

IMAGINARY WITNESS: HOLLYWOOD AND THE HOLOCAUST

A Documentary Film by Daniel Anker

Narrated by Gene Hackman

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IMAGINARY WITNESS: HOLLYWOOD AND THE HOLOCAUST

SYNOPSIS

This is the riveting story of the American film industry's complex and fascinating response to the horrors of Nazi Germany. Utilizing carefully selected excerpts from extraordinary and in some cases rarely-seen films, and told through the first-hand accounts of the directors, actors, writers, and producers, the film covers some of Hollywood's most important movies, including *The Mortal Storm*, *The Great Dictator*, *The Search*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *The Pawnbroker*, *Judgment at Nuremberg*, *Sophie's Choice*, and *Schindler's List*.

IMAGINARY WITNESS: HOLLYWOOD AND THE HOLOCAUST takes us from the American ambivalence and denial during the heyday of Nazism, through the silence of the post-war years, and into the present day. It asks hard questions: about the uneasy relationship between American popular culture and the Holocaust, about the responsibility of filmmakers in their portrayal of history, and about the power of film itself to affect the way we look at ourselves.

CREDITS

Narrated by Gene Hackman

With

Steven Spielberg, Sidney Lumet, Rod Steiger, Branko Lustig, Annette Insdorf,
George Stevens, Jr., Neal Gabler, Michael Berenbaum, Vincent Sherman

A production of Anker Productions, Inc.

Director

Daniel Anker

Producers

Daniel Anker and Ellin Baumel

Co-Producer

Susan Kim

Editor

Bruce Shaw

Cinematography

Tom Hurwitz and Nancy Schreiber

Associate Producer
Nate Smith

Original Music
Andrew Barrett

Executive Producers
Diana Holtzberg and Jan Rofekamp

Executive Producer for AMC
Jessica Falcon Shreeve

DIRECTOR'S BIO

Daniel Anker, an Academy Award nominee and Emmy winner for the film *Scottsboro: An American Tragedy*, has produced or directed numerous documentaries and specials, mostly for PBS. Most recently he produced and directed, in addition to: *Imaginary Witness*, *Music From the Inside Out*, a feature documentary featuring the musicians of The Philadelphia Orchestra. *Scottsboro: An American Tragedy*, which he produced and co-directed, premiered at the 2000 Sundance Film Festival and won numerous festival awards throughout the United States and abroad prior to its Oscar nomination.

A graduate of Harvard University with a degree in music, Anker has previously produced numerous award-winning music programs, including the Peabody Award-winning children's series *Marsalis on Music*, which was broadcast on PBS, the BBC and BRAVO. He was also producer for three seasons of the PBS series *The Metropolitan Opera Presents* and produced broadcasts of *Parsifal*, *Elektra*, *Stiffelio*, *I Lombardi*, *Falstaff*, *La Fanciulla del West*, and the world premiere of *The Ghosts of Versailles*. Additionally, Anker produced the PBS pledge perennial *A Carnegie Hall Christmas Concert*. He was associate producer of Julie Taymor's filmed version of Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*, shot at the Saito Kinen Festival in Matsumoto Japan, and the Emmy Award-winning *Tchaikovsky 150th Gala from Leningrad*.

Other documentary credits include the Emmy-nominated AMERICAN EXPERIENCE film *Daley, the Last Boss* (co-producer), the short *The Magic of La Guardia* (producer/director), and a series about campaign finance reform for THE NEWSHOUR WITH JIM LEHRER (field producer). Anker produced new documentary material for the PBS rebroadcast of the historic *Horowitz in Moscow with Charles Kuralt*, and several segments for the Emmy Award-winning series *City Arts*. He was associate producer of the first two seasons of the PBS series *Bookmark*, the LIFETIME special *Abortion: An American Controversy*, and the cinema-verite film *Abbado in Berlin* (with Maysles Films). Anker's additional awards and honors include a Peabody Award, four national Emmy Award nominations, the Erik Barnouw Award from the Organization of American Historians, and multiple grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts.

BACKGROUND

For over half a century Hollywood films have dealt with Nazism and the Holocaust in complex and often contradictory ways, marked by outrage and indifference, compassion and ignorance, the need to understand and the desire to forget.

For better or worse, much of what we know about the Holocaust comes from images in the movies. Daniel Anker's *IMAGINARY WITNESS: HOLLYWOOD AND THE HOLOCAUST* helps shed light on one of the darkest periods in human history as seen through the lens of American movies. With clips from over forty films and comments from leading directors Steven Spielberg and Sidney Lumet, actor Rod Steiger, producers, survivors and scholars, it is an enlightening and moving journey through horror and triumph, despair and nobility. It is the intriguing record of how Hollywood came to terms with a story that had to be told.

As the son and grandson of East European refugees, with a great-grandmother, aunts, uncles and cousins who had perished, Anker grew up in the shadow of the Holocaust. After making documentaries ranging from racism in the South to campaign finance reform to The Philadelphia Orchestra, Anker knew he would one day tackle a Holocaust film. "I always thought I would do a Holocaust story, though I thought it would probably be a film about my family's home town."

Anker was unsure how to tackle the material at first. "I didn't know what the film was at all," he says. "Initially I thought we would focus on the early history, the story of Hollywood's relationship to Germany and Nazism up until the war." But as is often the case, the project started to take on a life of its own. For five months, Anker and his team, producer Ellin Baumel and co-producer Susan Kim, started to digest all the writing and thinking about the Holocaust, and watching movies, lots of movies.

"Going into it we thought, maybe this will be a fun project, watching these wonderful old movies. But ultimately it became incredibly difficult. Difficult on an emotional level."

Anker watched some forty films, some many times over. "There aren't that many films about the Holocaust in American cinema." It's a finite number. So we were able to see every film on the subject made in Hollywood.

He also watched other documentaries about films and a method started to emerge. The best docs, like *VISIONS OF LIGHT*, about Hollywood cinematographers, and *CELLULOID CLOSET*, about gays in movies, used extended film clips to further the narrative, not just trailers or other material. "I am impressed by the achievement of those two films in particular, and wanted to be able to use film clips in the same way."

He saw that the story of Hollywood's response to the Holocaust was all there in the movies themselves. Newsreel footage from the 1930s that treated Nazi book burnings like some fraternity prank demonstrated Hollywood's early avoidance of the issue. Hollywood was captivated by the imagery of the rise of Nazism, not the meaning. The

industry's relative ambivalence during the years before the war evidenced in films like *CONFESSIONS OF A NAZI SPY* (1938) raise the question of what we knew and when we knew it. Complex economic ties to Germany and fear of anti-Semitism at home kept the lid on dissent in movies. And later on, filmmakers danced around the subject of the Holocaust in immediate postwar films like *GENTLEMAN'S AGREEMENT* (1947) and *CROSSFIRE* (1947), films that addressed anti-Semitism, but made no mention of what had happened in Europe only two years earlier.

After five months of research, they had the first draft of a script that gave *IMAGINARY WITNESS* a chronological framework. But new issues surfaced in the editing room. As the film started to deal with the post-war presentation of the Holocaust in Hollywood, the filmmakers ran smack into a philosophical debate that has raged for 50 years about the nature of artistic representation of the Holocaust. Hard liners like survivor and author Elie Weisel had declared the landmark *Holocaust* mini-series (1978) "morally objectionable and indecent" in a story in *The New York Times*. Interviewed in the film, writer and critic Thane Rosenbaum argues "there are events that simply should not be imagined or fictionalized because in some ways they are by definition unimaginable."

The question for Anker, and indeed for any filmmaker tackling the Holocaust, was not just about bearing witness but about how you bear witness without trivializing the material. "I had a real sense of responsibility, and that made me very sensitive to striking the right balance and being careful not to end up doing exactly what we were critical of others for doing in fictional films."

Anker was keenly aware that many films about films are blindly celebratory, but he also knew that wouldn't work when it came to the Holocaust. "It's easy to fall into that trap. You can applaud *SOPHIE'S CHOICE* for dealing with concentration camp scenes in such a realistic manner or *SCHINDLER'S LIST* that were both an artistic triumph and a box office winner. But the biggest challenge was avoid making a documentary that appears to celebrate these films."

So the broader goal of *IMAGINARY WITNESS*, beyond telling the story of the Holocaust through films, was a critical look at how the history has been portrayed by Hollywood, and how these films reflect how America itself has dealt with the Holocaust over time.

In any artistic endeavor, choices are made. The protagonist of *SOPHIE'S CHOICE* is not a Jew; *SCHINDLER'S LIST* is about a good Nazi; *THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK* doesn't take the story to its logical conclusion; *THE PAWNBROKER*, which in 1965 was the first feature to dramatize scenes in the concentration camps, chose a well fed Rod Steiger as its star.

For each clip he showed, Anker had to ask himself how it was being used historically in the film and in the context of the history of the Holocaust in American life during each decade. "All these films were noble in their intentions yet as Holocaust films attempting to recreate an unimaginable reality, I believe they will always be, by definition, flawed," says Anker. "We wanted to show how the flaws reflected the time in which they were made."

THE FILMS

"The reason Hollywood hasn't done many Holocaust movies is because it is an ineffable experience only understood by those who survived the camps. " -Steven Spielberg

Even for viewers who think they know everything there is to know about the Holocaust, *IMAGINARY WITNESS: HOLLYWOOD AND THE HOLOCAUST* will still offer some surprises. Why, for instance, was Hollywood largely silent as the Nazis rose to power in the '30s? "I think we offer a new perspective," says Anker, " at least with regard to America's alleged complicity in the early years. The role of Hollywood in the debate about America's responsibility during the early days of Nazism may be new to some people."

Apparently in the late '20s, ten percent of Hollywood's grosses were earned in Germany, so no one was anxious to look too closely at what was happening there. Newsreel footage from the time, produced by the major studios, is particularly uncritical. And Hollywood was complicit when, in the late '30s, Germany asked that all Jewish studio employees in the country be fired. As the film notes, the studio moguls, who were themselves immigrants, did not want to call attention to their Jewishness and run the risk of having their allegiance to America questioned. Yet outside of the films they made, some were outspoken. Many joined the Anti-Nazi League, represented in rare footage of Melvyn Douglas reading a manifesto with James Cagney, Bette Davis, Myrna Loy and others looking on.

Hollywood did not totally bury its head in the sand. *IMAGINARY WITNESS* shows clips from Warner Brothers' *CONFESSIONS OF A NAZI SPY* (1938), the first of several anti-Nazi features produced by the studios (no actor would agree to play Hitler so the part had to be written out of the movie) and *MORTAL STORM*, a brave and poignant 1940 MGM film starring Jimmy Stewart. But the most realistic portrayals of the time came from B films such as Columbia Pictures' *NONE SHALL ESCAPE* (1944) or a rare independent film like Charlie Chaplin's self-financed *THE GREAT DICTATOR* (1940). Director Sidney Lumet in a moving interview recalls attending the premiere of *THE GREAT DICTATOR* in New York and how surprised he was to hear the word "Jew" in an American film for the first time.

One of the revelations of the film is newsreel footage of thirteen studio moguls visiting the concentration camps immediately after the war at the invitation of General Eisenhower. "It felt to us like a seminal moment," says Anker who uncovered documents in the personal files of Jack Warner at USC. The message of the trip was clear: go home and bear witness to these atrocities, and for a time newsreels did carry graphic images of bulldozers burying bodies at Bergen-Belsen, an image that would be etched in the collective memory of a generation of people. But Eisenhower's mission was not accomplished and it would be decades before Hollywood would again depict a concentration camp on screen.

In the meantime, television surprisingly became the more vocal medium. Anker had read about footage from *This Is Your Life*, a fifties-style reality show in which guests were

surprised by people from their past as their life story was presented in front of a national TV audience. In one such show, which Anker tracked down at the Jewish Museum, a Holocaust survivor is reunited with her best friend from Auschwitz and her brother from Israel, whom she had not seen since before the war. It's an almost surreal mix of wrenching emotion and Hollywood hokum.

Another landmark in the depiction of the Holocaust on film is the 1959 TV broadcast of *Judgment at Nuremberg*, which incorporated some of the most graphic post-war newsreel footage. In an ironic aside, the film reveals how the show's message was compromised when the sponsor, The American Gas Company, balked at references to gas, as in gas chambers, and had the word struck from the broadcast at the last minute. The film was remade in Stanley Kramer's acclaimed theatrical feature version two years later.

And with every new film, a little more of the picture came into focus for audiences. "You just see it time and time again," suggests Anker. Films are crucial to the collective memory of historical events perhaps no more so than with the Holocaust." Each time a holocaust film is released by a major studio or television network, beginning with THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK (1959), the public becomes 'educated' about the Holocaust. It's easy to be cynical that so much of the world learns their history through Hollywood, but it's a fact of life."

Anker experienced this first hand when he was growing up with the broadcast of the mini-series *Holocaust* in 1978. Anker remembers that it was only with the broadcast of the series that the Holocaust began to have resonance among his peers. As the film notes, it was actually *Roots*, the previous year that paved the way for *Holocaust*. The very week *Roots* aired, another network gave the green light to go ahead with *Holocaust*.

Over the next decade the dialogue continued with films like SOPHIE'S CHOICE (1982) and TV productions like *War and Remembrance* (1988), which Steven Spielberg notes in the documentary was more graphic than anything he had ever seen before. In a way, it paved the way for Spielberg's own tour de force, SCHINDLER'S LIST in 1993. "SCHINDLER'S LIST was really a watershed moment. The story we tell ends, in a way, with SCHINDLER'S LIST. The relationship of Hollywood to the Holocaust begins with reticence and denial, and then 60 years later Hollywood's greatest director creates an Academy Award-winning Holocaust film," says Anker. "But in many ways Spielberg did so by taking stock of how the story had been told throughout the years-. It's not that SCHINDLER'S LIST was derivative, but it is derived. The graphic footage in films of the 80's, allowed Spielberg to use film in more subtle ways.

"SCHINDLER'S LIST also opened the flood gates. It sort of changed the playing field for Holocaust films in a way. And the danger is that the self-scrutiny that Spielberg gave himself in making that film, may not be felt as strongly by the filmmakers that follow," says Anker.

Media critic Neil Gabler, author of *An Empire of Their Own*, a history of the Jews in Hollywood, comments that SCHINDLER'S LIST was so powerful because of the

casualness of its storytelling. "It's the reticence that makes it so effective," he says. But the film's happy ending still drew its share of criticism.

"What Hollywood does with the Holocaust is find a way to tell a good story, but give the audience a message of hope: something they can go home with feeling good about themselves and the world in which they live," historian Thane Rosenbaum argues in *IMAGINARY WITNESS*. "And that's the paradox when Hollywood turns its lens on the Holocaust."

Because he has such respect for the film, Anker says that the section of *IMAGINARY WITNESS* about *SCHINDLER'S LIST* was the most difficult for him to put together. The struggle was trying to find the balance between being analytical and still presenting the film in a fair way. "It took many weeks to select the scenes and figure out how to approach it. We didn't want to deify Spielberg," he says, "or suggest that Hollywood has redeemed its prior 50 years of silence by embracing the film."

THE INTERVIEWS

"The filmmakers who made Holocaust films, without exception, have been keenly aware of what they were getting into and the moral dilemmas posed by tackling the subject."

-Daniel Anker

After spending six months doing research, selecting film clips and writing a script, Anker and his team set out to do the 21 interviews that form the backbone of the film. Given the seriousness of the project, hardly anyone he approached turned down his request. "Everybody without exception went out of their way to help us on this film," says the director. "I didn't take no for an answer; I was persistent in every possible way, persistent because I felt in my gut that it would be possible to get this film made. Even heads of studios weighed in and helped us."

One area where persistence really paid off was in getting Steven Spielberg to participate. He was one of the last interviews, but without him, Anker felt that his history of Holocaust films would be incomplete.

Spielberg graciously sat for a 90-minute interview. He had seen most of the films Anker was using and was able to speak eloquently about them. One of the revelations that came out of the conversation was an explanation for why he had given a young girl in *SCHINDLER'S LIST* a red dress as the only spot of color in an otherwise black and white movie. It was, he explains, a metaphor for America's complicity. The Holocaust was, Spielberg says, "a large red blood stain, and nobody did anything about it."

Anker's determination also helped him land Gene Hackman to do the narration for the film. He was looking for someone with an authoritative but not pretentious voice.

Sidney Lumet was another filmmaker who couldn't have been more cooperative talking

about THE PAWNBROKER. "He was very engaged and very smart, very open to talking about both the technical aspects of his craft, as well as the implicit moral issues involved in the subject matter," says Anker. Among the other directors questioned was Dan Curtis who talks about rebuilding the crematorium at Auschwitz from original blueprints for *War and Remembrance* in 1988.

In rounding up people to interview, Anker's goal was to get at least one major player from each film who could address the issues of that film. "We didn't want to get a brother or a wife. We didn't want to have witnesses who speak to these films second hand, but rather to hear from those who grappled with these issues directly."

Among those interviewed was Rod Steiger, star of THE PAWNBROKER, who describes the still chilling final silent scream at the end of the film. It proved to be one of Steiger's last interviews as he past away a few weeks later.

The oldest person interviewed was 96-year-old Vincent Sherman. Initially Anker went to him because he was a Hollywood old-timer, who had been at Warner Bros. in the 30's when the studio was making anti-Nazi films. But Sherman had also directed a B movie about the Nazi resistance in Germany, UNDERGROUND, and his interview proved incredibly informative.

When Anker went to interview two other former Warner Bros. employees, screenwriter Malvin Wald and film editor Stanley Frazen, he learned that they had been among eight studio employees, part of the First Motion Picture Unit of the Army Air Corps, who had been present at the screening of the raw footage from the liberation of the concentration camps in April 1945. Ronald Reagan was also one of the eight. Frazen recalls being warned that this was the roughest stuff he would ever see. "After twenty minutes, I went outside and threw up. It was just devastating."

Anker also wanted to make sure he included survivors in the film. One of the first people he went to talk to in Los Angeles before he started shooting was Branko Lustig, producer of SCHINDLER'S LIST as well as associate producer of SOPHIE'S CHOICE and assistant director on *War and Remembrance*. "It was very important to me that he be in the film," says Anker. Lustig poignantly points out that he is one of the youngest Holocaust survivors, and perhaps the last working in movies, and in the not too distant future directors will have no one to ask what it was really like.

FEATURED FILMS

BLACK LEGION
CABARET
CONFESSIONS OF A NAZI SPY
CROSSFIRE
THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK
GENTLEMAN'S AGREEMENT
THE GREAT DICTATOR
HEROES FOR SALE
HITLER'S CHILDREN
HAROLD AND MAUDE
HOLOCAUST, NBC MINISERIES
JUDGEMENT AT NUREMBURG (CBS TELEPLAY AND FEATURE FILM)
I MARRIED A NAZI (OR "THE MAN I MARRIED")
THE MORTAL STORM
NONE SHALL ESCAPE
THE PAWNBROKER
THE PRODUCERS
THE SEARCH
SCHINDLER'S LIST
SHIP OF FOOLS
SINGING IN THE DARK
SOPHIE'S CHOICE
TO BE OR NOT TO BE
TOMORROW THE WORLD
UNDERGROUND
WAR AND REMEMBRANCE

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

This is one of those films that started in one place and ended up in another. When my colleagues Ellin Baumel, Susan Kim and I set out to make a film about Hollywood and the Holocaust, we were stymied as to how to approach the subject in a way that would not seem to trivialize it. In the wake of 9/11 we felt there were enough parallels that would make this a timely look at how an artistic community responds to atrocity. We were initially struck by the 1945 trip to Europe of thirteen Hollywood moguls, who, at the invitation of General Eisenhower, toured the liberated camps with the expressed purpose that they would then bear witness through their films and educate the world. But despite the declarations of intent from the moguls, the trip was followed by decades of silence from the studios.

Could we make a documentary about why Hollywood chose not to make Holocaust films? Should there be an expectation that Hollywood make films on a particular prescribed

subject? Moreover, is it even appropriate to attempt such a film when the subject is atrocity? As the son of a refugee from Hitler's Germany, and the great-grandson of a victim of the Holocaust, it had been my core belief that any effort to shed light on those events, even if fictionalized, was worthwhile. But I would come to appreciate that there was another side to this question. The representation of the Holocaust in any art, let alone Hollywood movies, is at the center of an emotionally charged and polarizing debate that has persisted half a century. There were many points during our production, when we felt that the film was undoable, that we would in essence be guilty of celebrating the very thing we questioned.

Through much debate, research, and the invaluable aid of scholars Michael Berenbaum, Annette Insdorf, Neal Gabler, and Thane Rosenbaum, we settled on a narrative that has as its focus the singular relationship of American culture to the Holocaust and the evolution of that relationship, as seen through film, from a period of denial, to the present day when a National Holocaust Museum graces our nation's capitol. The contradictions and ironies are fascinating. The story begins well before WWII, and is one that is intertwined with Hollywood money, Hollywood moguls, and the movies themselves. Ultimately, it was this broader view of the place of the Holocaust in our society that allowed us the distance to explore a little-known chapter in pre-WWII American history, and to consider the issues of filmmaker responsibility that are central to any discussion of the Holocaust on film.
