

## The Defense of a Jewish Collaborator

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Issue

Mark Lilla

### *The Last of the Unjust*

a film directed by Claude Lanzmann

Shown at the New York Film Festival in September; general release in February 2014

### *Terezin: Il ghetto-modello di Eichmann [Theresienstadt: Eichmann's Model Ghetto]*

by Benjamin Murrelstein

Brescia: La Scuola, 246 pp., €15.50

### *“Der Letzte der Ungerechten”: Der “Judenälteste” Benjamin Murrelstein in Filmen 1942–1975 [“The Last of the Unjust”: The “Jewish Head Elder” Benjamin Murrelstein in Films 1942–1975]*

edited by Ronny Loewy and Katharina Rauschenberger

Frankfurt: Campus, 201 pp., €24.90



Cohen Media Group

*Claude Lanzmann and Benjamin Murrelstein, Rome, 1975; from Lanzmann's film The Last of the Unjust*

# 1.

A half-century has passed since Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was first published. Yet somehow we can't escape it. Even today historians of the Final Solution do battle with her misguided thesis that Adolf Eichmann, the cold-blooded engineer of the Nazi killing machine, was himself but a cog in it, a self-deceived simpleton who made evil seem banal.<sup>1</sup> And her cavalier criticism of Jewish leaders who found themselves forced to cooperate with the Nazis in the expropriation, expulsion, internment, and even extermination of their own people still provokes outrage and rebuttals. As sometimes happens in the world of ideas, it is those who think least of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* who keep it alive by dragging its author out for what is by now ritual trial and conviction. This is how the book survives.

The specter of Hannah Arendt haunts every film Claude Lanzmann has made, beginning with his nine-and-a-half-hour epic *Shoah*, released in 1985. Arendt believed that the Nazi experience could be understood, and had to be, since only through understanding can "we come to terms with, reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world." This would mean reconciling ourselves, in some sense, even to the Holocaust. "To the extent that the rise of totalitarian governments is the central event in our world," she once wrote, "to understand totalitarianism is not to condone anything, but to reconcile ourselves to a world in which these things are possible at all."

Lanzmann refuses to understand the Holocaust, let alone make peace with the world that made it possible. A short essay only three paragraphs long is his most powerful retort to Arendt:

All one has to do, perhaps, is pose the question simply, and ask, "Why were the Jews killed?" This shows its obscenity. There is an absolute obscenity in the project of understanding. *Not* understanding was my iron law during all the years of preparing and directing *Shoah*: I held onto this refusal as the only ethical and workable attitude possible.... "*Hier ist kein Warum*": this, Primo Levi tells us, was the law at Auschwitz that an SS guard taught him on arriving at the camp: "Here there is no why."

What disturbs Lanzmann about standard historical treatments of the Final Solution is that, in trying to comprehend its chronological development, they unwittingly make it look inevitable, given the "factors" involved. Documentaries that begin with Nazis burning books and end two hours later with emaciated prisoners staring out from behind barbed wire leave the impression that everything moved like clockwork. But, he has written, "the six million murdered Jews did not die right on time, and that is why any work that wants to render justice to the Holocaust today must make breaking chronology its first principle." Lanzmann's achronological approach in *Shoah* may be the secret of its power. We hear victims, killers, and bystanders speaking as if in a vacuum, and experience their shocking words without preparation or anticipation of what is to come. They are simply present. For "the worst crime,

moral and artistic, that can be committed when making a work dedicated to the Holocaust is to consider it as *past*.”

It is more than a little surprising, then, to watch Lanzmann’s stunning new movie, *The Last of the Unjust*, and realize that it breaks all these rules. Its genesis was complex. Lanzmann worked for over a decade on *Shoah* and during that period collected hundreds of hours of recorded material that could not possibly be fit into the film or that struck a discordant note. Several strong interviews from that material were left out and over the past fifteen years he has been releasing them as independent films. *The Last of the Unjust*, the most recent, is based on a series of interviews he did in 1975 with Benjamin Murmelstein, the controversial head of the *Judenrat* (council of Jewish elders) who dealt with Nazi officials in the Theresienstadt concentration camp, and the only such figure to have survived the war.

It is also a brief for his defense. Like the ludicrous Jewish elder of the Łódź ghetto Chaim Rumkowski, Murmelstein was widely despised by survivors of Theresienstadt, who considered him a traitor, his guilt sealed by the fact of his survival. Gershom Scholem spoke for many when he wrote in a letter to Hannah Arendt that, “as all the prisoners of the Lager I’ve spoken with confirm, the Viennese Rabbi Murmelstein of Theresienstadt deserves to be hanged by the Jews.”<sup>2</sup> But who really knew anything about him? Was he even alive? Lanzmann finally hunted Murmelstein down in Rome, where he had been living in obscurity since the war, and arranged for an interview that ended up lasting a week. And during that time Lanzmann was converted. A text that scrolls down the screen as the movie opens informs us that “during the week I spent with him, I grew to love him. He does not lie.”

If *Shoah* can be viewed as a cinematic response to Arendt’s “banality of evil” thesis, Lanzmann’s new film is a retort to her unflattering portrait of the Jewish leaders. It is a straightforward, chronological documentary that moves from Murmelstein’s work with Austrian Jews after the *Anschluss* to the history of Theresienstadt, then moves to the two years Murmelstein spent in the camp, the last as head elder (*Judenältester*). Now, it seems, Lanzmann wants very much for us to understand the Holocaust, through Murmelstein’s story. This is a striking turnabout for the filmmaker and makes for a very strong documentary, if not an entirely satisfying one.

## 2.

Benjamin Murmelstein was born into an Orthodox Jewish family in the Galician city of Lemberg (Lviv) in 1905 and moved to Vienna as a young man to pursue his religious studies, eventually becoming rabbi of a small synagogue there. In 1935, as Hitler’s rise stoked Austrian anti-Semitism, Murmelstein gave a speech in Vienna honoring what he called the “unknown Jewish soldiers” of World War I—that is, the soldiers whose names had been removed from German war memorials on Goebbels’s orders. This brought him to the attention of the Israelitische Kultusgemeinde (IKG), the Viennese Jewish community organization, which asked him to write reports for them after the

*Anschluss*. It was in this capacity that he first encountered Eichmann, who had been put in charge of organizing the emigration and expropriation of the Jews, and received Murrelstein's reports.

Between 1938 and 1943 Murrelstein became increasingly responsible for arranging logistics with Eichmann as Nazi policy evolved from forced emigration to forced ghettoization and internment. He cajoled and argued with officials to help Jews obtain exit visas and in 1939 even traveled to London to beg for assistance. By 1941, when the Nazis began sealing the borders, he and the IKG had helped over 125,000 Jews flee Austria. In 1943, though, Murrelstein was himself deported to the Theresienstadt ghetto along with many remaining "prominent Jews" in Vienna.

Theresienstadt was unique in the Nazi camp system and wore nearly as many masks as its creator Eichmann. Set up in 1941 within an eighteenth-century fortress in Czechoslovakia, it was publicized in Germany and abroad as a "model ghetto" for elderly and prominent Jews and the first step toward establishing a separate Jewish homeland in Europe. In fact it almost immediately became a transit camp for Auschwitz-Birkenau, whose purpose was then known to few. Even more perversely, the ghetto was sold to fearful Jews as a spa town whose rooms with mountain views could be booked if they handed their wealth over to Eichmann, which many of them did. They were then sent off in second-class train compartments well stocked with food and medicine, only to disembark at the other end and be attacked by guards and dogs.

When Murrelstein arrived in Theresienstadt he was appointed almost immediately to the *Judenrat*. Its leader at the time was Jakob Edelstein of Prague, who after a year was deported to Auschwitz and murdered, after first being forced to watch his wife and son being shot. When his successor, Paul Eppstein of Berlin, was summarily executed in the fortress the following year, the office of elder fell to Murrelstein, who held it until the camp was liberated in May 1945.

In the camp, Murrelstein was feared and distrusted, given his constant contact with the Nazis and efficiency in carrying out their orders. Murrelstein was, apparently, an extraordinarily strict man who applied the Nazis' regulations with what seemed appalling inflexibility and heartlessness. He established a seventy-hour work week to help the camp commander reach his production quotas, despite the fact that the population was slowly starving. (It did not help that he was a naturally fat man who also controlled the food supplies.) And when the largest deportations to Auschwitz began in late 1944, he refused to receive requests for exemptions unless the petitioner was willing to take his friend's place on the train.

Even more controversially, Murrelstein helped the Nazis "beautify" the ghetto and turn it into a movie set for propaganda films made in 1942 and 1944. (This strange episode and Murrelstein's role in it are examined thoroughly in Ronny Loewy and Katarina Rauschenberger's book, which also helpfully chronicles his life.) Buildings were painted, flowers were planted, and the sick and crippled were deported so as not to ruin the montage. Lanzmann splices in clips from these films that show inmates

working happily, enjoying soccer games, playing chess, and listening to lectures, with klezmer music on the soundtrack. In one heartbreaking scene we see jovial children playing games and munching happily on snacks they no doubt would never see again. It is hard to know what effect if any these films had on public opinion, but the renovation of the ghetto did much to fool officials from the International Red Cross when they inspected it in 1944 and reported nothing out of the ordinary.

Murmelstein's fall was quick and hard. After the camp was liberated by the Russians he was arrested by the Czech government and spent eighteen months in prison while a case was built against him as a collaborator. In the end, prosecutors abandoned it and Murmelstein was allowed to emigrate to Italy, where he spent the rest of his life in relative anonymity with his wife and son in Rome, working as a salesman and occasionally for the Vatican (in what capacity is unclear).

But well before his arrival, rumors about him reached the Roman Jewish community organization, which refused to register him. When Murmelstein died in 1989 his son was not allowed to inter him next to his wife; he was buried instead at the very edge of the Jewish cemetery. His son maintains that Jewish community leaders also forbade him to say Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, in Rome's main synagogue. This despite the fact—or because of it—that he was the only *Judenältester* to survive the war.



bpk/Art Resource

*A concert in the 'community house' at the Theresienstadt concentration camp, August 1944; still from the Nazi propaganda film The Führer Gives a City to the Jews*

### 3.

*The Last of the Unjust* begins badly. Rather than plunge us right into the Marmelstein story, Lanzmann weirdly keeps the camera focused on himself for the first half-hour. We see him staring silently and significantly at stations where the transport trains passed, pausing at spots where executions were carried out, and reading from texts on the history of Theresienstadt and from camp memoirs. Similar blunt intrusions punctuate the film. At different points we are shown drawings by ghetto artists, a cantor singing in a rebuilt synagogue, the gravestones in Prague's Jewish cemetery, and, apropos of nothing, a long shot from a car as it approaches the walls of Jerusalem. Lanzmann generally avoided such techniques in *Shoah* and has criticized other filmmakers for applying schmaltz to the Holocaust, but here he nearly slips into it himself. Then Marmelstein begins to talk and the tenor of the film changes.

The first image of him will jar anyone who thinks he knows Marmelstein's story. Sitting on a terrace overlooking Rome on a splendid day he looks less like a monster than an aging cherubic uncle from the old country, sporting tweeds and tinted glasses and speaking rapid-fire German with an Eastern European accent and slight lisp. Lanzmann seems uncomfortable around him, while Marmelstein is serene and charming, dropping well-worn anecdotes and *bons mots*, and smiling ironically from time to time. He is well prepared for the director's questions, which at first are mundane. But as the interview gathers steam and the questions become more precise and challenging, Marmelstein responds with equal and astonishing precision, causing Lanzmann to remark on his prodigious memory. From that point on their relation is fixed. Marmelstein talks at length while Lanzmann interrupts occasionally to ask for clarification or shift the conversation in a slightly different direction. This, unlike *Shoah*, is a one-man show.

What few viewers will know is that many of Marmelstein's detail-filled monologues are drawn, sometimes verbatim, from a book he published in 1961 about his camp experiences, *Terezin: Il ghetto-modello di Eichmann (Theresienstadt: Eichmann's Model Ghetto)*, which has just been reissued to coincide with the film's premiere. Marmelstein must have had high hopes for the book but it received little attention at the time and did nothing to rescue his reputation. When he learned of Eichmann's kidnapping and planned trial he even sent a copy to prosecutors in Jerusalem, along with a letter giving his contact information and stating his willingness to testify. He never received a response.<sup>3</sup>

*Terezin* is largely a straightforward history of the camp and Marmelstein's imprisonment. He tends to get lost in the details, but every so often there are extraordinarily vivid and moving passages that express a sensitivity and moral outrage that Marmelstein rarely displays in the film. Here are his

impressions on the day he arrived in the ghetto:

In one corner tired workers, in another mothers with babies in their arms. Next to a broken table, work is being prepared for tomorrow; technicians discuss the quantity of water available and the diameter of the tubes. In the corridor the sick lie in agony without hope, in the kitchen girls and grown women give themselves up for a cigarette, and, under the arcade, young people read poetry.

Soon after arrival Murelstein was put in charge of managing health services, such as they were, and describes the hopelessness of his task:

In this atmosphere even the bacteria are not allowed to develop freely. Epidemics run a strange course because the ghetto's residents, surrounded by all the infections possible and imaginable, finally acquire a certain immunity. Everyone becomes his own cultivator and inhibitor of bacteria.

In another passage he gives an acute analysis of Eichmann's strategy and how it kept the Jews at each others' throats rather than the guards':

This is how Eichmann's experiment developed and was prepared according to a detailed recipe: throw together Jews from different places and with different languages, add a dash of those who were never really Jewish, and bring the whole thing to a boil over a slow flame; strain, making some pass through every once in a while. The rest end up in the oven.

*Terezin* also describes what Primo Levi called the "gray zone" of concentration camp life that Lanzmann avoids. Up to 50,000 prisoners from very different backgrounds were forced to struggle for survival in a fort that had been built for seven thousand troops, provoking appalling behavior in some and bringing out strange rivalries and even snobbery in others. In a paragraph worthy of Levi, Murelstein describes a sick inmate who refused care from an Eastern European doctor who visited her. "Excuse me," she said, "but I'm a German woman who cannot be examined by a Jewish doctor." He overhears an argument: "Theresienstadt was given by the Führer to us, the Germans; a Polish ghetto suffices for the Jews." He tells the stories of "prominent" inmates who were under the illusion that their social position would protect them from Nazi racial laws. There is the judge who investigated the Reichstag fire in 1933, as the Nazis demanded, but was sent to the camps when his impure blood was discovered. And there is the Jewish ex-wife of a German noble who divorced her to save his family's honor—then, to ease his conscience, arranged her transfer to the model ghetto Theresienstadt with "a privileged status."

There are no such humanizing touches in Lanzmann's film. Murelstein is there to defend himself and defend himself he does. He wants to convince his interviewer and the viewer that all his

actions, including the most troubling, were intended to beat the Nazis at their own game. If Eichmann's strategy was to create in Theresienstadt a model ghetto that would distract world attention from the mass murders committed elsewhere, Murrelstein's was to maintain that illusion so the camp and its inmates could not be destroyed without setting off an alarm.

If one accepts the soundness of this strategy, his actions appear in a different light. Rules had to be strictly, even brutally enforced to ensure that the Nazis did not transform the ghetto into an extermination camp. To keep the place from succumbing to a typhus epidemic he secretly had all the inmates forcibly vaccinated, denying food to those who refused, so the place appeared healthy. The seventy-hour work week was essential because, at the time he instituted it, the Nazis were worried more about shortages than about world opinion, and Murrelstein wanted the ghetto to appear economically indispensable. "Survival through work," he says, was his version of the Nazi camp motto "Freedom through work."

He offers the same defense of his efforts to beautify the ghetto for the propaganda films. Besides keeping it in the public eye, the beautification program also allowed him to actually improve conditions in the camp: clean the streets, build more accommodations, especially for the elderly, and put windows into windowless buildings. Every one of these actions bought the camp a little more time.

They may have done so. What's fascinating, though, is to witness a man incapable of recognizing the real cost of his strategy, especially in the wider *Lager* system. Keeping his camp running efficiently and in the public eye saved it as an institution, but also meant that victims could be processed more efficiently on their way to Auschwitz-Birkenau and other places east. Murrelstein, like everyone in the camp, did not learn about Auschwitz until 1944, but no one was ignorant of the fact that transport *nach Osten* meant unspeakable suffering and nearly certain death. At times, he speaks as if preserving the ghetto was an end in itself, never considering, as Hannah Arendt had suggested, that less efficiency might have meant fewer deaths overall. In the judgment of Holocaust historian Saul Friedländer, "*objectively* the *Judenrat* was probably an instrument in the destruction of European Jewry." "But," he added, "*subjectively* the actors were not aware of this function." Arendt never considered that a healthy capacity for self-delusion may have been necessary for survival in the camps, and that Jewish elders especially would have needed it to continue helping others and not just themselves.

Still, there are moments, when Murrelstein rattles off statistics or recounts the precise dates of meetings or corrects some detail in Lanzmann's questions, that he sounds eerily like the blinkered figure Eichmann pretended to be in Jerusalem, oblivious to the larger drama he was a part of. In the last half-hour of the film Lanzmann finally loses patience with him. After asking Murrelstein what happened to children born in the camp, and being told matter-of-factly that all those born before October 1944 were killed, Lanzmann criticizes his coolness:

Listening to you speak about Theresienstadt, one does not have the impression that

Theresienstadt was a place of disaster, that the people were suffering, that thousands perished and that other thousands were deported to Auschwitz.... I have the feeling that you did not have any human feelings.

Murmelstein snaps back:

Imagine a surgeon who cannot stand blood, who is so good-hearted that he starts crying during an operation. Can you imagine that? He would kill the patient. He is hard-hearted, yes, in order to save the patient.

In the transcripts of his original footage Lanzmann is even rougher on Murmelstein, asking him at one point, “You have a fascist temperament, right?”<sup>4</sup> But as the interview wears on, it’s clear that Lanzmann is coming to believe and even admire him. It’s not hard to. What gives Murmelstein’s testimony the ring of truth is not his mastery of detail or even self-justifications. It is his ability to evoke, often with striking metaphors, what it was like to be in his position, without the “luxury,” as he puts, of being a gentleman. All the *Judenälteste* were “between hammer and anvil,” unable to satisfy either Nazis or Jews and earning the contempt of both. He compares himself to Sancho Panza, the practical man who got things done while the Don Quixotes of the camps perished ineffectively.

He also likens himself to Scheherezade, keeping Theresienstadt alive by telling stories to both Nazis and Jews. When asked about the charge that he was just a marionette, he rejects it—then, on reflection, accepts it:

The Jewish elder was stuck in the position of being a marionette, a ridiculous marionette. But this marionette had to act in such a way that he could influence matters from his laughable position. Nobody could understand that, nobody was supposed to understand that otherwise it would have cost him his head.... Usually marionettes are pulled by wires, but in this case the marionette had to pull his own wires. This was the hard part of being a Jewish elder.

Murmelstein states plainly that he was no hero, just a “tightrope walker.” (He also refuses to call the prisoners “heroes,” preferring the term “martyrs.”) When asked whether he enjoyed having power, he freely admits it. “I am only human.... Who is displeased with power? By which I mean the possibility of accomplishing something, that is a real satisfaction.” He also admits to a certain *Abenteuerlust*, a “thirst for adventure” that kept him at his post in both Vienna and in Theresienstadt. Murmelstein could have tried to escape during his London trip in 1939, and later that year was even offered a pass to Palestine for himself and his family, which he gave instead to a former student. That, in retrospect, was a mistake, and at one point he speaks wistfully of the career he might have made for himself as a rabbi or professor in America. Instead he became, as he calls himself, “the last of the unjust.”<sup>5</sup>

## 4.

By the film's end Lanzmann appears completely won over. He accepts Murelstein's friendship and praises his fortitude in the interviews. "*Mais vous êtes un tigre!*" He then asks what Murelstein thinks about Israelis' hostility to him, mentioning Scholem's letter to Hannah Arendt. Murelstein praises Scholem somewhat ironically as a great scholar at the level of Sigmund Freud, then wonders why he didn't use the Murelstein case as an occasion to do some historical research. Besides, cracking a smile, isn't it strange that Scholem opposed the execution of Eichmann but wants Murelstein the Jew dead? "The *Herr* is a bit capricious with hanging, don't you think?"

This conversation, the movie's final scene, was filmed before the Arch of Titus, not far from the Roman Forum, at Murelstein's request. It is a highly symbolic place. The arch was built by the Emperor Domitian in the first century to commemorate the victories of his brother Titus, who reconquered Jerusalem in 70 CE. A sculptured panel shows this conquest and Roman soldiers carrying off an enormous menorah. One of Titus's aides was the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, who as a young man fought against the Romans and, when trapped by them, took part in a collective suicide pact that he alone survived. He later defected to the Roman side and tried unsuccessfully to negotiate a Jewish surrender to save Jerusalem and its temple from destruction, and for this was, and by some still is, considered a traitor and pariah. Murelstein was always fascinated by Josephus and in 1938, that fateful year, published an anthology of his writings, with an introduction that concludes, "His divided and ambiguous nature turned him into a symbol of the Jewish tragedy." A sentence that reads like an epitaph for Murelstein himself.

As the film fades into the credits we see Lanzmann walking up a cobblestone street toward the arch, his arm draped over Murelstein's shoulder, a gesture that seems to say, once again, "he does not lie." Perhaps not. But *The Last of the Unjust* cannot be the whole truth about this brave, slippery, wise, half-blind man.

Had Lanzmann stuck to the more jumbled, associative style of *Shoah* he might have been able to capture cinematically the moral shadows that still shroud this historic figure, making a powerful film more powerful still. Instead he sticks to the conventional style of the documentary apologia, which delivers a clear lesson but does not, in the end, disturb. One cannot help feeling that an opportunity was missed. By blocking all the psychological exits *Shoah* forced us into a genuine experience few viewers will forget. *The Last of the Unjust* lets us escape before we reach the center of the gray zone, where we might have encountered not only Benjamin Murelstein but ourselves. n

—*This is the second of two articles.*

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1 See my review of Margarethe von Trotta's film *Hannah Arendt*, "[Arendt and Eichmann: The New Truth](#)," *The New York Review*, November 21, 2013. ↩

2 This sentence was excised by Scholem in later publications and translations of the letter, but can be found in his *Briefe II: 1948–1970* (Munich:

Beck, 1995), p. 98. ↵

- 3 This is regrettable on many grounds, given Murlstein's intimate knowledge, apparent in the book and movie, of Eichmann's independent initiative, cruelty, and financial ploys to feed his ambition. In the film he also drops a bombshell: that on *Kristallnacht* he found Eichmann in Vienna's Seitenstettengasse synagogue with a crowbar, eagerly directing the SS as they destroyed the place. ↵
- 4 These transcripts, which run to hundreds of pages in German and English, along with an hour of excerpts from Lanzmann's raw footage, are available on the website of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. ↵
- 5 He is referring ironically to a historical novel about the Jewish predicament that won the Prix Goncourt in 1959, André Schwarz-Bart's *Le Dernier des Justes*. ↵

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