

MENEMSHA FILMS

Presents

A VLR Production

BELZEC

a film by

Guillaume Moscovitz

Running time: 100 minutes

US DISTRIBUTION

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BELZEC

a film by

GUILLAUME MOSCOVITZ

produced by

JEAN BIGOT

with the support of

The Foundation for the Memory of the *Shoah*.

and

ARCADI (*patrons of the arts in Ile-de-France*)

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La PROCIREP

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Production Supervisor: Pablo Freville

FORMAT: 35 mm, .1:66

RUNNING TIME: 110 minutes

BELZEC

Never heard of it? There's a reason.

"A glorious page out of history that was never written, and should never be written." ...These terrible words of Heinrich Himmler, overseer of Hitler's "Final Solution," burn at the heart of *Belzec*. For what filmmaker Guillaume Moscovitz seeks to do here is recover a lost historic memory.

The Nazi death camp at Belzec, in easternmost Poland, was the first of three designed and supervised by SS commander Aktion Reinhard -- the man later responsible for Sobibor and Treblinka. Whereas these latter place-names (particularly Treblinka) are now synonymous with the genocide against Jews, Belzec is virtually unknown, despite that over 600,000 human beings were put to death there between March and December, 1942 -- months when the Nazis were at their peak of world power. Between January and June of 1943, the now empty camp was bulldozed, the bodies disinterred and burnt, then reburied with the rubble, over which the Nazis planted a thick forest of trees and grass. Belzec thus defines, tragically, the most "successful" extermination of the age, in the sense Himmler meant. Not only were lives destroyed there, but nearly all memory and most evidence of the manner in which they were killed was destroyed with them.

Nearly all. No crime is so perfect that it leaves *no* evidence -- though Belzec comes close. Guillaume Moscovitz follows a stray set of clues which begin for him in a letter written in April 1942 by a doomed man, Szelmo Fajner. Belzec is named there. Next, in the "present tense" style of exploration pioneered to such potent effect by Claude Lanzmann in his epic *Shoah* (1985), in which Belzec was briefly referenced, Moscovitz takes us to the former site of the camp.

The pine forest planted by the Nazis stands taller and thicker than ever over the remains of those they killed -- but one needn't dig far to find concrete evidence of these crimes, or their concealment. Moscovitz listens to locals who remember the camp, consults the written and sworn testimony of witnesses no longer living, and, most

harrowingly, films Braha Rauffman -- Belzec's one living survivor, concealed by a courageous local woman, at first in a tomb at a local cemetery, later for two whole years under a pile of logs, from the time she was seven, until she was nine years old. Out of over 600,000, only *four* victims survived Belzec: Rauffman; her mother, Sarah Ritterband; and two men, Rudolf Reder and Chaim Hirszman. That is all -- but Moscovitz relates each of their stories, to the extent that records allow. Throughout the film he returns to Braha Rauffman, at different stages in her ordeal. Her unthinkable sufferings, and eventual deliverance, become the single life-giving thread in this account. For the rest of it, we must face the specter of historical amnesia as it afflicts those who were *not* victimized, but overwhelmed by events.

The local townspeople of Belzec who were alive at the time of the mass-murders now subsist quietly, either in various states of denial and muted, shame-faced self-justification. One young beautician who was not yet born when these events transpired expresses outrage at the ongoing silence of her elders. However, even witnesses in denial are vital to his purpose, as Moscovitz told one French interviewer, for "They are among the *only witnesses* of the extermination camp."

We hear from the daughter of the village mayor of that time; visit an elderly couple in their overgrown garden (a strong visual analog for what becomes of all history); listen in on another pair as they bicker and banter about the past with their young grandson, a high schooler for whom the forest over the former death-camp has become a teen refuge to which he bicycles with friends. In each case, we encounter simple minds and hearts who saw what was being done, but were too terrified, or directly threatened with the same fate, to object or rebel -- but rivetingly share what they remember. Finally, we confront what is left of the scene of the crime, as a young emissary of the Grand Rabbi of Warsaw explores the site for the first time with a circle of contractors charged with raising a new monument. This young man is profoundly overwhelmed, though he hangs onto his composure. Everywhere their bulldozers turn, one can hear the crunch of human remains. The white powder of bone meal under the earth has turned the grass white. Nothing in this emissary's experience, or even his well-schooled imagination, could have prepared him for this.

Master filmmaker Claude Lanzmann pioneered the method of inquiry Moscovitz pursues, here. He is gratefully named in the credits, but *Belzec* stands alone as a solid, self-contained work in its own right. For here is not only the fact of an enormous, unforgiveable crime -- but the nearly successful effort by its perpetrators to erase all memory of what they did from the annals of history, and justice.

BELZEC

notes on the production

“The history of the ‘Reich of the Millennium,’” writes philosopher, and Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi, *“could be read as a war against memory, a falsification of memory, a negation of reality that goes so far as to escape from all reality.”*

Guillaume Moscovitz certainly understood these words on an intellectual level, well in advance of ever visiting Belzec. Even so, when he made a pilgrimage to the site in April of 2000, he was “flabbergasted,” as he put it, “that there was nothing to see.” He found a forest, a glade -- “a very banal landscape, yet with something terrifying about it, something dreadfully unreal.”

He paced the grounds accompanied by a historian who showed him where the barracks, gas chambers and graves had stood. Feeling the enormity of this juxtaposition between the riot of foliage in front of him and the horrors conjured in his mind’s eye, Moscovitz found himself “literally staggering.”

“I was confronting the reality of erasure,” he says. “The violence of this reality is the reason I made the film.”

Belzec is named, and even shown briefly in Claude Lanzmann’s epic masterpiece *Shoah* (1985), but, generally speaking the name and the place are little-known outside the realm of attentive scholars. Out of more than 600,000 Jews who were murdered in Belzec, only four survived.

Some historians place the number of survivors at ten, but, says Moscovitz, “only two came forward after the war.” These were Rudolf Reder and Chaim Hirszman, who worked as *sonderkommandos* (Jewish laborers, spared to move corpses from the gas chambers to the vast open graves where they were first buried, and later burned). Hirszman managed to jump from the train while being transported to the camp at Sobibor, where he surely would have been liquidated himself. Reder escaped from his Ukrainian guards when he was sent out to the nearby town of Lvov to collect sheet metal for the camp.

Moscovitz learned of two others: Sara Ritterband, a young Jewish mother “who never spoke directly of her experiences in the camp. She never had the strength to testify. Her name was listed during the trials, but the prosecutors decided she was not in a state to withstand a counter-interrogation. She was part of a group of women who worked as maids for the German and Ukrainian guards. At Belzec, the Nazi homes were outside the camp, and this group of women lived next door.” Because of this, Ritterband was able to save her young daughter Braha, who (after she was successfully smuggled from this domestic compound, owing to a freak set of coincidences) hid near Belzec for several years with the help of a courageous local, Julia Pempiak. That child, now Braha Raufman, is an elderly citizen of Israel when Moscovitz’s camera finds her. Her account of her years in hiding forms a narrative through-line in the film.

Although the Nazis destroyed all of their own official records of Belzec, there is still abundant, if scattered evidence. Moscovitz consulted the sworn testimonies of Reder and Hirszman, taken in 1946. (Both men are now dead; Hirszman was assassinated the night after he testified. Reder died in Toronto in 1968.) Digging further, the filmmaker unearthed notes from the SS administration office and from the German police who oversaw the Lublin district of Poland, where Belzec was located; gathered depositions by the SS officers, Kurt Gerstein (in 1946) and Wilhelm Pfannenstiel (in 1950 and ‘59) and by Joseph Oberhauser and other members of the SS guard troops, given in the early 1960s; testimonies of the Ukrainian guards; communiques of the Polish resistance; flyers from the Jewish clandestine press; documents from wartime employees of the Polish railroad system. Not least, there are the vivid accounts by the local villagers of Belzec, still alive and available for the camera. “The townspeople saw everything,” says Moscovitz. “They knew everything. Despite their cowardice, their complicity with the occupiers, their fear, or the heroism of some of them, they were all spectators to what happened.”

Most movingly, there is a letter which survives from the period -- and this becomes the point of departure with which the film opens.

“This letter is without doubt the very earliest available document that describes what happened at Belzec,” Moscovitz explains. “The information it gave was circulated through newspapers of both the Polish and Jewish clandestine resistance. The author

of the letter is Szelmo Fajner, a man from Zamosc who had been deported with a group of 20 or so others in December of 1941 to Chelmo, where they were ordered to unearth bodies and burn them. Fajner then escaped to Warsaw, where he was taken in by the Oneg Shabat, a clandestine group operating out of the Jewish ghetto there. When he made it back to his native village of Zamosc, at the end of March 1942, he discovered his entire family had already been killed. *'The cold has already passed by --'* he wrote a friend in the Oneg Shabat, *'the cold'* being a metaphor for murder -- and then he lists all of the shtetls that have also been liquidated. *'Belzec is the cemetery,'* he wrote, and *'the same thing that happened at Chelmo is happening at Belzec.'* ... The letter is an amazing testimonial, a courageous alarm sounded a young Jew who has not only lost his family, but is aware he will likely die the same way."

One vital aspect Moscovitz was determined to communicate with his camera is the remarkably compact space into which the Nazis fit their butchery. "The camp was at the end of the main street of the village, about 500 meters from the train station," he explains. One man he interviewed who did not make the final cut told him that, as a small child, he used to climb high into the trees to see what was going on in the camp -- and witnessed Jews entering the gas chambers. "The first of these were barely 80 meters from the main street," says Moscovitz. "They were not hidden by trees. The story this man told me was later confirmed by others who, as children, also climbed trees to see for themselves. A man whose account is in the film tells us how, from a high hill nearby, one could see nearly everything that was going on inside."

Although he makes discreet use of a single archival photo from 1945 -- Belzec as it appeared, two years after the Nazis had cleared it away and the forest had begun to sprout -- and we are shown a haunting, photographically detailed paintings from memory, created by a villager who worked at the Belzec train station, named Kolodziejczyk. This man taught himself to paint for the sole purpose of offering the world a vital, visual, irreplaceable firsthand testimony of what the camp was, when it existed. Otherwise, Moscovitz keeps faithfully to the working principle pioneered by Claude Lanzmann in his epic *Shoah* (1985) -- that of present day confrontation with the sites where the horror took place. Let the viewer's imagination recreate the horror, as the camera explores what remains. "Show the the *erasure* the Nazis had organized," as

Moscovitz says. "It is the only way to keep one's eyes open, to not lose consciousness (literally and figuratively) in the vertigo that grabs hold when we examine the violence of extermination." This refusal to show, say, the horrifying atrocity footage taken by the Allies when the camps were liberated, "goes hand in hand," as Moscovitz sees it, "with the demand for lucidity."

He was in his teens when he first saw Lanzmann's nine hour masterwork, and it was a life-altering experience. "Lanzmann articulates his refusal to understand. He denounces the absolute obscenity of trying to understand how these events could happen, stating that this is the only ethical working mentality one can have. He speaks of his voluntary blindness to archival footage as 'the only way *not* to look away from a blinding reality -- a clearer way of looking *at* events.'" Moscovitz embraces this fully.

For a long time, Moscovitz had a steep uphill battle seeking funding -- he is a first-time filmmaker. The horrific era under which Belzec lies buried has been otherwise so widely covered in film that backers and audiences alike could be said lately to suffer holocaust fatigue. "I could not have done the film at all, had it not been for the courage and willpower of producer Jean Bigot," he says. It was Bigot who enlisted the support of the *Foundation for the Preservation of Memory of the Shoah*, as well as several private backers. "This was vital, because compared to other documentaries, ours was not cheap -- roughly a million euro." Moscovitz tried filming with a crew of three for a few days in March, 2002, but realized immediately this would be inadequate. He and Bigot organized a better-funded, month-long shoot with a ten-person crew in June, 2002 -- filming three weeks in Belzec, then ten days in Lublin and Krakow. 15 months later, in November and December of 2003, he and his crew filmed for another five weeks.

There were two translators operating simultaneously, to narrow the lag time between questions and answers. The locals who give their testimony are not always talkative, but then, "I did not expect interviewees to *respond* in the strictest sense to the questions I asked," says Moscovitz. "I wanted them to speak for themselves. Their words come from their silence, in a way. Their words are less a response to my questions than they are a response to their own silence all these years." Moscovitz compensated some speakers for their time, for the courtesy at allowing him to film in their homes and town, but he emphasizes, "They were not paid to speak." What these

people did not or could not say was often more eloquently present in their faces, anyway. "I often felt it more appropriate to keep my distance from the people I was filming," he recalls. "I communicated less in words than through my physical presence, through my attitude, my reception of what they were saying, my gaze."

The tale of young Braha Raufman's ordeal, hiding in a cemetery and under a woodpile, became central to the film's purpose, despite that she is not, strictly speaking a "survivor" of Belzec. By a quirk of fate Moscovitz can only marvel at in retrospect, she was momentarily spared the fate of other children because her mother worked as a domestic in the homes of the guards -- local houses, outside the camp, which had been commandeered for this purpose. Moreover, in a life-saving coincidence, her mother Sara Ritterband, had been born in the village of Belzec -- and an uncle, who was successfully passing as a gentile and working in the local bakery, caught sight of the little girl one day when making a delivery and smuggled her into hiding in a bread-basket. "Had Braha been a concrete witness to the extermination, she would not have survived," says Moscovitz. "She instead survived because she was *unseen*, absent from the world of the living, literally hidden among the world of the dead when she was kept, first, in a tomb in the cemetery, and later literally buried alive for two years in a hole dug out under a pile of wood. She endured an underground counterpart to what camp inmates suffered under open sky. Her testimony is previously unheard, completely unique, incredible -- but it *cannot be* an example of what happened *inside* the camp. Her case is exceptional in every sense."

"This is why it was fundamental that we *not* end our film with the story of her rescue, but instead conclude with the episode in which David Szpilman, the emissary of the Grand Rabbi of Warsaw, comes to the Belzec site to confer with contractors." Moscovitz was himself surprised by the "nearly surrealist" avalanche of painful ironies and emotional reckonings which collide in this sensitive, latter-day witness. "The materiality of extermination, the reality of Nazi will, the erasure of the Jewish people -- all the violence and reality of what happened in this place are all reflected in the look of overwhelming disbelief on his face -- with which we can all identify."

Szpilman, being deeply religious, knows well what the laws of orthodoxy require for an intact body or even skeleton -- but here he faces a realm in which the bones of

countless dead have been reduced to powder, and where the grass grows oddly white as a result. "There is no *Halaka*," says Moscovitz, "No law to tell him what to do. The absolute violence of the Nazis is manifested in this white grass. The emissary is literally seized with vertigo. He is so overwhelmed that he drops the sheet of paper on which he was writing what the architect was telling him."

Belzec is structured so as to unfold, quite deliberately, "in layers," as Moscovitz puts it. "What the film strives for is a sense of displacement -- the place we see at the beginning of the film is not the same as the place we see at the end. Fragments of the reality of this place inscribe themselves within us, the reality of extermination and erasure. This is essential, if we are to affirm the very *existence* of Belzec."

BELZEC

a timeline

November, 1941. Construction of the death camp at Belzec is begun, under the direction of SS commander Aktion Reinhard, who will later oversee the design and construction of camps at Sobibor, and Treblinka.

March, 1942. Mass murder commences at Belzec, accomplished by carbon monoxide gas produced by a tank motor.

April, 1942. Szlomo Fajner, after escaping death at Chelmo, is made aware of the Belzec death camp when searching for his family, and mentions the place in an urgent letter of warning circulated by clandestine Jewish resistance groups.

March -- December 1942. Exterminations proceed at Belzec, murdering prisoners taken from Krakow, Lublin, Lvov, and Radom, as well as Jews deported from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia. We will never know precisely how many were assassinated, but a postwar investigation by Polish authorities conservatively estimated the number at 600,000 souls, during this 8 month period.

December 1942 -- July 1943. The camp is completely destroyed, and all traces of the extermination are erased. The bodies were dug up from their graves and burned, the infrastructures were dismantled, trees were planted to replace gas chambers.

1945 /46. Although ten people were known to have survived Belzec, only two are alive at the war's end: Chaim Hirszman and Rudolf Reder. Hirszman, active in Polish politics after the war, was murdered by his then-current opponents the night after he gave a sworn deposition about what befell him at Belzec. (There is no known connection between his camp experience, and what later befell him.) Reder gave testimony and lived until 1968 -- he died in Toronto.

Two others survived, indirectly -- Sarah Ritterband, a young mother, and her 7 year old daughter, Braha, now Braha Raufman, who gives on-camera testimony. Ritterband, originally a native of Belzec village, was forced to work as a maid in the homes of the guards, which were located just outside the camp gates. Amazingly, she was allowed to keep her young daughter with her, until her brother -- passing as a gentile while he worked in the Belzec village bakery -- managed to smuggle the little girl into hiding, first in a tomb in the local cemetery, later, *for two years*, in a small hole dug under a pile of firewood.

1969 (approx.) -- A Soviet-era plaque is erected on the grounds where Belzec stood, dedicated to "The Martyrs of Hitlerism." No mention is made that they were Jewish.

1994. A new plaque replaces the earlier one, with an acknowledgement that these victims were killed precisely *because* of their Jewish heritage.

2002. Efforts are begun to create a more ambitious and fitting monument. One problem, as captured by Moscovitz, on-camera -- the history of the place has been so obliterated by Nazi malice, intervening time and inevitable ignorance that contractors are at first confused as to where where the bodies are, and find themselves bulldozing bone-powder and rubble in a hellish mix.