

TELEVISION EUNY HONG KORAL

Arcane memories that recall the Holocaust

When trauma causes ordinary language to fail, perhaps film can pick up the pieces and move on with the story. Holocaust documentaries that include first-hand accounts, such as Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), often include long and painful silences. During such times, presumably, the speaker has recalled an image so horrifying that it steals his voice. With the film medium, the audience can sense what the speaker cannot say.

This week, HBO will broadcast the Oscar-winning Steven Spielberg project *The Last Days*, about five Jewish Holocaust survivors who recently returned to their home towns in Hungary. (HBO, Sunday, May 28 at 3.30pm; Wednesday, May 31 at 1.30 pm.)

The film includes survivor testimony that shows how cruelly tenacious memory can be, clawing on to arcane details and refusing to cast them out of one's mind. One woman recalls that when she was brought to Auschwitz, she had to change out of the bathing suit she was wearing when arrested.

"I was worried that if I took [the suit] off, I would leave behind all those memories of when I would go to the pool, and the boys would be whistling at me, and the other girls would be so jealous." She can barely say the words: even the pleasant, pre-war memories catch in her throat.

This is one of the first major productions of Spielberg's Shoah Foundation, and it is an honourable beginning.

Sharon Rivo, who heads the National Centre for Jewish Film, singles out the responsible manner in which the information was incorporated for this film: "They are very accurate about the origins of the footage. Often such documentaries use any footage they can get their hands on, and incorrectly

occur, no one has the heart to protest. The film maker must shoulder the full responsibility, and this film's creators have done so with dignity.

I don't know the extent to which Spielberg was personally involved in this project, but it does bear his stamp: he can't resist showing that the bad guys get slammed in the end.

One survivor triumphantly recalls the day US soldiers liberated his camp: "The Americans held the guns up to the Germans, but didn't shoot them. They let us tear the Germans apart piece by piece."

The footage accompanying this narrative depicts the enfeebled prisoners' attempts to gang up on the Nazi guards, who were in no position to resist.

One gets a twinge of

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satisfaction from this image, but, as Rivo says, this isn't necessarily a desirable response. "You come out of this film feeling a little better about the Holocaust, and I'm not sure that's a good thing."

Not all films, after all, have to redeem the viewer.

Being aired in conjunction with this film is *Children of the Night*, a short documentary film produced by Arthur Cohn, who also brought us the unforgettable *Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (1970). *Garden*, about a wealthy Jewish family in Italy during the second world war, presented the lesson that ignoring an evil does not make it go away.

Children of the Night challenges the viewer to

verdure and clay tennis courts. The 20-minute film's footage, much of which has never before been broadcast, consists of the Holocaust's child victims. (HBO, Saturday, May 27 at 2pm; Tuesday, May 30 at 2pm.)

The narration was written and spoken by the formidable Marion Wiesel, wife of the Nobel Peace Laureate Elie Wiesel. In addition to translating her husband's writings from French to English, she writes articles and speeches as a stateswoman for peace. Her text for this documentary exhibits her signature prose style: the words are surrounded by ghosts.

Of the children who seem to be smiling, she says: "I ask you to receive as a gift their pitiful attempts to act normally for the camera."

The imprisoned children's odd expressions and camera poses may have something to do with the film's origins. According to HBO, some of these images are taken from Nazi propaganda films - as is the case with much of the extant Holocaust footage. Knowing that the original intent of the footage was something other than pathos makes it all the more difficult to contend with.

"The use of Nazi propaganda films in Holocaust documentaries is always a source of controversy," says Joanne Rudolf, archivist of Yale University's Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies. "There are those who think Nazi footage should be labelled as such if used, and some who think it shouldn't be used."

But Wiesel turns the dark purport of the footage on its head: she tells us the children's names.

It is difficult to formulate a proper response to documentaries of this sort. Normally, what constitutes a favourable review is to say the films are "thoughtful" or "engaging" - neither description is quite