

HOMEVIDEO

“If This Be a Man...” Eichmann on Trial in *The Specialist*

by Stuart Liebman

With all due respect to OJ and Johnny Cochran, what very likely was the trial of the twentieth century began in the newly constructed premises of the *Beth Ha'am*, the House of the People, in Jerusalem on April 11, 1961. In the dock, actually a bulletproof glass booth specially designed to protect the defendant, was a slightly built, balding man whose mouth often palsied into a diffident sneer, as if he were savoring some private joke. Sitting uncomfortably in an ill-fitting, dark business suit, his shifty eyes only partially masked behind thick eyeglass frames, he appeared to be the very antithesis of a strutting SS man. But he was, and certainly one of the most deadly. *Obersturmbannführer* Adolf Eichmann had headed the notorious department IV B 4 of Nazi Germany's *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (Head Office for Reich Security). His principal tasks were the identification, rounding up, expropriation, and deportation to their deaths of millions of European Jews. From the late 1930s through the end of the war, he had performed his job with exemplary, unwavering loyalty. Now he was being called to account for his role in these unprecedented crimes. For the next nine months, until December 15th when the judges found him guilty on all fifteen counts with which he had been charged, the Israeli public and a large worldwide audience as well, would closely follow the course of the trial. After its conclusion, the Nazis' war against the Jews, soon to become better known as 'the Holocaust,' could no longer be repressed in the world's historical consciousness.

Prime Minister David Ben Gurion's motives for directing his secret service agents to kidnap Eichmann in Argentina and bring him, drugged, to Israel in May 1960, went beyond the simple desire to see a mass murderer brought to justice. He also wanted to teach the world a history lesson. The newsreels of skeletal victims in the liberated concentration camps at World War II's end had confirmed Nazi brutality beyond any reasonable doubt. Everyone who had read a newspaper between 1935



Adolf Eichmann as he appears in *The Specialist*, a documentary by Eyal Sivan and Rony Brauman on his trial in Jerusalem.

and 1945, moreover, knew that the Germans had singled out the Jews for "special treatment." But any detailed comprehension of the mass slaughter of men, women and more than a million children *simply because they were Jews* had never really become widespread, in part because the victorious Allies had not made the Germans' genocidal plans a central part of their charges at the Nuremberg trials. (The Judeocide was subsumed in the larger category of "crimes against humanity.") Fifteen years later, an official, ideologically inspired silence reigned in the Soviet bloc. The West European nations that had assisted the Nazis or at best had passively witnessed the horrors were, of course, even more disinclined to recall their shameful behavior. Now, Ben Gurion reasoned, the time had come to tell the *Jewish* side of the story, especially to a world that tolerated ongoing Arab hostility to the new state he led. "We want the nations of the world to know...and they should be ashamed," he is reported to have remarked at the time.

Even the Jews of the Diaspora, however, and especially the Israelis, had conspired in the repression of history. Western Jewish leaders regarded Holocaust memories as dysfunctional to communal recovery. Survivors were urged to forget and build new lives. But there were also other, more unsettling, reasons for their willed ignorance. American Jews did not wish to face disquieting questions about their inability to aid their coreligionists during the war, while

the shattered communities across Europe did not want to remind the *goyim* of their weakness for fear of once more setting themselves up as potential victims. For their part, Israelis, including Ben Gurion himself, had been more inclined to invest psychic energies in their own heroic establishment of a Zionist state in the face of the Arabs' violent opposition than to remember an all too painful past.

Finally, other domestic political calculations led Ben Gurion to a strategic re-evaluation of the past. Not only might such a trial win sympathy for the still beleaguered state, it might also solve some of the inherent conflicts *within* the state. Between survivors and *sabras* lay a barrier of blood and silence, anguish and solitude. The time had come to bridge this divide. Half the Israeli population, moreover, had recently arrived from Middle East countries. While these "Oriental" Jews had suffered at the hands of the Arabs, they had not directly experienced the extraordinary horrors of the concentration camps. Hastily transplanted to the promised land, they had grown restive in primitive resettlement areas administered by *Ashkenazim*, the European Jews who constituted the majority of the Zionist political leadership. The trial, Ben Gurion believed, might sensitize the *Sephardim* to the murderous anti-Semitism that had not only decimated their kinsmen, but it also still surrounded their haven in a heartless world. Gratitude and national reconciliation might follow.

Eichmann's case was therefore conceived as a manifold didactic exercise, one with varying significance for the many different audiences it was intended to reach. This explains why the Israeli government was so interested in having the trial recorded in its entirety, a first in the history of world jurisprudence. Enter the American media company Capital Cities Broadcasting (which later purchased the ABC Television network before itself being swallowed by media giant Walt Disney). CCB engaged the well-known left-wing documentarian Leo Hurwitz (*Native Land* is his most famous film), who set up a battery of four cameras, discreetly hidden from view, to record from various angles and distances every moment of the proceedings on the new medium of videotape. Altogether, Hurwitz's crew (and, somewhat later, an Israeli film company that continued their work) shot approximately five hundred hours of footage. Each day, the new material was shipped by air to New York, where it was quarried for soundbites for the extensive American television coverage.

After Eichmann was hanged on May 31, 1962, no one seems to have given much thought to the questions of who was to preserve the videotapes and how they should do so. Eventually, they ended up in the archives of Hebrew University, but they were ultimately transferred to the newly established Steven Spielberg archive when it was formed in the late 1970s. Some sixty-six hours of the most sensational footage was culled, and made available to filmmakers and historians. These excerpts have subsequently been put to use in about a dozen later documentaries, most notably *Witnesses to the Holocaust: The Trial of Adolf Eichmann* (produced by the Jewish Museum in New York in 1987 and now distributed by

Lorimar Home Video) and in PBS's *The Trial of Eichmann* (1997).

The story, however, does not end there. When the young Israeli-French filmmakers Eyal Sivan and Rony Brauman decided to make yet another compilation film about the trial in 1991, they found that no one seemed really to know what had happened to the rest of the historic material, more than four hundred hours in all, that did not appear on the excerpt reels. The tale they tell in their book, *Éloge de la désobéissance* (Paris: Éditions Le Pommier, 1999), should send chills up the spine of all who care about the preservation of our audiovisual heritage. Ultimately, the Israeli Supreme Court had to force the archival authorities to provide access to the footage, and what Brauman and Sivan uncovered proved deeply embarrassing to the Spielberg archive. Only then did they learn that almost a third of the total material originally shot had been lost. The remaining 350 hours, moreover, had been stored rather desultorily without any catalog in an unused washroom. Most of it was deteriorating, still trapped in an obsolete video format of the early 1960s. Special equipment had to be imported from the United States even to view the images; in order to make it usable, all the footage had to be transferred to contemporary formats and then enhanced by digital techniques that lightened darker passages. Recorded radio transmissions also had to be grafted to augment the defective video soundtrack.

We should be grateful to Brauman and Sivan for salvaging such priceless historical material. That their heroic efforts, however, have now yielded *The Specialist*, a problematic and deeply puzzling version of the trial, is one of the great ironies of this entire affair. In part, its failings derive from the film's purported inspiration, the German-



Eichmann reads a statement in this scene from *The Specialist*, a Kino on Video release.

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Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt's highly controversial critique of the case, first published in the pages of *The New Yorker* in 1963, and then as *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* in 1965. As is now well-known, she evacuated any hints of malice and horrific ingenuity from her portrait of Eichmann as a desk murderer, a new species of villain who, with a few strokes of a pen or a barked verbal order, consigned millions to their deaths. For Arendt, Eichmann, like all those principally responsible for the Holocaust, were neither madmen nor demons. Their evil was rather a byproduct of "banal" bureaucratic routine. And, in the most provocative—and heartless—claim of the book, Arendt accused the leaders of the *Judenräte*, the Nazi-appointed, Jewish ghetto councils, of cowardly complicity with Eichmann and his henchmen in the murder of their fellow Jews.

Brauman and Sivan adopted Arendt's outlook. Like her, they also wanted to move beyond the trial issues themselves to create a political essay on personal moral responsibility and the devastating effects of obedience. They therefore decided to compress their perspective and concentrate on the evasive bureaucrat Eichmann, "a rat with frightened eyes," as a representative incarnation of what sociologists used to call "mass man," that is, someone very much like us. As they note in their book, their choice of scenes and shots also aimed to expose "the system of Eichmann," rooted in the "vertigo of powerlessness," one, that is, that bears an uncomfortably close resemblance to the institutions and work rules we continue to live in and by. They aspired thereby somehow to uncover a "terrifying dimension of modernity," as if the ultimate destination of those caught in what Max Weber called the "iron cage of bureaucracy" was the glass box in the Israeli courtroom.

These ideas betray a large, indeed, perhaps overweening, ambition. Unfortunately, *The Specialist* fails to live up to it. Such a wide gap exists between their intentions and the results as to raise serious questions about their control over their own project. In part this derives from the difficult circumstances and real temporal limits they faced. Arendt, at least, had the opportunity to lay out her often subtle arguments in depth over the course of 300 densely detailed pages. Brauman and Sivan did not. They had to reduce the 350 hours of footage to 128 minutes, a daunting, almost impossible task that, coupled with other self-imposed restrictions, burdened them with artificial and unnecessary limitations. Earlier filmmakers, after all, had successfully managed to present an even more comprehensive history of the Holocaust through the vehicle of the trial (which, indeed, had been the Israeli prosecutors' major purpose) by bridging the inevitable temporal and evidentiary gaps through the classic orienting devices of voice-over narration and archival imagery. Brauman and Sivan, however,

reject such strategies.

Like the German philosopher and critic Theodor Adorno and Claude Lanzmann, the creator of the celebrated film *Shoah*, Brauman and Sivan reject on principle the idea of showing images of atrocities. Such vivid depictions, they argue, substitute the spectacle of horror for thinking, and also provoke a sense of pity that finally paralyzes any serious reflection about evil. This claim is certainly contestable, as is the idea that the narrational economy achieved through a voice-over somehow constrains the spectator's understanding in inevitably coercive ways. In any case, as a result of these proscriptions, they were obliged to construct their film primarily out of the words of the antagonists—Eichmann, the lead prosecutor Gideon Hausner, the witnesses, and the three justices (ironically, all three were German refugees from Hitler).

The huge cuts in the materials required to focus on Eichmann make the narrative of his criminality hard to follow, even for those aware of the issues at trial. They pay only token attention, for example, to the important judicial wrangling introduced by Servatius, the German defense attorney, who challenged the legal basis and essential fairness of the trial of a Nazi held in a Jewish court in a state that had not even been born during the time of the Holocaust. The montage of the State Attorney's impassioned presentation and summing up of his case is also much too limited. Indeed, they seem to have acceded too readily to Arendt's consistent, peevish animosity toward Hausner, and, as a result, their portrait verges on caricature, as the editing minces his ringing indictments into silent, empty histrionics. He is unfairly made to seem merely foolish.

Brauman and Sivan attempted to compensate for these problems by sensibly abandoning the chronological order of the court sessions in favor of presenting testimony that traced the events as they had occurred in history. They also selected only those witnesses whose experiences directly depended on Eichmann's actions, although this certainly truncates any sense of the full range of the proceedings. Shockingly, however, they decided at times to intercut many different testimonies to create a curious synthetic witness who collectively takes parts of the oath, makes brief and unanchored statements, and then, overcome by horrible memories, falls silent. These glib snippets destroy the coherence of the individual testimonies; the force of the courage the survivors displayed simply evaporates, for no persuasive reason I can discern.

Yet they also include rather meaningless episodes of 'dead time' akin to those that French New Wave *cinéastes* used to flaunt to try the patience of its audiences. Undoubtedly, the ceremonial arrival of judges, the calls for breaks, the long pauses needed for translations, the guards staring absent-mindedly into space were all part of the

texture of the proceedings, but are they *that* important when so many more vital aspects have been gutted? And what is the reason for souping up these odd, oblique views with portentous electronic guitar sounds, or, more generally, creating a host of special visual effects (digitally manufactured camera movements that are not in the original, or generated reflections of the audience or attorneys in the glass of Eichmann's booth)? I am not so worried that Holocaust deniers might jump on clearly faked material like this to discredit any aspect of the evidence against Eichmann. The technical wizardry seems innocent enough, though the added sound effects occasionally obscure what is being said. (That the subtitles are not always legible does not help.) Nor do they work effectively as a reflexive marker of the triage of the material, as Brauman and Sivan would like to think. Most often, the gimmicks are more distracting than meaningful.

Collectively, these strategies create errors of balance and perspective, tact and judgment. They not only produce unfortunate distortions of their presentation of the case against Eichmann, they finally even fail to generate a sober assessment of his character and culpability. Throughout, Eichmann sits more or less unmoved and phlegmatic; at times, he shuffles large stacks of papers. Just to show him in this way may begin to deconstruct the myth of the SS man and confirm Eichmann's function as a middle manager in the Nazi regime. In and of themselves, however, such shots certainly do not—can not—convey the evil he perpetrated. For that, evidence is required, and that is simply in too short supply in *The Specialist*. Precious little time is spent recounting the cunning ways in which this "banal" bureaucrat malevolently deceived the *Judenräte* who pathetically clung to what in context were understandable, though utterly irrational desires for order and calm in their captive, doomed communities. Without witnesses testifying to what his actions meant for his hapless victims, the filmmakers *allow* Eichmann to appear as an innocuous cog in a much larger machine run by others, which is, of course, what he all along claimed to be. He becomes a little guy just trying to do his job and, as such, a figure for our identification and, alarmingly, perhaps our indulgence too. True, the extent and character of Eichmann's crimes should be familiar and clear by now to any fair-minded and reasonably informed viewer. Indeed, Braun and Sivan note how much their approach vitally depends on such a spectator. But by requiring such sophistication of their spectators, the filmmakers take a great risk—too great a risk, in my opinion.—**Stuart Liebman**

Distribution Source:

Produced and Directed by Eyal Sivan. VHS, B&W, 128 mins., Hebrew, German and French dialog with English subtitles. Distributed by Kino on Video, 333 West 39th Street, New York, NY 10018, phone (212) 629-6880.