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Representations of Jewish Functionaries in the Holocaust in Israeli Documentary Cinema

https://doi.org/10.1515/eehs-2022-0025
Received November 27, 2022; accepted June 12, 2023; published online July 17, 2023

Abstract: The role of Jewish functionaries during the Holocaust has fueled heated debates internationally, as well as in Israel since the 1940s. For decades, however, the topic was marginalized in Israeli cinema. The documentary, *Kapo* (Tor Ben-Mayor and Dan Setton 1999) was the first to include filmed testimonies of former Jewish female functionaries in Auschwitz-Birkenau. The documentary, *We Wept Without Tears* (Itai Lev and Gideon Greif 2021) is the first to include testimonies by members of the *Sonderkommando* ("the special squad") i.e., prisoners in Auschwitz-Birkenau, primarily Jews, who were forced to work in the killing installations. This article analyzes the ways these documentaries deliberately suspend judgment to provide a more complex perspective on these individuals. *Kapo* and *We Wept Without Tears* are examined in the context of how Holocaust memory has changed in Israeli society and cinema. The discussion centers on the ways these films generate a non-judgmental narrative, and the similarities and differences between them in approaching this sensitive topic. It shows that *Kapo* endeavors to maintain cinematic ambivalence, whereas *We Wept Without Tears* deliberately highlights the protagonists' lack of agency and avoids rendering judgment.

Keywords: Auschwitz-Birkenau; Holocaust; Holocaust survivors; Israeli cinema; Israeli culture; Jewish functionaries

1 Introduction

The role of Jewish functionaries during the Holocaust has been controversial in Israel since the end of the War. For decades, however, it was marginalized in Israeli culture, and only rare depictions were found in fictional cultural narratives. More globally, although fiction films have touched on Jewish functionaries [for example, *Kapo* (Gillo Pontecorvo 1960), *The Heavenly Squad* (Mia Knežević 1961), *The Grey Zone* (Tim Blake

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Nelson 2001), and *Son of Saul* (László Nemes 2015)], firsthand testimonies remain the exception. In the documentary realm, interviews with functionaries have appeared, for example, in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) and *The Last of the Unjust* (2013).

To date, only two Israeli documentaries have focused on first person testimonies of concentration camp functionaries: *Kapo* and *We Wept Without Tears*. *Kapo* (Danny Faran, Dan Setton 1999, and Tor Ben-Mayor), an Israeli-German-Italian co-production (unrelated to the Pontecorvo film of the same name) was the first to include filmed testimonies of Jewish women functionaries in Auschwitz-Birkenau. *Kapo* was received with great acclaim and won the prestigious International Emmy award for best documentary in 2000. It aired in Israel on the prominent documentary TV program *Uvda* (Fact). *We Wept Without Tears* (Itai Lev and Gideon Greif 2021) is the first Israeli documentary to present the testimonies of members of the *Sonderkommando* ("the special squad") in Auschwitz-Birkenau, most of whom were Jews, and who were forced to work in the killing installations. In both films, the interviewees discuss their roles and agency, explain what they had to do, and describe the ways they dealt with their activities at the time, as well as their perspectives over the years.

In the scholarly works on *Kapo,* for example, Adam Brown (2013, 134–141) claimed that *Kapo* is highly judgmental of "privileged" Jews under the guise of an objective film. Kozlovsky Golan (2020, 49–68) argued that the directors wanted to make a non-judgmental film, but that the cinematic language, the differences in the ways the interviewees are filmed, and the ways the narrator defines the topic in one key sentence all reflect a judgmental stance and deviate from the filmmakers' goal. *We Wept Without Tears* has yet to be analyzed by research.

This article examines *Kapo,* and *We Wept Without Tears* in the context of changes in Holocaust memory in Israeli society and cinema. It analyzes how these documentaries deliberately suspend judgment to provide a more complex perspective on these individuals. The discussion centers on the ways these films aim to generate a non-judgmental narrative, and the similarities and differences between them in approaching this sensitive topic. It shows that *Kapo* endeavors to maintain cinematic ambivalence, whereas *We Wept Without Tears*, produced 20 years after *Kapo,* avoids judgmental stances and depicts the members of the *Sonderkommando* as the Jewish victims of the Holocaust whose suffering was the most extreme.

2 Auschwitz-Birkenau Functionaries, Israeli Society, and Israeli Documentary

During the Holocaust, some Jewish victims of the Nazis were given responsibilities, which also meant slightly better conditions for them than for the rest. In the ghettos,

some volunteered, but others were appointed by the Nazis to be policemen, members and heads of Jewish Councils (*Judenrat*). In the concentration and death camps, some were ordered to be *Blockälteste* (heads of blocks), *Kapos* (in charge of labor units) and *Sonderkommando* in the death camps (Greif 2014).

After the Second World War, the *Sonderkommando* were difficult to identify since they were kept separate from the other prisoners. The only people to see them were murdered in the gas chambers. Other Jewish functionaries who survived the Holocaust were identified by survivors. Trials of Jewish functionaries were held in Displaced Person camps in Europe and later in Israel under The Nazis and Nazi Collaborators (Punishment) Law enacted in Israel in 1950. Roughly, 40 Jewish functionaries (out of a total of 160 complaints filed with the Israeli police) were prosecuted from the 1950s to 1972s. The verdicts ranged from exoneration to a death penalty, which was never carried out because of the survivor's poor health (Brut 2019; Levin 2015; Bilsky 2000, 509–547).

The historian, Porat (2019) argued that the trials went through four main phases during these two decades, which reflected changes in public opinion from an initial perception of Jewish functionaries as perpetrators on a par with the Nazis to the view that they had been victims.

The most famous trial that defined the negative image of Jewish functionaries in Israel was the Gruenwald trial (1954–1958), which, as opposed to the other trials, did not involve a Jewish functionary in the ghettos or concentration camps. Rudolph Israel Kastner was a Hungarian Zionist leader who belonged to the Zionist *Mapai* party (the Labor Party) and was part of Budapest's relief and rescue committee. After the Nazis invaded Hungary in March 1944, he convinced Adolf Eichmann, who was in charge of the deportation of the Hungarian Jews, to release 1685 Jews to safety in Switzerland in exchange for money. After the Second World War Kastner immigrated to Israel and served as a spokesperson for the Ministry of Trade and Industry. Malchiel Gruenwald, a Hungarian Jew, accused Kastner in one of his many pamphlets denouncing public figures of being responsible for the mass murder of the Hungarian Jews. The trial began as a libel suit filed by Kastner against Gruenwald for circulating defamatory material about him. During the trial, however, Kastner found himself on the defensive due to the vigorous efforts of Gruenwald's attorney, Shmuel Tamir, who portrayed Kastner as a willing agent of the Nazis. The district court judge, Benjamin Halevi, wrote in his verdict that Kastner "had sold his soul to the devil." He found Gruenwald not guilty on most counts and fined him a symbolic one lira (the equivalent of less than a dollar). Kastner appealed to the Supreme Court but was shot by right-wingers because of the accusations against him, and died in hospital before the decision was handed down. In 1958, the Supreme Court cleared his name of the accusations of collaborating with the Nazis, the indirect murder of Hungarian Jews, or associating with the Nazis to defraud. Gruenwald was convicted and sentenced to a year probation (Bilsky 2000). However, these rulings did little to change attitudes about Jewish functionaries and their negative image.

Despite the interest, the topic of Jewish functionaries has been rarely dealt with in Israeli culture. When it was approached, its representations ranged from an extremely judgmental perspective on the functionaries to attempts at more complex representations. For example, Yehiel Fajner (DeNur) (1909–2001) spent two years in Auschwitz. In the aftermath of the Second World War, he began writing about his experiences under the pseudonym "Ka.Tzetnik"; i.e., "a prisoner in a camp." He immigrated to Israel and became one of the main survivors who wrote about the Holocaust. In his books dealing with Auschwitz, which were presented by him and perceived by many as actual documentation of life in the camps (and not as fictional prose), Harry Preleshnik, the protagonist (and Ka.Tzetnik's alter-ago) took a highly negative view of Jewish functionaries. The accuracy of his depictions only began to be challenged in the 1990s; and today, some historians consider them pornographic or kitsch fiction (Bartov 1999; Liebsker 2007; Miron 1994).

A more complex view appeared in Nathan Shaham's play *A New Account* (1954). It is set in 1950s Sodom (of Biblical infamy), a southern town in Israel with an extremely hot climate and tough living conditions. In the play, Israelis and two Auschwitz survivors are working at a factory. One had been a Kapo who also helped the underground in Auschwitz. Their monologues and interactions with the Israeli Sabras (Jews born in Israel) are designed to show that individuals who did not experience the camps firsthand can never understand, and should never judge the Jewish inmates; and that the Kapos were forced into this position but also subverted the Nazis' plans (Feingold 2012, 44–59). In addition, in the 1950s, the revered poet, Nathan Alterman attempted to change the public's perception of Jewish functionaries as collaborators through opinion pieces published in his popular "The seventh column" editorials in the newspaper *Davar*. In his poems and polemical essays as well, he rejected the widely embraced dichotomy of the only two choices open to European Jews: either the courageous path of the rebels (in the ghettos, concentration camps, and in the woods as partisans), or the cowardly path of collaboration. He argued that Jewish functionaries were not collaborators, and that the public should not indiscriminately condemn (Laor 1989). His views were countered with heated responses that sparked fierce debates (Bilsky 2000).

The Eichmann trial (1961), which was covered in all the Israeli newspapers and broadcast on the radio, also dealt with functionaries. Vera Alexander, a *Blockälteste* in Auschwitz-Birkenau, was a witness for the prosecution during the trial. Historian Rivka Brut noted that Chief Prosecutor Gideon Hausner's efforts to change Israeli society's attitude toward the Holocaust and the survivors had a decisive influence on the way in which Alexander was presented and the questions she was asked. Alexander's testimony ended up being mainly about her conduct toward the inmates. Brut considered that Hausner depicted Alexander as a heroine who helped the inmates, and not as a collaborator (Brut 2019).

Since the 1970s, multiple studies have shown that Jewish functionaries were far from being a homogeneous group, since individuals who had the same official roles acted in different ways. These works have done much to undermine beliefs that a Jewish functionary was necessarily a collaborator or a sadist (for example, Trunk 1973; Friling 2014; Levin 2016). Furthermore, since the 1980s, Holocaust awareness in Israel has deepened and become more complex due to socio-cultural-historical and political reasons (Ofer 2009; Porat 2011; Steir-Livny 2009). These changes made the Israeli public more open to discussing difficult topics. For example, in the documentary realm, documentaries explored variations in survivors' oral testimonies (*The Cahana Sisters*, Gilad Melzer 2006), Holocaust black humor (*Pizza in Auschwitz*, Moshe Zimerrman 2008), and the intimate relationship between a Jewish inmate and an SS officer (*Love it was Not,* Maya Zarfati 2020).

These changes also reinforced the complex outlook on Jewish functionaries in the ghettos and concentration camps. Since the 1980s, several cultural texts have dealt directly with Jewish functionaries. They highlight the cruel dilemmas facing Jewish functionaries, the fact that they were victims, and that many of them did not choose these roles. For example, the fiction film, *Tel-Aviv –Berlin* (Tzipi Trope 1987) depicts encounters between a former *Kapo* and a former inmate on the streets of Israel in 1948. Initially, the survivor plans to kill the Kapo, but after a face-to-face encounter with this miserable individual, he changes his mind. Joshua Sobol's play, *Ghetto* (1984) takes place in the Vilnius ghetto. It illustrates low-level Jewish functionaries but also Jacob Gens (1905–1943), the commander of the ghetto police and later Head of the *Judenrat*. Sobol argued that the play constituted a complex portrait that forced viewers to deal seriously with the past. Motti Lerner's TV series *Kastner* was broadcast in the 1990s on what was then the sole Israeli TV channel, which meant maximum ratings. This time, it portrayed Kastner as a victim of the Nazis and the Israelis. The TV series revived the heated debate on Kastner's image and the issue of Jewish functionaries in general. The hero (or anti-hero) of Uri Barabash's fiction film *Kapo in Jerusalem* (2015) is Bruno, a *Blockälteste* in Auschwitz-Birkenau, who immigrates to Jerusalem and is plagued by rumors of his vicious, sadistic past. In Israel, he fights for his life and good name. This film was inspired by the true story of Eliezer Greenbaum, a famous *Kapo* who died during the 1948 battles for Jerusalem. Until this day, it is unclear whether he was killed in battle or by soldiers who were Holocaust survivors. From the documentary perspective: *The Kozalchik Affair* (Ron Ninio 2015) tells the story of Ya'acov Kozalchik, a Kapo in the infamous block 13 in Auschwitz, from the perspective of his son, Itzik Shaked. Years after Shaked broke off relations with his father, who died alone and outcast, he returns to his father's horrific past to analyze his complex role: he had been a hangman but also had helped many Jewish inmates.

Kapo and *We Wept Without Tears* are two important milestones in the representation of concentration camp functionaries in Israeli culture. They exemplify a more complex narrative than depictions that have appeared since the 1980s in Israeli culture (such as Sobol's play, the fiction film *Kapo in Jerusalem*, and the documentary *The Kozalchik Affair*) because the functionaries themselves speak to the camera. These films constitute the first time the functionaries appeared on the screen. Instead of a fictional narrative or their descendants mediating their stories, they are documented and their story is presented in their own words.

3 Kapo

Kapo was the first Israeli documentary to present testimonies of former female Kapos in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Even though these women had provided testimonies to various testimonial institutions elsewhere, this was the first time they appeared on screen in a film for the general public.

Vera Alexander, Magda (Blau) Hellinger, and Frances Kousal are Auschwitz-Birkenau survivors. Alexander and Kousal were *Blockältesten*. Hellinger held the highest position allotted to Jewish woman inmates: *Lagerälteste* (Camp Eldest, Camp Leader) of the Women's Camp in Birkenau.

Alexander was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau in April 1942 along with a large group of Slovakian women, and was imprisoned there until December 1944. Aside from her testimony during the Eichmann trial, she was also summoned to testify at the trials of Nazis who were prosecuted abroad (Geva 2010, 247–270). (Blau) Hellinger was born in Michalovce, Slovakia, and was deported to Auschwitz from Slovakia in 1942. She gave oral and video testimonies, which are archived in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection and in the Holocaust Center in Melbourne. In 2003, she also published a book entitled *From Childhood to Auschwitz* ("Blau", USC Shoah Foundation). Kousal was born in Kezmarok, Slovakia. In Auschwitz, she was a *Blockälteste*. After the Second World War, she immigrated to Australia, and in 1996, she gave testimony to the USC Shoah Foundation. She maintained her friendship with Thea Kimla (1918–2008), who had been an inmate on her block in Auschwitz ("Kimla, Thea"), which also appears in the film.

The film incorporates footages of the Second World War, and the 1950s and 1960s Israel; photos, newspaper clippings from trials of functionaries from the 1950s and 1960s, court documents from the trials with actors reading parts out loud, drawings that depict the Kapos in the camps, interviews with people who were involved in the Kapo trials in Israel, diaries of Jewish functionaries read by

actors, as well as personal testimonies by survivors who were subjected to Jewish functionaries.

Kapo won the prestigious Emmy award for Best Documentary Film in 2000, a first for an Israeli documentary. Israeli newspapers praised the film for its sensitive and professional handling of this issue, and the fact that it does not take a stand but provokes tough dilemmas. Journalist, Rogel Alfer called it "Shades of Grey" (Alfer 2000; Birenberg 2000; Kupfer 2000; Zaltzman 2000). The director's stated purpose in making *Kapo* was to create an ambivalent film that depicts a complexity that goes far beyond definitions of good or bad, right or wrong.

Two main scholars who have analyzed the film take different views. Adam Brown's book, *Judging "Privileged" Jews: Holocaust Ethics, Representation, and the "Grey Zone"* (2013), argues that *Kapo* takes a stand against privileged Jews under the guise of objectivity. Brown (2013, 139) writes that "while *Kapo* engages to some degree with the problem of judgment, the film's clear argumentative thrust frequently conveys negative judgments of former 'privileged' Jews." Kozlovsky Golan (2020) is more lenient in her critique. She discusses the "inherent duality" in the film and claims that *Kapo* presents a complex picture by giving the former perpetrators a platform to express their views while juxtaposing conflicting testimonies. Nevertheless, she considers that the filmmakers' intention to produce a non-judgmental film fails to achieve this goal and leaves the viewer with troubling "realistic judgmental and critical significances" (54–60).

3.1 The Functionaries' Narrative

Even though the three former functionaries did not consult one another before the shooting, the way they address their role manifests four key themes, which are voiced repeatedly in their testimonies: the choiceless choice, the idiocy of refusal, the subtle violence that was sometimes necessary to preserve order, and their conviction that their mission was to help and to save. The filmmaker strengthens this narrative by providing the supportive testimonies of two survivors (Thea Kimla and Walter Reichman) who were not Jewish functionaries, and that of former Supreme Court Judge, Haim Cohen.

3.2 The Choiceless Choice

Lawrence Langer (1980, 222–231) called the decisions of Jews during the Holocaust to accept privileged positions "choiceless choices," in other words, "crucial decisions

[that] did not reflect options between life and death, but between one form of abnormal response and another, both imposed by a situation that was in no way of the victim's own choosing." Historian Gideon Greif (2021) claims that the position of *Blockälteste* was never forced on prisoners. Inmates could suggest themselves for the position or refuse if offered. But according to the women's statements, they were not able to exercise any degree of human agency. Hellinger describes how a Nazi officer forced her to accept the job of *Lagerälteste*. She claims the SS woman slapped her face and gave her no choice. Walter Reichmann, who was an inmate, describes the day the *Kapo* ordered him to become a work manager: "You could not say no. If you refused, you would have been killed".

Former Supreme Court Judge, Haim Cohen further emphasizes the complexity of these choiceless choices in his testimony in the film. Cohen was on the bench during Hanek Barenblat's appeal to the Supreme Court. Barenblat was the former chief of the Jewish police in the Bedzin Ghetto and was put on trial in Israel under the 1950 law. He was convicted in district court but appealed to the Supreme Court, which exonerated him. Cohen explains why:

> I felt we (Israelis) could not judge these people. To put ourselves in their shoes to judge them. If a person does something under the threat of death (his death or his children's), you cannot judge him on issues like solidarity with others. His solidarity is with himself and with his children. It is not only natural but also moral. Allowed. I had sleepless nights during the trial. Sometimes I felt repelled by him, and sometimes I felt sorry for him.

3.3 The Idiocy of Refusal

In her broken English, Kousal says very clearly that "to refuse – it would be stupid […] to feel a bit like a human […] why would you refuse? I think nobody in the world would have done that. That would have been the stupidest thing to do". Reichmann clarifies that being in the camp was a struggle between life and death. "If you had been asked to be a *Kapo*, would you have accepted?" asks the director, "I would have said yes right away" Reichmann replies.

Kimla (an inmate in Kousal's block) testifies that she did "everything" to survive, implying that if judged from the outside, she would have been condemned. She does not contradict the fact that Kousal had power and privilege, but she also says that Kousal was an inmate like herself, and she did not blame her for accepting this role "because she wanted to survive, which I fully understood".

3.4 Subtle Violence was Sometimes Necessary to Maintain Order

Here, Alexander describes how Hellinger recruited her to be a *Blockälteste*:

> Our friendship began with two slaps in the face she (Magda) gave me because I wrote a poem on the board of my bunk bed with a nail. She slapped me because I destroyed German property. But later she gave me a piece of paper and a pencil and told me that when she handed out the soup, I should stand at the end of the line so the soup I would get would be thicker.

She does not blame Hellinger, and tells the story without a grudge capturing the multiple facets of a functionary in one brief story: the person who slapped her, also supported her and helped save her.

In another scene, Hellinger talks about how she intimidated prisoners for their own good (as she sees it) to maintain order by waving her stick in the air several times. She says:

> I did it a few times, and then they be [sic] quiet, and I said to them: "listen there is no good [if you are] doing it". You are hurting yourself. Because if I would [sic] let you do the brewing [disorder] … I didn't bring you here, I didn't want you here, I didn't want myself here, but I know if it starts [to be] brewing [resistance], which I want to avoid, then the SS will come, and they won't just make a step forward.

She explains that she cried afterward. Her threat was thus a performance for the greater good. The fact that the directors chose to include this story suggests that they found it relevant to the understanding of her complex position.

3.5 The Job was to Help and Save

Kousal states that every culture needs people who preserve law and order. "If we had left the camp to the Germans [if they had been in charge] things would have been much worse." Alexander claims she helped women escape the gas chambers and run back to their block until it was too dangerous to continue to do so. In Hellinger's opinion, being strict, maintaining order and cleanliness saved inmates. In her words: "I feel that I was chosen by fate […] to save to help in every step what I did."

If *Kapo* had been compiled solely from these testimonies of former functionaries and supporting witness statements, it would have been supportive, shallow, and one-sided. However, as mentioned, the film consists of other components. The following subchapter shows that the directors deliberately prevent the viewers from constructing a unidimensional perspective.

3.6 Other Testimonies in the Film, Choice of Place and Music

The directors present the other functionaries' cruel behavior through court transcripts and other filmed survivor testimonies. Actors read parts of the transcripts. Hence, on the soundtrack, a list of the functionaries' sadistic acts is heard. The film also includes testimonies of other survivors who state that the vast majority of functionaries were cruel. Walter Reichmann indicates that Kapos beat the inmates so hard they broke their arms and legs, and the inmates could not work. "It was a death sentence." Noah Flug denounces the Jewish functionaries in the Łódź Ghetto, particularly the Head of the *Judenrat,* Chaim Rumkowski. Reuven Waxelmann deals with the cruelty of Barenblat and states towards the end of the film: "Today, more than ever, I'm convinced that without the collaboration of Jews, they [the Nazis] wouldn't have succeeded in murdering six million Jews […] There is no forgiveness. There is no resurrection."

As a counterpoint to these descriptions, survivor Michael (Mickey) Goldman-Gilad, who appears in several scenes, takes a cautious position and is very careful not to formulate a uniform depiction. He explains that the functionaries were individuals who could not be referred to as a homogenous group but also cites the brutal behavior on the part of some and leaves the viewers to grapple with this duality.

All the survivors are filmed in a similar manner: in medium shots and medium close-ups. All are filmed in their homes, which immediately makes the viewers feel closer to them since the audience has been "invited" into their private domains. Unlike the other survivors, the three former functionaries are cast in an even more "homey" role since they are also filmed while being engaged in mundane activities. Helinger is filmed cleaning her house, Alexander is weeding in the garden, and Kousal is walking down the street with Kimla, chatting happily. These scenes thus depict them in a broader perspective than just "former functionaries."

The soundtrack is composed of dramatic, frightening music when dealing with the Holocaust, the Nazis, the horrors, the story of Hanek Barenblat, and when transcripts of other trials are read by actors. By contrast, there is no music at all during the sequences of the three protagonists in order to maintain a more neutral standpoint.

3.7 Narration

The narrator (television host and anchor Kobi Meidan) sometimes acts as a moderator and discusses historical events. In other scenes, he serves as the mouthpiece for the directors by asking questions and making assumptions through

commentary. He sometimes supports the former functionaries' justifications, but also questions them, thus making it hard for the viewers to draw any definitive conclusion. When talking about the Jewish functionaries in the ghettos, the narrator says that the Germans deliberately created a ruling class over the rest of the ghetto inmates. "And in the new hierarchy, each individual behaved according to his character." This comment is designed to upend the homogenous negative perception of Jewish functionaries and turn the story into one of individuals. The visual shown as he talks is a still picture of a lone Jewish policeman, the camera tilting up from his toes to his head, suggesting that people should be treated as individuals.

In another scene, the narrator says, "refusal to cooperate (to become a Jewish functionary) is a death sentence. Obedience can delay the sentence. Who can refuse even the slightest chance to stay alive?" The screen shows a drawing of a *Kapo* restraining an inmate while a Nazi strikes him with a whip. The dissonance between the narration, which accepts the will to survive, and the picture, which shows cooperation, leaves the viewers with complex questions.

When Hellinger states how she maintained order for the greater good, the narrator asks, "Was it really necessary on the threshold of death to maintain order and obedience? This question will probably remain open." The visuals show the infamous gate to the concentration camp with its banner stating "Arbeit Macht Frei," and then a child's body on the snow. This suggests that either it was unnecessary to maintain order and obedience in such horrific circumstances, or it was needed, so as many inmates as possible would not wind up like this child.

4 We Wept Without Tears

The *Sonderkommando* were considered "secret holders" (*Geheimnisträger*). Between 1941 and 1945, approximately 3400 men worked as *Sonderkommando,* most of whom were murdered by the Nazis. Some 80–100 survived; none were alive in 2021, at the release of the film. Gideon Greif was the first historian to study the Sonderkommando comprehensively. By 1993, he had interviewed 31 former *Sonderkommando* members on several continents, which resulted in his book *We Wept Without Tears: Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz* (1999 in Hebrew, 2005 in English).

In 1993, Greif took six former *Sonderkommando* members who lived in Israel to the Auschwitz-Birkenau memorial museum and filmed their testimonies. Yaacov Zilberberg, Eliezer Eizenshmidt, Shaul Hazan, Abraham Dragon, Shlomo Dragon, and Yosef Sakar were a part of the last group of *Sonderkommando* who had survived until January 1945, when the camp was evicted.

Each former *Sonderkommando* member was assigned to one particular post in the "death factory," but if someone was sick or murdered, they filled in, so they knew the chain of command and what the work entailed in the other "posts." Greif considered this documentation to be a rescue operation since no one had ever interviewed them before. According to him, if their voices had not been heard, a significant element of the enactment of the Final Solution would have been lost.

Greif made numerous efforts to interest producers, directors, production companies, and institutes in turning the filmed testimonies into a movie, but all failed to materialize. In 2015, director and journalist, Itai Lev interviewed Greif, and they decided to turn Greif's interviews with the former *Sonderkommando* inmates into a documentary film together (Steir-Livny 2021a). The Claims Conference Committee in New York was the only fund willing to invest in the documentary. Greif and Lev also raised 120,000 shekels through crowdfunding (Steir-Livny 2021b). *We Wept Without Tears* was screened for the first time on Israel's Channel 11 on Holocaust Martyrs and Heroes' Remembrance Day, in April 2022. It received good reviews from the press (Shimony 2022; Feiglin 2022; "We Wept") and people who viewed it on YouTube referred to it as strong, powerful, heartbreaking, and extremely important ("Kan Docu").

Greif wanted to bring them to the exact spot ("to the millimeter") where they had been forced to work in the "world's largest death factory," as he defines it (Steir-Livny 2021a). Esthetically, the film adheres to the cinematic style of Claude Lanzmann's seminal documentary *Shoah* (1985) in that it does not use Nazi visual materials or archival footage taken by the Nazis. Lanzmann only used interviews with survivors, former Nazis, and non-Jewish locals who were asked to recall the atrocities. Lanzmann took many of the interviewees back to the killing sites and interviewed them there. Lev initially considered using drawings by a Polish painter who had been also a *Sonderkommando* member, but finally decided to maintain the unity of place and time and focus on the survivors who returned to Auschwitz. This is also the reason why the film does not include the other survivor testimonies that Greif filmed in their homes. Lev explains:

> Quiet, green places and the evidence that slashes the sky. It is a contrast that enables the viewers to look into the past […] without the over-mediation of images and the glamor of cinematic language, just truth that pursues the truth. Old people walking on cursed ground and saying what they did. (Steir-Livny 2021b)

The six survivors are at the core of the film. Although he asks questions off-camera, Greif appears on camera at the beginning and the end, thus leaving the majority of the screen time to the survivors and their stories.

Unlike *Kapo*, which is compiled of the former functionaries' narratives, and integrate contradictory voices, images, and narration; *We Wept Without Tears* is

edited differently in that there are no other voices to contradict the survivors and no narrator to oppose them. Not only does Greif ask technical questions about facts, but also questions their emotional reactions to their hell and their interactions with the victims. He asks questions about the facts to understand every detail of the process: he wants to know exactly what the victims screamed, what the *Sonderkommando* saw when they opened the doors of the gas chambers, and what the bodies looked like. He objects that these details are too graphic:

> The role of the historian is to restore and reconstruct. If I did not ask this, I would not be professional. I cannot avoid it. That would be a failure to take on my responsibilities as a historian. There is no other way. We (who were not there) read or hear testimonies. They [the *Sonderkommando*] had to go through it, so should we spare them and not inquire? Not dealing with it can only serve the Nazis. (Steir-Livny 2021a)

Lev, as a filmmaker, acknowledges that the documentary needed to walk the thin line between showing the truth and disturbing the viewers. During editing the film, they hesitated about including certain descriptions, such as when Jacob Silberberg describes how he ate breakfast sitting on corpses. They decided they should include this since this was part of the *Sonderkommando* routine, and it should be known. "It is impossible to describe Hell and make it aesthetic. Hell is made up of horrors and the former *Sonderkommando* testimonies are made up of horrors. However, the filmmaker also has to be sure that the viewer will not stop watching after ten minutes" (Steir-Livny 2021a). But they decided against "descriptions of people when the doors of the gas chambers were opened that were not needed to grasp the horror, it was plunging into a photographic memory that would only scare the viewers away" (Steir-Livny 2021a).

In *Kapo,* the survivors do not admit to committing questionable deeds. Even when mild violence is mentioned, it relates to saving lives. In *We Wept Without Tears,* the survivors openly discuss the behaviors that were part of their daily lives, such as taking the gassed victims' belongings and the food they had brought with them. Lev argued that "it is the Yom Kippur of their lives, and the testimony is their confession […] There is something almost religious about their need for confession. A kind of preparation for the great confession when ascending to heaven" (Steir-Livny 2021a). These confessions may create more empathy since they do not try to sugarcoat anything.

In *Kapo*, the narratives forged by the former functionaries to deal with their past are very similar to each other. By contrast, the accounts in *We Wept Without Tears* are more varied. They discuss emotional detachment, and the inability to cry, but the testimonies show this developed differently. Eliezer Eisenschmidt talks about the lack of emotivity ("We were all indifferent"). Shaul Hazan says they were sent to Hell and had no reason to commit suicide. He suggests that someone who

considers suicide is either depressed or has committed a crime. But they committed no crime: they were taken from their homes to a camp, and the job was forced on them. Nevertheless, Jacob Silberberg says that he thought about throwing himself against the electrified barbed wire fence. He was dissuaded by a religious *Sonderkommando* who told him he should do "what the creator wants". He thus suppressed his emotions ("You get used to it" […] we didn't think about it … no emotion … everything is dead inside. "I am not a human being. Like a robot"). Josef Sackar also provided a religious explanation: "it was from God. There is nothing we can do. Maybe we are to blame. Maybe God wanted to test us. There's nothing else to say […]".

The different members of the *Sonderkommando* also deal differently with the *Sonderkommando* uprising and its repression. Shlomo Dragon explains they did not achieve much but emphasizes the importance of the fact that the Jews finally resisted and injured SS men: "at least we had a feeling we did something." He frames the revolt as a suicide mission and says he wanted to die a hero. Confirming the tragic failure of their gesture, Jacob Silberberg mentions the 300 *Sonderkommando* who were shot in the head by the Nazis in response to the uprising.

Unlike the interviewees of the former Kapos in *Kapo*, the six survivors of *We Wept Without Tears* were directly involved with the killing machine, so cannot claim that they could save lives. Their positive image is nevertheless built up through their descriptions of small acts of care for the victims in their last moments. Eliezer Eisenschmidt describes how he and his friends made two lines, so that women who did not want to take off their underwear in public could sneak into the gas chambers (believing those were a shower) without taking them off. Josef Sackar says that when a girl asked him if this was the end, he denied it ("I didn't have the heart to tell her 'you are going to die'."). Shaul Hazan felt that the best response was the truth. When encountering a friend in the camp who knew he was about to be murdered and wanted to know how, Hazan finally provided the details.

Towards the end of the film, Greif is filmed in the former camp during one of his many return visits in 2020. The way Greif summarizes *We Wept Without Tears* is meant to avoid judgment at all. While walking in Auschwitz-Birkenau, he states that the *Sonderkommando* were the ultimate victims of the Nazi regime. "Whoever wants to blame these six people after hearing their testimony – it's up to them", Lev commented in an interview, "but the reality was unimaginably surrealistic in its cruelty, and that is what the film shows […] The evidence does not enable outsiders to judge or treat them as collaborators. The film confirms that they were the most miserable victims" (Steir-Livny 2021b).

4.1 Location, Reenactment, Music and Language

Kapo does not probe the former functionaries' lives before Auschwitz and minimalizes their post-war lives. Greif considers that *We Wept Without Tears* is a portrait of Jewish workers in the largest death factory in the world and provides a technical and emotional depiction of how this factory operated. Thus, the events in the lives of the *Sonderkommando* before and after are irrelevant (Steir-Livny 2021a). Hence, the location of the film is only Auschwitz-Birkenau and the reenactments take place only there.

Lanzmann argued that since there are no Nazi film reels documenting what happened in the gas chambers, Nazi footage could provide no more than a dismal, superficial account of what had truly occurred during the Holocaust. By refusing to use materials filmed by the Nazis, Lanzmann implicitly formulated a rule in the ethics of Holocaust documentaries, which he broke in his 2013 documentary, *The Last of the Unjust*. In this film, Lanzmann did incorporate several minutes of the 1944 Nazi propaganda film "Theresienstadt: A Documentary Film from the Jewish Settlement Area," although the warning *mise en scène Nazi* ("staged by the Nazis") appears in the right-hand corner of the frame, throughout all the scenes, to remind viewers that this is not the truth. *We Wept Without Tears* gets as close as one possibly can to the gas chambers, since the six interviewees worked there and saw exactly what happened.

In one of the most (in)famous scenes, Lanzmann interviewed Treblinka survivor Abraham Bomba, who was forced to cut the hair of the victims in Treblinka and worked as a barber after the Liberation. When Lanzmann filmed the interviews, Bomba had already retired. Lanzmann nevertheless filmed him in a barbershop, in a "staged reenactment" (Felman 1994, 90–103; Felman and Laub 2007).

The reenactments in *We Wept Without Tears* are staged differently. The former *Sonderkommando* members stand where they were but they are not doing the job they were forced to do but imitate it. The film documents the survivors as they return to the past. On location, they go through the stages of the final journey from the train to the undressing room to the gas chambers. They are a part of how the survivors explain their duties and what they saw. Greif walks with the former inmates through the ruins of the undressing room, the gas chambers, and the crematoria. In each location, the survivors describe their duties. At other times, they reenact the victims' behavior, and at others, they reenact themselves. Josef Sackar and Eliezer Eisenschmidt show how women covered their naked bodies in the undressing room; Shaul Hazan, who is filmed in the area of what was once the gas chambers, demonstrates to the camera how they packed the gas chambers with as many as 2500 people "like sardines" and mimics the way the victims stood. When in crematorium No. 1, the former inmates touch the artifacts left there for illustrative purposes to demonstrate what they did.

These reenactments and their testimonies answer the question that viewers doubtless ask themselves, namely: how can someone live with these memories? They reveal how emotional detachment acts as a defense mechanism. The only time Josef Sackar is not emotionally detached is when he talks about his family who was murdered in Auschwitz, suggesting that this defense mechanism does not always succeed. Another scene that explains the failure of the defense mechanism is Jacob Silberberg still referring to himself as a prisoner in Auschwitz.

The emotional detachment of the former inmates is also embodied in language. For example, in crematorium No. 1, they light memorial candles "to the memory of the Jews who were burned in the Holocaust," implying that they had nothing to do with it. Abraham Dragon's defense mechanism involves euphemisms. He talks about the annihilation of part of the *Sonderkommando* group by commenting that "let's say we were 200; 100 were sent [i.e., murdered] and 100 stayed" or "they didn't take everyone at once" [i.e., the Nazis did not murder the entire group of *Sonderkommando* at once] or "when there was no work" [i.e., no killings in the gas chambers]. Greif and Lev do not address their language or ask them to use other words. They accept it and insert these scenes, which increase the viewers' empathy for those who have been able to live their lives by detaching themselves mentally from these events.

The directors echo this emotional distance by minimizing the use of non-diegetic music meant to enhance feeling. There are no extra-diegetic screams, barking dogs, etc., as found in many Holocaust films (including *Kapo*). Lev considers that there was no need for music in most of the film since the testimonies sufficed. The music at the beginning and the end was written by Tobias Ruger, a musician who had seen the filmed materials and said it was important to him. The violin music in the rebellion scenes is performed by Ivri Gitlis, a well-known violinist who had also seen the film and asked to play. Since there is an element of action in those scenes, Lev decided that music was appropriate there (Steir-Livny 2021a).

5 Conclusions

Kapo and *We Wept Without Tears,* as well as the way Israeli audiences received them, reflect ongoing changes in the perception of Jewish functionaries in the Holocaust. Functionaries were represented negatively in the Israeli culture in the 1950s and 60s. In the 1970s, a more complex narrative began to emerge but was conveyed through works of fiction. *Kapo* and *We Wept Without Tears* remain the only Israeli films documenting functionaries' stories in the first person. In the 2000s, survivor functionaries could face the camera and tell their stories without fearing repercussions. More than two decades separate the two films, showing that

this is a progress and that filmmakers and the Israeli culture are delving deeper into the issue.

In *Kapo,* the three protagonists do not apologize for their past. There is no self-criticism, only self-advocacy. Nevertheless, the other voices in the film and the cinematic components challenge their responses. The directors raise crucial questions of agency, shame, and guilt in a complex manner. The film does not fully support the functionaries' narrative but makes it hard to judge their positions or the functionaries as a group. The result is a multi-faceted cinematic document that deliberately avoids simplistic responses. "We had to wait 50 years to deal with this topic in such a healthy way", said Ilana Dayan, who aired the film in her documentary show *Uvda* (Birenberg 2000).

Whereas *Kapo* takes an ambivalent stand, *We Wept Without Tears* represents the functionaries as the most miserable victims and avoids a critical perspective. The entire film is dedicated to the testimonies of the former *Sonderkommando* who discuss horrible actions without judgment. It is represented as the story of the victims whose suffering was the most extreme.

The last time the interviewees are seen in the film is when they are filmed visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau with Greif. The captions at the end of the film mention their years of birth and death. Since their pre-, and post-*Sonderkommando* lives are barely mentioned, Auschwitz becomes the center of their existence. None has been liberated from the past.

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