

TV Movie 'Escape From Sobibor' Tells Truth, Agree Author, Actors, Survivors

By Marlene Goldman
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What for so long has remained a whisper in the active discussion of the Holocaust finally was clearly heard on the three-hour television docu-drama "Escape From Sobibor," which was aired on CBS recently.

A quarter million Jews were killed at the Sobibor death camp, located in Eastern Poland. Sobibor also was the site of largest successful prisoner revolt and escape of World War II and the greatest Jewish victory of the Holocaust.

It is not well known that on October 14, 1943, all 600 prisoners stormed the gates, with more than half getting away. "The escape was the greatest insult the Jews could give the Nazis," said Richard Rashke, author of "Escape From Sobibor," the 1982 book that served as a basis for the movie.

Rashke, who is not Jewish, chastises historians for not investigating the revolt. "Since there weren't any documents or papers for the historians it didn't exist," Rashke told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency at the preview for the film last month. Immediately after the escape, the Germans attempted to conceal the camp's existence by leveling it, planting trees, destroying documents and even killing the Nazis who worked there.

The story has not been widely publicized also because the survivors are spread throughout the world and speak different languages. It took Rashke a year-and-a-half to research the remaining accounts of Sobibor, interviewing any survivors willing to relive the horror. According to Rashke, the screenplay remains faithful to his work and portrays the incident with accuracy in detail and spirit.

At Sobibor, built in April 1942, all incoming prisoners save a few workers were immediately gassed. In the film, trainloads of Jewish prisoners arrive daily, a few assigned to hard labor by a sadistic SS Sergeant Gustav Wagner (Hartmut Becker), and the rest are sent to their deaths.

But there are rumblings of an escape plan by prisoner Leon Feldhendler (Alan Arkin). After a horrifying incident where the prisoners are forced to witness the murders of 13 Jews who had been captured in an escape attempt and another 13 'partners' chosen by the captives upon orders by the Nazis, Feldhendler steps up the planning to include every prisoner in Sobibor.

By now a small organization heads the planning and Feldhendler seeks help from Lt. Alexander "Sasha" Pechersky (Rutger Hauer),

the leader of a contingent of Soviet Jews shipped to the camp.

Their breakout is executed while the chief SS officer is on leave. The SS men are assassinated individually and secretly with homemade or stolen weapons, having been lured into a workshop to pick up an item they covet, such as shoes or a leather jacket.

The prisoners then cut off all electricity and the telephones, and at the evening assembly rush en masse for the gate. Despite gunfire from Ukrainian guards and mine fields outside the gate, 300 survive, although many, including Feldhendler, are killed later during the war.

"Escape From Sobibor," a Chrysler Showcase Presentation and a Rule/Starger Production, was written by Reginald Rose, directed by Jack Gold and produced by Dennis Doty and Howard Alston. Many of the film's stars and the survivors they portrayed attended the screening in New York.

"When I saw it the first time I was speechless," said Joanna Pacula, who plays Luka, an integral character in the escape planning, but whose fate after the war remains a mystery. "The whole thing was like an earthquake." Although Pacula was born 11 miles from Sobibor, she learned about the history of the camp through the filming.

Arkin felt especially disturbed by the intense escape scene where some prisoners choose not to leave the camp. "The scene where I wept -- which rarely happens," he said, "was when some of the people liberated are afraid to go. The victims were barbarized to such an extent they didn't feel worthy of escape."

In contrast to Arkin's heroic character, German actor Becker's portrayal of Wagner seemed so cruelly realistic to the survivors, he told JTA, that during the shooting of the film, survivors would shout, "That's the way he (Wagner) did it!" Consequently, Becker, who had been well informed about Sobibor while growing up in Germany, spent much of the project alone.

Not so the screening. "I sat next to Esther Raab (one of the Sobibor survivors) during the screening," he said. "After each cruel scene she took my hand and held it."

The survivors praised the film's accuracy. "After seeing the final product the first time I was so shocked, I wasn't able to say a word," said Thomas "Toive" Blatt, who had played a key role in isolating the Nazi officers while other prisoners killed them. "I took the producer like a brother," he continued, imitating a hug, "and told him I owe him my whole life."

Blatt, who was imprisoned at Sobibor for six months, believes "this film will do as much for the history of resistance as (the television movie) 'Holocaust' did for knowledge of the Holocaust."

Sobibor is not solely a Jewish story, according to Blatt. "It's a humanistic warning," he said. "Given the right circumstances, a society could easily fall apart like an eggshell."

Like Blatt, Stanislaw "Shlomo" Szmajzner devotes his life to keeping aflame the memory of Sobibor. Szmajzner spent 18 months in Sobibor and was instrumental in making and stealing weapons for the escape. Blatt and Szmajzner consider themselves brothers. Both were young teenagers in the camp, both were active in Nazi-hunting after the war and both have written about their experience.

Szmajzner had thought it would be impossible to portray what really happened at Sobibor, but after condensing the accounts of many survivors, "I was shocked. What is shown in the movie really happened."

Much of the accuracy can be attributed to the three technical consultants, Blatt, Szmajzner and Raab. Blatt is especially concerned with documenting truthful accounts of Sobibor, because in 1985 the monument there to the victims and survivors of the camp collapsed.

A church now is being constructed at the site, and though the priests have written about the death camp, Jews -- the only victims at Sobibor -- are not even mentioned.

Blatt, who now lives with his wife in California, recently completed a 20-minute documentary about the omission of the Jews. But the thousands of dollars and countless nights he devotes are only part of what he perceives as his duty to the victims of all Nazi concentration and death camps.

"Many survivors can't stand talking about Sobibor and choose family life," Blatt said. "But I believe keeping the memory of Sobibor alive is a small price to pay for survival."

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Three Israeli diplomatic officials believed to have been associated with Jonathan Pollard's espionage activities in the U.S. have refused to appear before the Cabinet-appointed committee investigating the government's role in the Pollard affair on grounds that they might incriminate themselves.

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