

Family Frames

Filming Gertrude Schneider for ‘Shoah’

Quadros de família

Filmando Gertrude Schneider para ‘Shoah’¹

Jennifer Cazenave

Boston University, Romance Studies, Boston, EUA

Abstract

During the making of *Shoah*, Claude Lanzmann amassed 230 hours of filmed footage, an archive purchased by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1996 and preserved over the course of twenty years. This article examines the unused testimonies of three women survivors, who were filmed for *Shoah* in the 1970s. In the finished film, they are largely missing from Lanzmann’s Holocaust narrative. Yet, he interviewed almost a dozen women survivors and accumulated twenty hours of unused footage with them. In this article, I focus on the testimony filmed in New York in 1978 with the scholar-survivor Gertrude Schneider, her mother, Charlotte Hirschhorn, and her sister, Rita Wasserman. Shifting attention from the finished film to the outtakes sheds light on the choices made in the editing room. In so doing, we can theorize the exclusion of women survivors and analyze the construction of testimonial performances during the making of *Shoah*.

Keywords: reenactment. women. outtakes. testimonies.

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Resumo

Durante a realização do filme *Shoah*, Claude Lanzmann acumulou 230 horas de material filmado, um arquivo que foi comprado pelo United States Holocaust Memorial Museum em 1996 e preservado no decurso de vinte anos. O foco deste artigo está nos testemunhos excluídos de três mulheres sobreviventes filmadas para *Shoah* nos anos 1970. No filme, elas são em grande parte ausentes da narrativa de Lanzmann. Contudo, ele entrevistou quase uma dúzia de mulheres sobreviventes e acumulou vinte horas de *outtakes* (isto é, as tomadas que ficaram de fora, o material bruto) com elas. Este artigo examina o testemunho filmado em Nova York em 1978 com a historiadora-sobrevivente Gertrude Schneider, sua mãe, Charlotte Hirschhorn, e sua irmã, Rita Wasserman. Ao focar os *outtakes*, podemos examinar as escolhas feitas na sala de edição, a fim de teorizar a exclusão de mulheres sobreviventes e analisar a construção das atuações testemunhas durante a realização de *Shoah*.

Palavras-chave: Reconstituição. Mulheres. Outtakes. Testemunhos.

In the fall of 1978, Claude Lanzmann and his film crew had just returned from Chelmno, in Poland. There, they recorded Simon Srebnik returning to the death camp and singing for the camera the songs he had once sung for the Nazis; his testimonial performance would become the opening of *Shoah*. Directly after Chelmno, Lanzmann and his crew spent several weeks in New York City filming survivors of the Riga ghetto. Among them was Gertrude Schneider, a scholar-survivor who would devote several books to the Holocaust. Like many of testimonies with women survivors recorded for *Shoah*, the story of the largest ghetto in occupied Latvia recounted by Schneider was haunted by a singular theme: the tragedy of choice. In late November and early December 1941, all but 3,800 Latvian Jews of the thirty thousand incarcerated in the ghetto were massacred. At the same time, twenty thousand Jews from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia – including Schneider and her family – were deported to the Latvian capital. They remained in the ghetto until its liquidation in 1943; only eight hundred survived the war. During the making of *Shoah*, Lanzmann also carried a personal connection to Riga – his paternal grandmother, Anna, had been born there.

In New York City, Lanzmann recorded two different testimonies with Schneider; both were in English and totalled two hours of unused footage. The first, in October 1978, consisted of an interview alone with Schneider; the second, which took place several weeks later, included her mother, Charlotte Hirschhorn, and her sister Rita Wasserman. In *Shoah*, Schneider and her mother appear very briefly toward the end of the film: they sing a melody in Yiddish titled “Azoy muss sein” that they had once sung in the ghetto; Hirschhorn

is present, but remains off-frame. In the first recording with Schneider, Lanzmann begins the interview in the same way he would weeks later when filming the historian Raul Hilberg in Vermont. Just as he first discusses with the historian his published study of the Holocaust, he starts by asking “Dr. Schneider” as he refers to her in these outtakes, why she chose to write a book on the Riga ghetto. This opening question reveals Schneider’s dual perspective on the catastrophe underlying her writings as a whole and unique in Lanzmann’s archive of filmed testimonies: that of a historian-eyewitness. When interviewed for Shoah, Schneider had just completed a book manuscript based on her doctoral dissertation, *Journey into Terror: Story of the Riga Ghetto* (1979), which incorporated archival documents, survivor testimonies, and the diary she had kept as a thirteen-year-old girl in the ghetto. “There was no actual book on this most unique ghetto”, she first observes, here alluding to the fact that, following their deportation, Jews from the Reich formed a community of their own. Unlike in other ghettos in Eastern Europe, they were physically isolated from the Latvians Jews who were housed in a separate section of the Riga ghetto.

In front of the camera, Schneider details the tragedy of choice that defined their arrival: “[*Journey into Terror*] brought to light certain of the things that had bothered me already then, as an inmate, and bothered me later, when I started to learn more about the Holocaust itself. Like why we were selected to live, and for instance, the Latvian Jews were killed”. Asked to elucidate the nature of her book (“Do you think it is an exemplaire [sic] book, a classical book about the Holocaust, about this particular theme...?”), she defines *Journey into Terror* as “a minute detail of the vast theme of the Holocaust”. Her phrasing calls to mind how Lanzmann would eventually edit Shoah so as to turn it from a broad investigation of the catastrophe into a minutely detailed depiction of the extermination process (Lanzmann’s and Schneider’s parallel approach is further accentuated in the excluded footage by the fact that they consulted some of the same archival documents for their respective research).²

² Original Gertrude Schneider Interview Transcript, 1-2. On page 4, she mentions letters by Latvian Jewish survivors who blame the Jews from the Reich for the destruction of their community. Lanzmann immediately interjects: “I have one of those letters. [...] Fred Wildhauer [a Latvian Jewish survivor]?”, “Yes, yes, I have this letter in my files”, Schneider retorts.

Figures 1 e 2



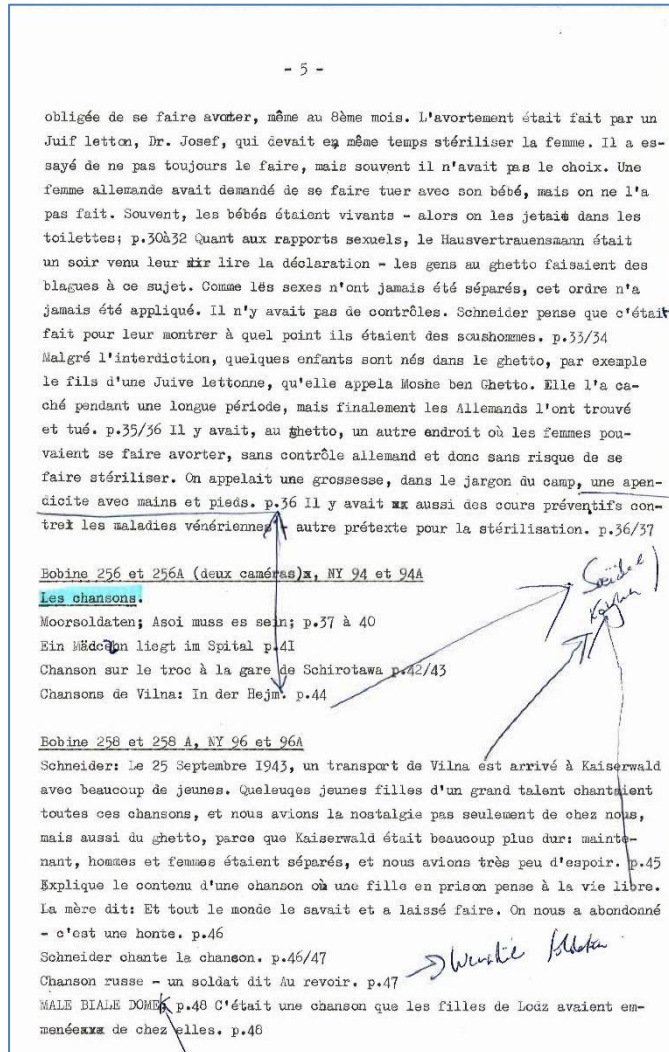
Gertrude Schneider (center), Charlotte Hirschhorn (right) and Rita Wasserman (close-up) singing “Azoy muss sein” in the outtakes; in the finished film, Wasserman remains off-frame (Created by Claude Lanzmann during the filming of *Shoah*).

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In these outtakes, Schneider provides a vivid and exhaustive account of the German Jews’ arrival and their life in the ghetto. His interest in Schneider’s testimony and her twofold perspective as a historian-eyewitness is evidenced in the transcript: in addition to extensive underlining and bracketing of entire pages, this document also contains highlighted sentences, beginning with the inaugural exchange around Journey into Terror (the summary of the transcript in French, which is several pages long, also contains annotations and highlighting). However, Lanzmann edited out almost the entirety of the Schneider footage. Effacing his investigation into the “unique” case of Riga (in *Shoah*, an unspecific caption for Schneider and her mother reads “survivors of the ghetto”) and the historian-eyewitness’s unparalleled intertwining of public and private memory, Lanzmann only retained his authorial imprint in the finished film — the reenactment of

“Azoy muss sein” during his second interview with Schneider and her family. In this footage, the story of the women’s survival beyond the Riga ghetto is also never told in front of the camera.³

Figure 3



A page from the French summary of the Gertrude Schneider interview with “Les chansons [the songs]” highlighted and an arrow pointing to “MALE BIALE [sic] DOMEK” at the bottom (Created by Claude Lanzmann during the filming of *Shoah*. Used by permission of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority, Jerusalem).

Lanzmann does not appear on-screen in the Schneider outtakes. Sitting across from the historian-eyewitness, his presence from beginning to end takes the form of a disembodied voice reminiscent of the iconic barbershop scene with Abraham Bomba. Schneider is seated in the same place in both interviews; she

³ In an essay titled “The Unfinished Road”, Schneider details their deportation from Riga to the small camp of Gotentov in the eponymous Latvian village. Similarly, in a short text titled “How I Almost Did Not Make It”, Rita Wasserman describes how the three women survived a death march from Gotentov in the final days of the war. See Schneider, 1991, p. 1-25 and p. 167-173.

knits while being filmed with her mother and sister. Calling to mind Ada Lichtman's needle and thread in *The Four Sister*, his final documentary, this gesture encapsulates the movement of memory or weaving of testimony. It also accentuates the intimacy underlying this "family frame", to borrow the title of Marianne Hirsch's influential book on photography and postmemory (Hirsh, 1997). At the same time, it foreshadows Schneider's role throughout this second interview where, sitting in the center, she literally holds the threads of familial memory, particularly by singing a total of seven songs, sometimes twice.

Her mother, visibly upset at different points of the interview, remains for the most part silent: sometimes briefly singing and smiling, sometimes waiving her hand in disbelief at the lyrics being sung, sometimes covering her face with her hands, she interjects at different moments in order to mention the world's indifference or her deceased husband, who perished at Buchenwald in the final days of the war. Schneider's sister, Rita Wasserman, sits apart from the rest of the family and often observes the film crew, all the while readily answering Lanzmann's questions about their life in the ghetto. Yet when solicited, along with her mother and sister, to perform songs from the ghetto, she sings in a quiet voice with a sad expression on her face, at times only mouthing the words she clearly remembers. "And so we sang, and so we suffered...", Schneider declares after finishing the last of the seven songs that, combined, encompass nearly two-thirds of the entire interview. "... And so we died", Rita Wasserman immediately adds⁴.

If these outtakes recover a distinct portrait of two generations of women survivors, they also capture the docu-auteur at work. Unbeknownst to the three women, who resume their testimony after the first song only to be immediately prompted to strike up another melody from the Riga ghetto, this excluded material suggests that Lanzmann had intended to solicit a specific testimonial performance during his second interview with Schneider. Following a discussion on forced abortions in the ghetto, William Lubtchansky — the great cinematographer of the French New Wave — cuts in order to recharge the camera; when the footage resumes, two cameras are now filming, a rare technical change that is even recorded in the interview transcript. "But tell me about the songs, you used to sing in the ghetto in which circumstances?" Lanzmann begins, steering, twenty minutes into the interview, the women's testimony toward a reenactment reminiscent of Srebnik's performance in Chełmno he had captured weeks before.⁵

In *The Patagonian Hare*, Lanzmann recalls that, during a preliminar meeting at Srebnik's home in Ness Ziona, he learned that the Chełmno Survivor had once sung for the Germans. "Mały biały domek w mej

⁴ Original Gertrude Schneider Interview Transcript, p. 52.

⁵ Original Gertrude Schneider Interview Transcript, p. 37.

pamięci tkwi... [A little white house sticks in my memory...]", Srebnik began to sing in Polish. The docu-auteur then decided to take the survivor back to Chełmno in order to film him performing songs in a boat on the river. In the opening moments of *Shoah*, Srebnik can be heard and seen singing this same Polish song (Lanzmann, 2012, p. 438). In his memoir, Lanzmann never mentions Schneider nor how he learned that she had sung in the Riga ghetto. Perhaps he inquired after reading the manuscript of *Journey into Terror* where she devotes a chapter to cultural activities, including songs composed and concerts performed in the ghetto (Schneider, 2001, p. 53-59). Schneider's musical memory, however, precedes her traumatic experience in Riga. In the preface to her 2000 edition of Mordechai Gebirtig's songs, she recalls having learned Yiddish melodies as a child from a Jewish Polish housekeeper who, every fall for several weeks, visited family in her native Kraków. Upon returning to Vienna, she would bring back with her new songs. "The last such absence occurred in the fall of 1937", writes Schneider (2000, p. 2): "She taught me a new song, and while it seemed quite sad to me, it had an interesting effect on her. Whenever she sang it, she stopped whatever she was doing and grew thoughtful. The name of that new song was 'Es Brent'".

In front of the camera in November 1978, Schneider never sings the famous Yiddish melody Lanzmann would ask another woman survivor – Malka Goldberg – to perform the following year. Rather, she limits her repertoire to melodies the three women had intoned in the Riga ghetto, beginning with a moving adaptation of the famous German resistance song "Die Moorsoldaten" ("The Peat Bog Soldiers"), which was originally composed in the thirties by concentration camp inmates. In the cinema verité classic *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961), a film Michael Rothberg considers "an unacknowledged predecessor of *Shoah*", the Holocaust survivor Marceline Loidan – Ivens briefly chants "Die Moorsoldaten" in French in the midst of her filmed testimony (Rothberg, 2009, p. 190).⁶

"I consider [it] really, very, very much the ghetto-song", Schneider tells Lanzmann in the outtakes, before explaining that in Riga they had modified the final lines of "Die Moorsoldaten" to capture their deportation: "Denn uns hat man verbannt / In ein fernes Land / Als Juden [Then we were banished / To a foreign place / As Jews]". Momentarily lapsing into German, thereby revealing his intention to engender an emotional reliving of the past, the docuauteur interrupts the survivor. "Können Sie... Could you sing it? [...] Aber [but]... from the beginning!", he exclaims in an imposing tone. As Schneider sings, the two cameras carefully frame this first performance by capturing close-ups of Charlotte Hirschhorn and Rita Wasserman. The former initially murmurs the words before burying her face in her hands as she does in *Shoah* while

⁶ On the relationship between *Shoah* and cinema verité, see Joshua Hirsch, 2004, p. 63-84.

singing “Azoy muss sein”. Visibly pained, the latter looks down silently. When Schneider stops singing, Lanzmann’s asks that she continue. “I would like... your mother [to sing]!”, he declares emphatically, a hint of impatience in his tone. “And you too, please!” he says to Rita Wasserman, further affirming his authorial intentions.⁷ Schneider’s singing prompts the same emotional reaction from her mother who, when hearing the line, “Heimat, du bist wieder mein [Homeland, you are once again mine]”, waives her hand in disbelief.

In these outtakes, the two performances of “Die Moorsoldaten” serve as a rehearsal — both for the survivors and the film crew operating the two cameras — for the reenactment of “Azoy muss sein” that immediately follows. In the finished film, Lanzmann excluded the famous German song of resistance and included instead the unknown Yiddish melody composed by the Latvian Jews whose story of destruction he had originally envisaged as a chapter of his Holocaust opus. From these outtakes, Lanzmann also omitted a poignant coincidence that further accentuates the cinematographic filiation between the testimonial performance of Srebnik in Chełmno and that of Schneider, her mother, and her sister in New York. Asked if they know any Polish songs, Schneider begins to sing the very melody with which *Shoah* would open: “Mały biały domek...”. When she sees Lanzmann’s astonished (off-screen) face, she interrupts herself and exclaims with surprise: “You know it? [...] Why, when did you hear it?”. Rather than reveal that he had just recorded Srebnik singing this melody in Chełmno, the familiar disembodied voice of the docu-auteur simply replies: “Please, go on, sing it”.⁸

Jennifer Cazenave

Professora de cinema na Universidade de Boston (EUA). É autora de An Archive of the Catastrophe:

The Unused Footage of Claude Lanzmann’s “Shoah” (2019), que recebeu uma Menção Honrosa pelo prêmio Best First Book Award de la Society for Cinema and Media Studies.

Também publicou uma dúzia de artigos sobre o cinema documental francês.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3033-8399>

E-mail: jennifercazenave2008@u.northwestern.edu

⁷ Original Gertrude Schneider Interview Transcript, p. 37-38. The phrase “your mother” is omitted in the transcript. Schneider also references this song and the modified lyrics in *Journey into Terror* (59). The original ending of the song is “Dann ziehn die Moorsoldaten / Nie mehr mit den Spaten / Ins Moor [Then will the peat bog soldiers march / No more with spades / To the bog]”.

⁸ Original Gertrude Schneider Interview Transcript, p. 48. Transcription modified.

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