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Holocaust as History and Memory

Final Essay

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In the years following the Holocaust, an attempt to fully realize the horrors of the Holocaust was made through film. The 1940 film *Night Train to Munich*, was the first feature film to depict concentration camps, and kicked off the representation of the Holocaust in film. Still to this day films are being made to teach and remember the Holocaust and its victims. However, as times change questions get raised as to whether or not these films are historically accurate, and whether or not they continue to benefit Holocaust education.

In 2019, director and actor Taika Waititi released an anti-war satire titled *Jojo Rabbit*. *Jojo Rabbit* tells the story of Johannes “Jojo” Betzler, a ten-year-old member of the Hitler Youth, who finds out that his mother has been sheltering Elsa, a Jewish girl, behind a wall in their home. The film divided audiences with its comedic portrayal of the Hitler Youth, and Waititi’s outlandish interpretation of Adolf Hitler. The film is more comedic than historical, and it is meant to lack a certain amount of historical accuracy, however the representation of the Hitler Youth was not entirely inaccurate.

In the early years of the Nazi regime, it was made very clear to non-Jewish civilians the consequences of not aligning themselves with the party’s values. In October 1936, a letter was sent to all German civil servants asking them to sign and join the Nazi party. A woman named Luitgard Wundheiler recalls what her father, a judge, said to her when he asked her opinion: “Before you say yes or no so clearly and so spontaneously, I also want you to know what the

possible consequences are. I don't know what the consequences will be definitely, but there will be some consequences. Under the best of circumstances, I will lose my job. Under the worst of circumstances, you will never see me again in your whole life because they will do away with me" (Fogelman, 23-24). And her father was right, when he refused to join the Nazi party he was fired, and for the rest of the war their family lived just above the poverty line. Concentration camps were also made widely known among civilians, and just the possibility of being sent to one scared most enough to prevent them from going against the party's authority. It is realities like these that made rescuers very rare during the Holocaust, and for those who were rescuers it was not easy.

Tensions often ran very high between rescuers and those they were rescuing, in her book *Conscious & Courage*, Eva Fogelman writes about how underlying these tensions was the awareness that the rescuer was putting themselves and their family in danger. *Jojo Rabbit* does a fair job of representing these fears as well as the repercussions for sheltering Jewish civilians. In the movie *Jojo's* mother Rosie is sheltering Elsa, a young Jewish girl, in their home. In one particular scene Rosie scolds Elsa for making noise and then tells her "If I have to choose between you or my son I-I won't know where to send you" (Neal, 2019). This echoes a real life occurrence in which a woman named Jopie D could no longer harbor her Jewish maid, so she told her to get on her bicycle and go to relatives in eastern Holland (Fogelman, 5). Unfortunately in *Jojo Rabbit*, Rosie's involvement in the resistance results in her being hanged in the town square, another very real possibility for rescuers and resistance members. In the town square of Lodz a mother, father, and their children were hanged next to the Jews they were harboring (Fogelman 30), and outside the Warsaw ghetto a Christian was killed for throwing bread over the wall. It's important to show these harsh realities in Holocaust films so that there is an

understanding of not only the brutality of the Nazi regime, but of why the Holocaust was allowed to happen by non-Jewish civilians.

So how does Spielberg's *Schindler's List* hold up in its representation of Oskar Schindler and other bystanders in Krakow, Poland. Oskar Schindler was a war profiteer, his initial intentions were to use Jewish people as slave labor. Spielberg attempts to provide the movie with a specific reason, and specific moment that Schindler changes his mind about using Jewish people. *Schindler's List* is in black and white, the only use of color is a red coat that belongs to a young Jewish girl of whom Schindler observes during the liquidation of the ghetto scene and she later reappears when her body is being wheeled to the mass funeral pyre. The girl is entirely fictional and was made up by Spielberg for cinematic purposes. When asked after the war for the reason he became a rescuer he responded "I knew the people who worked for me. When you know people, you behave towards them like human beings" (The Reasons Why 1). But this kind of sentiment is not echoed among the majority of non-Jewish citizens during the Holocaust. In November of 1938 a slew of violence against Jewish owned businesses occurred, this time of violence would later be called Kristallnacht or "The Night of Broken Glass". Kristallnacht was primarily organized by members of the Nazi party and the military, however non-Jewish citizens were encouraged to join in the violence and they did. Jewish woman Ruth Rack recalled in an interview that her family was friendly with non-Jewish neighbors, and her brother Bob played sports with non-Jewish friends. However, in 1937, one of Bob's friends threw a rock through the family's window, on the rock was a note that read "Jews get out" (A Friend Joins 1). In October, 1940, Nazi authorities told the Jewish inhabitants of the town Lorrach to pack their belongings. They were then sent to the Gurs internment camp in France, later most of the deportees would be sent to Auschwitz. As they were deported, friends and neighbors stood by and simply watched.

In Phillipsburg, Germany, Jewish citizens aged ten to eighty were deported to a detention camp in France. Manfred Wildman and his family were among the deported, and he recalls that only one person reached out to his family as they boarded the trains. (A Town Gathers 1-2). Oskar Schindler was among a very small number of people who went against the Nazi regime during the war, and part of an even smaller group that succeeded in sheltering Jews. A rescuer's ability to help and success was often determined by their circumstances; those who did help often held jobs and positions that worked to their benefit, like Schindler's reputation with the Nazi party and his factory. Another factor that made Oskar Schindler successful is his affinity for bribery, which the film shows multiple times. However, something that the film glosses over is much of Schindler's actual nature. The infamous "I could've done more" ending scene where Schindler breaks down about how he could've saved even one more person was conjured up by Spielberg and covered up the fact that when he left "Schindler was too scared about his future to say anything, that the car was lined with money for a safe getaway, and that he fled not only with his wife but also with his mistress" (Wood 31-31). While the story of Oskar Schindler and 'his' Jews is moving, *Schindler's List* overlooks Schindler's personality flaws one too many times.

Many people's first memories of the Holocaust is watching *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, a popular Holocaust movie adapted from the book written by John Boyne. Many teachers use the movie to introduce the Holocaust to younger audiences, however the Auschwitz Memorial sent out a tweet on January 5, 2020 that said "The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas' should be avoided by anyone studies or teaches about the history of the Holocaust" (@AuschwitzMuseum). That is because the very popular holocaust film is littered with inaccuracies of which can be harmful to education and memory of the Holocaust. The book and film tell the story of Bruno, the son of a high ranking SS officer. His father is put in command of

a concentration camp (it is implied that it is Auschwitz) and he moves his family to a villa close to the camp. While there Bruno befriends a Jewish boy named Shmuel, however Bruno does not understand or know anything about the camp, the war, or the persecution of Jewish people. At the end of the story, Bruno sneaks into the camp to help Shmuel look for his dad and because he is disguised as a prisoner he is taken to the gas chambers with other inmates and is gassed. The biggest issue with *Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is its representation of Bruno and other non-Jewish characters in the story.

Bruno is represented to be completely ignorant of the holocaust, he doesn't really know about the war and he has no idea that Jews are being persecuted. He is so clueless to the holocaust and his father's role in it that when he sees the concentration camp in the distance and a Jewish man enter his home to deliver vegetables he thinks that the camp is a farm and its prisoners are strange farmers. In reality "Bruno would have been, by law, a member of the Hitler Youth. He would have attended a German school where students regularly swore oaths to Hitler and where antisemitic propaganda infiltrated every part of the curriculum" (The Problem With 3). The implication that Bruno is completely unaware of the horrors happening around him perpetuates the misconception that non-Jewish civilians had no idea what was happening to Jewish people. When deportations of Jews began, their belongings would be auctioned off for profit, these auctions would be advertised in local newspapers for the townspeople to see and participate. Even though there was no way for residents to know what was really happening to Jewish people "the auction signaled that they would not return to the town" (Selling Stolen Goods 3). When German forces invaded and occupied Liepaja, Latvia in 1941, police, militia, and local townspeople helped round up Jewish men and transport them to pits dug on a local beach. A German sailor captured footage that shows crowds of other sailors and Latvians

watching as a German killing squad shot the Jewish men into mass graves. In fact, during the first few months of German occupation of Latvia, the mass shootings were mostly carried out in public places like the beach.

Bruno's mother is also a point of contention in the story. His mother, Elsa, is portrayed to be a good wife and caring mother to her children. She is also shown repeatedly to be a 'good person', with one scene showing her thanking a Jewish inmate for assisting Bruno after he scraped his knee. She is also shown to despise the fact that they are living so close to a concentration camp and wants so badly to move out for the remainder of the war. By representing her in this way, it garners sympathy for her when her son is killed inside the gas chamber at the end of the movie. Instead of the audience thinking about the genocide occurring within the story, they are thinking about how Elsa was such a good person and she doesn't deserve for her son to be taken away from her. Katharina Von Kellenbach states that it is this 'good wife' that nurtured the Holocaust and that "Women's love nourished and condoned the violence, rewarded and soothed the perpetrators, and normalized and sanitized a world that was profoundly disordered and depraved" (Kerner 131). The author of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* has made multiple statements about the historical inaccuracies within his story, holding onto the belief that since his work is entirely fictional there cannot be any inaccuracies.

Memory is important. How we choose to remember and memorialize history is important. When it comes to the Holocaust memory is very important, the memories of victims and civilians is some of the only evidence that remains. In an attempt to memorialize these memories many films have been made about the Holocaust. There are many films that show life inside of concentration camps and how Jewish people struggled to escape capture, but what these films also represent is the behavior of bystanders. How we choose to represent to actions of bystanders

during the Holocaust can alter the way history sees the oppression of Jews. The films *Jojo Rabbit*, *Schindler's List*, and *Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* all represent bystanders during the Holocaust in different ways. And when films like these are used to teach about the Holocaust, their historical accuracy needs to be evaluated.

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