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The Last Stage

Wanda Jakubowksa's Ostatni etap *in Post-war Austria, 1948–1949*

Abstract

This essay examines the Austrian reception of Wanda Jakubowska's 1948 film *Ostatni etap (The Last Stage)*. Set in Auschwitz, it was one of the earliest feature films to depict the Nazi concentration camp system. Drawing on contemporary newspaper reviews and press coverage, it traces the film's path to theatrical release in Vienna and beyond. While some commentators emphasised the film's importance as an act of remembrance and antifascist testimony, others reframed it through anti-communist comparisons to Soviet camps. In this way, the Austrian reception of *The Last Stage* reflects broader patterns of post-war memory politics in early Austrian public discourse.

The Polish feature film *The Last Stage* (1948), directed by Wanda Jakubowska and based on her own experiences as a survivor of Auschwitz, is among the earliest films to address the atrocities committed in Nazi extermination camps in a fictional, narrative, and visual setting.[1] The film explores themes of death, survival, and organised resistance in the women's camp in Auschwitz-Birkenau. *Die letzte Etappe* begins with a round-up on a Polish street before shifting its focus to Auschwitz-Birkenau, centering on the solidarity and organised resistance among the female prisoners. A Jewish Polish woman named Marta Weiss (actress Barbara Drapinska) becomes involved with a resistance cell comprising Polish, Russian, and German communists. Toward the end of the film, Marta attempts to flee, intending to share detailed information about the camps with the outside world, but she is captured and sentenced to death. She slits her wrists to defy her persecutors. The last scene concludes with the appearance of Russian aircrafts over Auschwitz.

As a pioneer of a genre that would later be defined as Holocaust feature film, *The Last Stage*'s depiction of the camp significantly influenced subsequent cinematic portrayals of the Holocaust.[2] For

1 Jakubowska, who co-wrote the screenplay with the German communist Gerda Schneider, remarked in interviews that the decision to process her camp experiences through film had been made already during her imprisonment. The scholar Hanno Loewy references Jakubowska as "the mother" of fictional films about the Holocaust, albeit using a question mark in his title. See Hanno Loewy, "The Mother of All Holocaust Films?: Wanda Jakubowska's Auschwitz trilogy", *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 24, no. 2 (2004): 197–204.

2 On the film's legacy, see, for instance, Jennifer Cazenave, "The Holocaust and Film", in *The Cambridge History of the Holocaust*, vol. 4, ed. Laura Jockusch and Devin O. Pendas (Cambridge University Press, 2025), 539–558, here 564; Sue Vice, "Space in Holocaust Film", in

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example, the French filmmaker Alain Resnais famously incorporated a scene from *The Last Stage* depicting an incoming train to Auschwitz into his influential and internationally renowned documentary film essay *Night and Fog* (1955) without, however, acknowledging or referencing it.[3] Upon its release in 1948, *The Last Stage* received international recognition; in France, artists such as Pablo Picasso praised and championed the film.[4] In Austria, where the film was screened as *Die letzte Etappe* at a film festival in Salzburg in 1948 and commercially released in Vienna and elsewhere in the spring of 1949, it attracted interest even before it reached domestic screens.[5] Drawing on reviews published in the contemporary Austrian press, this article traces the film's trajectory from its festival run to its domestic release, examining its reception in the press and in published letters to the editors.

A Festival Screening in Salzburg (1948)

In Salzburg, *The Last Stage* was screened as part of the second international film week (2. Internationale Filmfestwoche) organised by the Österreichische Kulturbund (Austrian Cultural Union) between 4–13 September 1948. In addition to its scheduled screening on 11 September 1948, it was also shown on the final day of the film festival as a substitute for a French film that had not reached Salzburg in time to be screened.[6] Austria's Pen-Club president at the time, writer Franz Theodor Czokor, mentioned *The Last Stage* alongside the German *Film ohne Titel* (*Film without a Title*, dir. Rudolf Jugert, 1948) and the US film *The Best Years of Our Lives* (released in Austria as *Die schönsten Tage unseres Lebens*, dir. Willam Wyler, 1946) as cinematic events not easily forgotten.[7] While the British-licensed Austrian newspaper *Weltpresse* (World press) reported a "mixed response" to *The Last Stage*'s Salzburg screening(s), the German weekly *Der Spiegel* claimed that the film, which it described as impressive, had been well-received at the

Space in Holocaust Research, ed. Janine Fubel, Alexandra Klei and Annika Wienert (De Gruyter, 2024), 119; Hanno Loewy, "Fiktion und Mimesis. Holocaust und Genre im Film", in *Lachen über Hitler – Auschwitz-Gelächter?*, ed. Margit Frölich, Hanno Loewy, and Heinz Steinert (edition text und kritik, 2003), 37–64, https://www.erinnern.at/themen/e_bibliothek/Filme%20und%20Fotos%20im%20Unterricht/579_Loewy%20Genre%20Film%20und%20Holocaust.pdf.

3 See Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska, "Der erste Holocaust-Spielfilm: Wanda Jakubowskas *Die letzte Etappe*", *Osteuropa*, no. 10 (2012): 80, and her revised and extended version of this article: "Bilder, die bleiben, Helden die gehen. Wanda Jakubowskas *Die letzte Etappe*", in *Bildformeln. Visuelle Erinnerungskulturen in Osteuropa*, ed. Susi K. Frank (transcript, 2018), 238.

4 Marek Haltof, *Screening Auschwitz. Wanda Jakubowska's* The Last Stage *and the Politics of Commemoration* (Northwestern University Press, 2018), 92.

5 For instance, the *Wiener Kurier* reported on its screening at the Venice film festival. See "Polnischer Auschwitz-Film auf der Biennale vorgeführt", *Wiener Kurier*, 27 August 1948, 4, Anno Österreichische Nationalbibliotek (hereafter Anno ÖNB).

6 "2. Internationale Filmfestwoche 1948", *Salzburger Tagblatt*, 13 September 1948, 5, Anno ÖNB.

7 "Epilog", *Salzburger Tagblatt*, 18 September 1948, 16, Anno ÖNB.

festival.[8] *Neues Österreich* (New Austria) lauded *The Last Stage* for not stirring up hatred (kein Hetzfilm) and for universalising its indictments rather than channeling blame in a specific direction (allgemein anklagend, niemals direkt bezichtigend).[9]

Reviews of *The Last Stage* subsequently appeared in local newspapers, including the *Salzburger Tagblatt* (Salzburg daily paper), *Salzburger Volkszeitung* (Salzburg people's paper), and *Salzburger Nachrichten* (Salzburg news). It enjoyed a mostly positive reception. The *Salzbuger Nachrichten* described the film's aim as portraying the reality of events as they played out: depicting the arrival of "transports with Jewish, Polish, Russian, or French prisoners, their inhumane treatment ... in overcrowded barracks", noting that the film transcended the genre of feature film.[10] The notion that *The Last Stage* was something more than a feature film was a sentiment repeated in other reviews of the film.[11]

The critic of the communist *Salzburger Tagblatt* – one of the few reviews that highlighted the fact that the vast majority of those killed in Auschwitz had been Jews – regretted that the screening was mostly attended by foreigners, believing that Austrians who were still deluded about "the true nature of the Nazi regime" would benefit from seeing the film.[12] Thus, the review emphasised that *The Last Stage* could be used to enlighten viewers and stressed that the film could be used as a pedagogical tool to teach audiences about the recent past. Other critics echoed this sentiment, which was also shared by the communist politician Viktor Matejka, a councilor for culture in Vienna at the time, who also championed the broader commercial release of the film in Austria's capital.

Although some, like Matejka, viewed *The Last Stage* as an educational tool, others preferred to use it to draw parallels between the Nazi past and the post-war present, ignoring the specificity and scope of atrocities committed during the National Socialist dictatorship. The *Oberösterreichische Nachrichten* (Upper Austrian news, a regional newspaper), for example, belatedly reviewed the film's Salzburg screenings in October 1948. Its critic accused Jakubowska of turning a blind eye to present horrors by portraying what the author termed "the day before yesterday".[13] Similarly, the conservative-oriented *Salzburger Volkszeitung* concluded its review by reporting that "one left the screening gloomy", not least because "concentration camps, including their horrors", were, according to the critic, "not just a thing of the past", a refer-

8 "Englische Kutlturfilme und amerikanischer Spitzenfilm in Salzburg", *Weltpresse*, 16 September 1948,14; "Filme, Reden, Delikatessen", *Der Spiegel*, 25 September 1948, 24.

9 "Internationales Filmfestival in Salzburg", *Neues Österreich*, 18 September 1948, 5, Anno ÖNB.

10 "POLEN: Die letzte Etappe", *Salzburger Nachrichten*, 15 September 1948, 3.

11 *Paimann's Filmlisten*, for example, described *The Last Stage* as "Dokumentar-spielfilm". It concluded that it showed "ein Höchstmaß an Realismus, aber nichts Undelikates". See "Die letze Etappe (Auschwitz)", *Paimann's Filmlisten*, 11 April 1949, 28.

12 Original: "wahre Natur des Naziregime", "2. Internationale Filmfestwoche", *Salzburger Tagblatt*, 13 September 1948, 11, Anno ÖNB.

13 Original: "Vorgestern". Max Gastelsberger, "zwei Filme – zwei Welten ... auf der Salzburger Filmfestwoche", *Oberösterreichische Nachrichten*, 9 October 1948, 6, Anno ÖNB.

ence to communist reprisals.[14] Other assessments followed this line of argumentation once the film was formally released. For instance, the review in a Styrian social democratic newspaper *Neue Zeit* (New age) used *The Last Stage* to condemn developments in post-war Poland, where, it reported, forced labor camps where inmates suffered in conditions similar to those in Auschwitz had emerged; it went on to compare the brutality of the SS guards to that of those now bearing hammer and sickle (i.e., communists).[15] Yet such comparisons were largely absent from discussions in the press in February and the early spring of 1949, following *The Last Stage*'s first screening in Vienna, at an event commemorating the liberation of Auschwitz (on 6 February) held in the antifascist theater Scala, and in the course of subsequent attempts to secure the commercial release of the film.[16] Comments focused instead on the film's perceived authenticity: the review published in the US-licensed newspaper *Wiener Kurier* (Vienna courier) argued that although the film was a "reproduction" of events, it could still count as an "authentic document".[17] *Der neue Mahnruf* (The new warning call), the press organ of the concentration camps survivors association (Verbandszeitschrift des KZ-Verbandes), cited the phrase "*Niemals vergessen!*" (Never forget!) – a sentiment aligned with the film's message of never letting such atrocities happen again – as to why this film mattered.[18]

"A Film Waits"

Reportedly, cinema owners in Vienna were initially reluctant to put *The Last Stage* on their programs, whereas Vienna's cultural councilor Viktor Matejka campaigned for the film's wider release. Since the mid-1930s and again after the war, Matejka was invested in disseminating film culture, as evidenced by his role in establishing a Friends of Film Society (Gesellschaft der Filmfreunde) in 1936 and reviving it in the post-war period.[19] A survivor of Dachau concentration camp, Matejka sought to dissemi-

14 "Man ging bedrückt nach Hause; bedrückt auch von dem Gedanken, daß Konzentrationslager und ihr Grauen nicht nur der Vergangenheit angehören", G. Bacher, *Salzburger Volkszeitung*, 14 September 1948, 2.

15 See "Film und Wirklichkeit", *Neue Zeit (Arbeiterwille)*, 10 June 1949, 2, Anno ÖNB.

16 The commemorative event at the Scala also featured speeches by Auschwitz survivors, including the President of the Jewish Community of Berlin. See "'Die letzte Etappe.' Eine Gedenkfeier und ein Film", *Der Abend*, 7 February 1949, 2. Other newspapers also reported on the film's screening on that occasion: see the *Wiener Kurier*, under the headline "Neu im Kino", 8 February 1949, 4. The *Österreichische Zeitung* also published an extensive review entitled "Ein Dokument des Leidens und der Anklage", 9 February 1949, 5.

17 "Neu Im Kino", *Wiener Kurier*, 8 February 1949, 4, Anno ÖNB. On the film's perceived hybridity between fiction and documentary within a more theoretical discourse, including Béla Balázs's analysis of *The Last Stage*, see Aaron Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust. New Perspectives on Dramas, Documentaries and Experimental Films* (Continuum, 2011), 19.

18 *Der Neue Mahnruf*, no. 2 (15 February 1949): 9, Anno ÖNB.

19 Gerald Trimmel, "Regie: Viktor Matejka", in *Wer war Viktor Matejka? Dokumente, Berichte, Analysen*, ed. Franz Richard Reiter (Ephelant, 1994), 177. The constituting meeting of the Filmfreunde after the Second World War took place in December 1945. See "Gründung der Gesellschaft der Filmfreunde Österreichs", *Wiener Zeitung*, 19 December 1945, 3.

nate awareness and encouraged reflection about National Socialists' crimes against humanity. Toward the end of February 1949, the communist-leaning newspaper *Der Abend* (The evening) lamented that "Vienna's cinemas are unwilling to show" the film.[20] The paper insisted that it was far too significant a film to be only screened once, and suggested that the situation could be remedied, for example, through the efforts of the Filmfreunde society.[21] The following day, Matejka, writing in his regular column for *Der Abend*, likewise regretted that none of the city's cinema owners were prepared to include *The Last Stage* in their regular programming:

> A film still waits. Also, this week, no cinema in Vienna has been found to show the Auschwitz film "The Last Stage". Cinema owners shed tears; they were "shocked" when the film was shown to them. When it was offered to them, they blamed the audience.[22]

Finally, with the support of the cinema-owning chain KIBA (Kinobetriebsanstalt G.M.B.H), a release was negotiated, and the film was put on the program of the Tuchlauben-Kino in Vienna's 1st district.[23]

Matejka argued that the film was important and needed to be released:

> Because, like no other film before, it introduces us to the truth and reality of the incomparable phenomenon of "German concentration camps". I readily admit that this film is not pleasant ... It gives us an idea of the unimaginable cruelty and arbitrariness that lay behind every prisoner transport, what it meant that in full view of the SS, the prisoners were unloaded, that the elderly and children were separated from the others, and how the prisoners' luggage was taken away.[24]

In this vein, Matejka invited the Germanist Josef Nadler, a known antisemite and National Socialist supporter, to watch the film, a gesture he also recounted in his memoirs, which testifies to his belief in the film's transformative power: having sent Nadler two tickets for the film's premiere – which was finally realised in spring 1949 – the recipient personally returned them, calling the film a "*Machwerk*" (concoction) he was not interested in watching.[25] Matejka retorted that it was his duty as a scientist to watch it, but Nadler continued to refuse. It was, Matejka writes, their last meeting.

20 "Die Wiener Kinos weigern sich", *Der Abend*, 25 February 1949, 6.
21 The Gesellschaft der Filmfreunde indeed planned a screening of *The Last Stage* in March 1949, but it cancelled this event when an agreement was in place to ensure multiple screenings of the film. See "Filmfreunde setzen 'Letzte Etappe' ab", *Kulturdienst der Stadt Wien (Beilage zur Rathauskorrespondenz)*, 21 March 1949, 123.
22 Viktor Matejka, "Unangenehme Notizen", *Der Abend*, 26 February 1949, 8.
23 "Ein Prüfstein für die Gesinnung", *Der Neue Mahnruf,* no. 3 (15 March 1949): 8.
24 Viktor Matejka, "Herr Nadler, ich lade Sie ein ...", *Der Abend*, 12 February 1949, 5.
25 Viktor Matejka, *Anregung ist alles. Das Buch Nr. 2* (Löcker, 1991), 119.

Reactions

After its reportedly celebratory premiere[26] on 8 April 1949, in Vienna's Apollokino – a cinema regularly chosen for prestigious film events – *The Last Stage* was widely reviewed in all the important newspapers of Vienna, from the *Presse*[27] to the *Wiener Kurier*,[28] including reviews of the film written even before its release. *The Last Stage* was also promoted in special-interest magazines such as *Mein Film* (My film)[29] and *Funk und Film* (Radio and film).[30] The *Wiener Tageszeitung* (Vienna daily news), the newspaper of Austria's Christian conservative party, the Österreichische Volkspartei (ÖVP), concluded its review with the recommendation that as many people as possible – if not all people – should see the film.[31] The *Wiener Zeitung* (Vienna news) commented on the fictional film's value compared to the Allied atrocity films shown shortly after the war; the critic recognised that although these films had been illustrative of the horrors of the Holocaust, they had lacked stories about individual fates.[32]

The film also encouraged commentary from survivors, which was then published in the press. Under the headline "They Experienced It" (sie waren dabei), the *Österreichische Zeitung* (Austrian newspaper) published two brief endorsements of the film by an architect named Heinrich Sußman and by a Protestant pastor named (Erwin) Kock.[33] Both were impressed by how the film conveyed the nature of the death camp. An affirmation of this perspective appeared in a section in the *Österreichische Zeitung* called "Voices from the Audience" (Stimmen aus dem Publikum): "That was Auschwitz", opened the commentary of one reader, who went on to explain that she had been incarcerated in Auschwitz for two years. She felt that the film was a memorial to Nazi victims and the resistance fighters among them, as well as a monument (Mahnmahl) for future generations.[34] *Der neue Mahnruf* published a similar letter entitled "I experienced Auschwitz a second time".[35]

26 The event was described as a gala premiere under the honorary protection of Austria's chancellor Leopold Figl, and it was attended by political figures such as the education minister Felix Hurdes and representatives of Poland and the Allied Control Council. See "'Die letzte Etappe' (Auschwitz)", *Wiener Zeitung*, 10 April 1949, 4, Anno ÖNB.

27 Rudolf Weys "Rekonstruiertes Grauen. Auschwitz – Die letzte Etappe", *Die Presse,* 8 April 1949, 4.

28 "Dokument. Zeitbild. Abenteuer. Neue Filme aus Polen, Deutschland und USA", *Wiener Kurier,* 8 April 1949, 4.

29 "Die Hauptstadt des Todes", *Mein Film,* no. 13 (1949): 6, Anno ÖNB.

30 "Die letzte Etappe", *Funk und Film*, no. 14 (April 8, 1949): 3. Reviews appeared in *Funk und Film*, no. 15 (15 April 1949): 20.

31 Original: "Es wäre zu wünschen, dass dieser Film von vielen, von allen besucht wird." "Neue Filme", *Wiener Tageszeitung (Zentralorgan der österreichischen Volkspartei),* 6 April 1949, 5.

32 "'Die letzte Etappe' (Auschwitz)", *Wiener Zeitung,* 10 April 1949, 4, Anno ÖNB.

33 "Sie waren dabei. Stimmen von KZlern zu dem Film *Die letzte Etappe*", *Österreichische Zeitung*, 26 April 1949, 5, Anno ÖNB.

34 "Ein Film im Dienste der Wahrheit", *Österreichische Zeitung*, 15 April 1949, 7, Anno ÖNB.

35 G.M. Satzinger, "Ich erlebte ein zweites Mal Auschwitz", *Der Neue Mahnruf*, no. 4 (15 April 1949), 18, Anno ÖNB.

However, some of the reactions from survivors of Auschwitz highlighted problems with the film. Physician Ella Lingens, honored by Yad Vashem as one of the "righteous among the nations", published an article entitled "The Little Lie of a Great Film" in the *Arbeiterzeitung* (Workers' newspaper; the press organ of the Austrian Social Democratic Party), which outlined what she would have liked the film to do differently.[36] Given that Auschwitz survivor Gerda Schneider co-authored the script, Lingens questioned why no German prisoner was depicted more prominently in the film and why none were shown in a positive light, arguing that the resistance of German women, the effect of which she experienced in the camp, should have played a role in the film.

A Success Story?

The Tuchlauben-Kino in Vienna's 1st district initially advertised its showing of *The Last Stage* as the "Ur- und Alleinaufführung" (the world premier and sole screening), marketing itself as the only cinema where this film could be viewed. But it played longer than initially planned: cinema programs noted that the film's run was prolonged, as did the *Österreichische Zeitung*, which reported on 20 April 1949, that 15,000 people had seen the film at the Tuchlauben-Kino.[37] A short while later, the number had risen to 27,000.[38] Meanwhile, other cinemas followed Tuchlauben-Kino's lead. For example, the film was shown at the Rabenhof cinema in the 3rd district and at the Edison in the 10th.[39] By the end of April 1949, film screenings had begun to expand to places outside of Vienna, for example, Wiener Neustadt.[40] *The Last Stage* also premiered in Linz and Graz.[41] The *Österreichische Kino-Zeitung* (Austrian film news) was surprised by the film's successful run, and the paper remarked that seeing its assumptions about the kinds of films Austrians would respond to disproved was a "pleasant disappointment".[42] In June, it was still possible to catch a showing of the film in Vienna, while screenings were also organised in Lower Austria's Bruck an der Leitha.[43] In July, the film

36 "Die kleine Lüge eines großen Films. 'Die letzte Etappe' – gesehen von einer, die dabei war", *Arbeiter Zeitung*, 26 April 1949, 5, Anno ÖNB.
37 "15.000 Wiener sahen, Die letzte Etappe", *Österreichische Zeitung*, 20 April 1949, 5, Anno ÖNB.
38 "27.000 Wiener sahen bisher 'Die letzte Etappe'", *Der Neue Mahnruf*, no. 5 (15 May 1949): 17, Anno ÖNB.
39 "Die letzte Etappe heute im Rabenhof-Kino", *Österreichische Zeitung*, 13 May 1949, 4, Anno ÖNB.
40 [Cinema advertisement for *The Last Stage*], *Wiener Neustädter Zeitung*, 30 April 1949, 6, Anno ÖNB.
41 See, for example, "Die letzte Etappe", *Neue Zeit*, 7 June 1949, and "Aus der Hauptstadt des Todes", *Neue Zeit*, 9 June 1949, 3, Anno ÖNB; "Der Film in Linz", *Linzer Volksblatt*, 8 June 1949, 2, Anno ÖNB; "Die letzte Etappe", *Oberösterreichische Nachrichten*, 9 June 1949, 2, Anno ÖNB.
42 "Angenehme Enttäuschungen", *Österreichische Kino-Zeitung,* no. 142 (16 April 1949): 4.
43 "Aufführungen der 'letzten Etappe'", *Österreichische Zeitung,* 25 June 1949, 4, Anno ÖNB.

was screened for three days in the Schönbrunn cinema located in Vienna's 14th district.[44] In later years and even decades, *Die letzte Etappe* continued to be shown at educational and commemorative anti-Nazi events in Austria.[45]

Comparisons with Other Films

Not long after *Die letzte Etappe* had been released theatrically, the German film *Freiwild* (Fair game; original title, *Morituri*, dir. Eugen York, prod. Artur Brauner), in its very first scene, also projected views of a (unnamed) concentration camp onto movie screens. However, the narrative then turns to a handful of inmates who have a chance to flee, and the film subsequently documents their attempts to survive in the forest. There they meet other men and women hiding from the Nazis. *Freiwild* struck a different note than *Die letzte Etappe* visually and thematically: set mostly in the woods, the narrative focuses on a group of people hunted by the Nazis. When they capture a German soldier and hold him as their prisoner, they eventually decide to set him free even though it endangers their hiding place. The film, however, ends with the German retreat, enabling the protagonists to survive.

Brauner experienced difficulties producing the film in occupied Germany, though he was eventually able to do so with Soviet support. The film was generally considered a financial debacle and was rejected by German cinemagoers.[46] Various movie theaters screened the film starting in July 1949. One viewer, writing to the *Österreichische Zeitung*, compared *Freiwild* unfavorably to *The Last Stage*: the viewer maintained that the film mocked victims of the Nazis as well as antifascists in general, whereas *The Last Stage* had been a masterpiece.[47] Echoing this sentiment, *Der Abend*'s film critic similarly counted *Freiwild* among the most "shameless mockeries" (schamlosesten Verhöhnungen) of antifacism.[48] The

44 [Cinema advertisement for *The Last Stage*], *Mein Film*, no. 27 (1949): 16, Anno ÖNB.

45 For example, *Der neue Mahnruf* repeatedly reported on screenings of *The Last Stage* in Austria, often organised by associations of concentration camp survivors (*Lagergemeinschaften*), be it in Bad Ischl in August 1949 (no. 9, [1949]: 13), 1950's exhibition in Bad Aussee (no. 4 [1950]: 15), or in Innsbruck in 1958, to mark the twentieth anniversary of Austria's annexation in 1938 (no. 3 [1958]: 4). It also mentioned a screening in Schwaz in Tyrol that was notably attended by young people (no. 6 [1958]: 2), and in 1960 at an educational event in Vienna, which was written up in an article entitled "Das Wissen um das Gestern. Die Aufklärungsarbeit muss fortgesetzt werden". The screenings were followed by a question-answer session survivors of Ravensbrück concentration camp. See *Der neue Mahnruf*, no. 19 (1960): 1. The same journal lists further screenings on 30 March 1961, also in an educational context (no. 1 [1961]: 6), and in Innsbruck and Knittelfeld in 1962, at commemorative events (no. 3 [1962]: 5).

46 See, for example, Ulrich Bach, "*Lang ist der Weg* directed by Herbert B. Fredersdorf and Marek Goldstein, and: *Morituri* directed by Eugen York (review)", *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* 44, no. 1 (2014): 22–24, here 23.

47 M. Str., "'Freiwild' – eine Verhöhnung der Naziopfer", *Österreichische Zeitung,* 6 July 1949, 5, Anno ÖNB.

48 H. Holl, "'Freiwild", *Der Abend*, 5 July 1949, 6.

Österreichische Volksstimme's (Austrian people's voice) review shared this opinion.[49]

According to the *Wiener Kurier*'s film critic, the makers of *Freiwild* had not succeeded in creating a "lasting document" (bleibendes Dokument) but had "degraded" the "harrowing facts" (erschütternde Tatsachen) for what is called in the review "a feature film" (einem Spielfilm).[50] Although *The Last Stage* was also a feature film, many Austrian reviews argued that it was something more, emphasising the film's documentary and monumental character.[51] According to the newspaper *Neues Österreich*, *Freiwild* had not achieved this stature, and after a thrilling start, the narrative became confusing.[52] Favorable reviews of *Freiwild*, however, appeared in *Der Furche* (The furrow) and the *Arbeiterzeitung*.[53]

Grenzgasse was another Polish film that reached Vienna soon after *The Last Stage*.[54] It tells the story of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising through the experiences of characters from different social milieus and ethnic and religious backgrounds who initially live together in an apartment building in Warsaw. The establishment of the ghetto forces the Jewish inhabitants to relocate, testing previous alliances. Poles' acts of solidarity with the Jewish population exists side-by-side with their collaboration with the German occupiers. The film culminates in the 1943 Ghetto Uprising. In Vienna, *Grenzgasse* was shown only in special screenings, but it was still reviewed in the contemporary press.[55] Once again, Viktor Matejka commented on the film, describing it as an "admonishing document" (mahnendes Dokument) that would make its mark on audiences, similar to *The Last* Stage, which, according to Matejka, had reached around 53,000 people and was ultimately screened in fifteen cinemas across Austria (including seven in Vienna).[56] Although the number of viewers does not, on its face, seem impressive when compared to the audiences of other

49 E. "Eine Verhöhnung der Naziverfolgten", *Österreichische Volksstimme,* 3 July 1949, 11, Anno ÖNB.

50 "Freiwild", *Wiener Kurier,* 5 July 1949, 4, Anno ÖNB.

51 As early as August 1948, when newspapers reported on the screening of *The Last* Stage's at the Biennale film festival in Venice, the *Wiener Kurier* called the film "ein fesselnder Dokumentarstreifen" [a captivating documentary]. See "Polnischer Auschwitz-Film auf der Biennale vorgeführt", *Wiener Kurier*, 27 August 1948, 4, Anno ÖNB. See also "Das namenlose Leben. Polens Preisgekrönter Film 'Die letzte Etappe' läuft in Wien an", *Weltpresse*, 31 March 1949, 6, Anno ÖNB; and "Die letzte Etappe", *Neues Österreich*, 8 April 1949, 3, Anno ÖNB.

52 M. L., "Freiwild", *Neues Österreich*, 8 July 1949, 3, Anno ÖNB.

53 D. G., "Filme der Woche", *Arbeiterzeitung, 3* July 1949, 7; Roman Herle, "Filme aus schwerer Zeit", *Die Furche*, 9 July 1949, 10, Anno ÖNB. The latter had also reviewed *The Last Stage*, deeming the film "a victory of the Avantgarde", which triumphed over all the other film releases that week. See Herle, "Sieg der Avantgarde. 'Die letzte Etappe' – Film von Auschwitz", *Die Furche*, 16 April 1949, 14–15.

54 Directed by Aleksander Ford. Also translated as *Grenzstraße*. The original Polish title was *Ulica Graniczna*. The English release title was *Border Street*.

55 See, for example, "Ein künstlerisches Dokumentarwerk", *Österreichische Zeitung,* 6 July 1949, 5, Anno ÖNB; E. "Die Grenzstraße", *Österreichische Volksstimme,* 3 July 1949, 11, Anno ÖNB.

56 Viktor Matejka, "Unangenehme Notizen", *Der Abend,* 16 July 1949, Wienbibliothek im Rathaus: Press Clippings relating to Matejka, Viktor, österr. Politiker (KPÖ) 1949/50.

films released at the time, *The Last Stage* had fared better than anticipated; this is why Matejka and others described the film as a success.

Conclusion

Contemporary observations highlight that *The Last Stage* exceeded the expectations of both its supporters and detractors in Austria. The film drew in larger crowds than anticipated; otherwise, the Tuchlauben-Kino would not have prolonged its run nor would other cinemas have added it to their programs. It appeared on Austrian screens at a time marked by the mounting tensions of the early Cold War, which informed some of the responses to the film. Rather than embracing the film as an opportunity to condemn the National Socialist dictatorship and commemorate its victims, some reviewers instead drew parallels between the conditions in Nazi and Soviet camps. This response reflected Austria's broader strategy of suppressing the memory of Nazi persecution, internment, and mass murder between 1938 and 1945, a tendency criticised by public figures such as Matejka, who repeatedly warned against ignoring Austria's fascist past and its specificities, including the murders in gas chambers.[57] At the same time, organisations dedicated to survivors of Nazi persecution screened the film at commemoration events. Thus, engaging with the screenings of *The Last Stage* at such special events illuminates the uses of film in post-war commemorative contexts, and sheds greater light on local commemorative initiatives in the early post-war period.

57 See, for example, Viktor Matejka, "Unangenehme Notizen", *Der Abend,* 16 April 1949, Wienbibliothek im Rathaus: Press Clippings relating to Matejka, Viktor, österr. Politiker (KPÖ) 1949/50.

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