

Films on the Holocaust

Because the Holocaust was such a unique and painful event in the history of human interactions, many filmmakers have dealt with the subject in their films. As the topic is so large, filmmakers all over the world, from the 1940s to our day, have chosen to depict diverse aspects of the Holocaust in both fiction and nonfiction films.

During the first years after World War II, fiction films about the Holocaust were made in those Eastern European countries that suffered very badly under the Nazis. In some of the films from that time, the Nazi persecution of Jews plays a minor role, while the war and the ensuing hardship take the films' major focus. An example of this phenomenon is the trilogy of films made by Polish director Andrzej Wajda, which describe Polish life in occupied Warsaw.

Since that time, a number of films have been produced that focus on Jewish characters and the specifically Jewish experience during the Holocaust. *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959) depicts a young Dutch girl who hid with her family for years until they were discovered by the Nazis (see also Frank Anne). *Kapo* (1960) hits on the compelling moral issues surrounding a Jewish labor foreman in a concentration camp. *Jacob the Liar*, first made in Germany in 1978 and remade in the United States in 1999, is the tale of a ghetto Jew who cheers his fellow Jews by telling them the lie that the Germans are losing the war.

A different type of fictionalized Holocaust film is that which uses the Holocaust as a backdrop for the film's main story line, rather than a major focus. For example, *Judgement at Nuremberg* (1961) is a portrayal of the trial of German judges at Nuremberg, and focuses on the moral issues of guilt and responsibility. *Cabaret* (1972), which tells the story of a German nightclub, is set in 1932, right before the Nazis' rise to national power. *The Tin Drum* (1979) depicts a young man in Germany who simply refuses to continue growing under the Nazis.

The documentary is another important category of films on the Holocaust. As almost all film footage from the Holocaust was taken in an amateur fashion

by the Nazis or shot by the liberating armies, filmmakers face the difficulty of trying to make their documentaries compelling without much actual footage. In *Night and Fog* (1955) the problem is solved by using black and white footage from the concentration camps, and then showing scenes in color that were filmed on the same sites 10 years later. The monumental documentary *Shoah* (1985) skips archival footage altogether. Instead, this almost ten-hour film builds the horrific story of the "Final Solution" through interviews with survivors, bystanders, and perpetrators. Another documentary is the 1970 French film *The Sorrow and the Pity*. This film created great controversy in France, as it shattered the myth that the French on a whole resisted the Nazis, and instead depicted the widespread French collaboration with the Nazis. Scores of other documentaries have been made about the Holocaust and the Third Reich. The films *Genocide* (1981) and *The Long Way Home* (1994), produced by the Simon Wiesenthal Center, received Oscars in the category of Documentary Films.

In 1978 American television presented a new type of Holocaust film: the mini-series. *Holocaust*, which told the fictionalized story of one family whose members each represented a different element of the Holocaust experience, provoked much criticism for being like a soap opera. However, it also introduced the Holocaust as an acceptable subject matter on television.

Two more recent Academy Award winning films have once again brought the Holocaust to a world-wide audience. Based on the real-life Righteous among the Nations, German businessman Oskar Schindler, director Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1994) depicted both the horrors and the saviors of the Holocaust. The 1998 Italian film *Life Is Beautiful* from director Roberto Benigni became famous as the "Holocaust comedy," but actually told a life-affirming story of a father and son surviving together in a concentration camp.