and a friend stepped away from another pal when told by a Nazi guard either to take a bullet with him or let him suffer execution alone.

Extraordinary vintage footage -- some of it never seen before -- is woven into "The Last Days" to forceful effect. **The survivors describe the almost hallucinatory unreality of their liberation. In one instance, American soldiers delivered up some German captors for wobbly death camp survivors to dismember.** The five "Last Days" survivors revisit the hometowns from which they were expelled, often as neighbors heckled them, and they inspect the painfully familiar death camps they miraculously managed to endure.

Almost all of the 90-minute film is artfully filmed and seamlessly edited, and some of the encounters in it will chill you to the bone. In one, Renee Firestone meets with the German doctor who in all likelihood subjected her sister Klara to fatal Nazi medical experiments.

Still, the enormous power of this documentary seems to surge directly from the survivors themselves, from their almost primal eloquence and the wisdom they brought back from what one calls, simply, "a madman's hell."

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