**THE CELLIST AND THE COMMANDANT**

A picture containing person, window, indoor, meal

Description automatically generated85-year-old Hans Jurgen has led a small, anonymous life. A retired car salesman in a Baltic Sea resort, he has kept silent about his father, Rudolf Hoess. As Commandant of Auschwitz, his father killed 1.1m Jewish people, making him the biggest mass murderer in history. Hans Jurgen grew up in the family home in Auschwitz, overlooking the camp with a view of the crematoria from the lounge. “*It was a nice childhood, with games and a swimming pool.”* As a 7-year-old, he remembers this childhood abruptly ending; he lost his home, then his father, and the family’s status.

His own son Kai is a pastor in Stuttgart. Unlike Hans Jurgen, Kai has read his grandfather’s painfully detailed and forensic account – written weeks before he was hanged – of exactly how he designed, built and ran Auschwitz. Kai believes the sins of the fathers are passed down to the third and fourth generation. Reuniting with his father after many decades, he persuades the old man – in his last days – to confront the past together and try to make sense of their hereditary burden. *“There’s been a curse of silence in my family. The blood we have on our hands….”*

He takes his father back to Auschwitz, where so much of Rudolf Höess’ machinery of death remains, as a memorial and a warning. Hans Jurgen revisits his childhood home in Auschwitz, and sees, for the first time, the hellish camp beyond their villa, and then the gallows where his father paid with his life for his crimes. How was it possible that his father could throw Jewish children into the gas chamber, then come home from “work,” cuddle his cherished son and read him a story? And how has the suppression of this unspeakable past passed trauma down the generations?

In London, Holocaust survivor Anita Lasker Wallfisch had also kept silent - for nearly five decades. Sent to Auschwitz at the age of 18, the accomplished cellist was forced to join the Women’s Orchestra of Auschwitz. While Commandant Rudolf Hoess was working out ways to kill and burn trainloads of arrivals in under 30 minutes, Anita was playing for her life “*a few metres from the crematorium, with an awful view of the selection ramp”* for the gas chambers.

“*I didn’t want to overwhelm my children with my terrible past,”* says Anita. But daughter Maya is convinced that the toxic silence in the intervening decades passed the trauma down to her and others like her; a second generation who in turn became scarred by their parents’ suffering and loss. She has become a psychotherapist specialising in transgenerational trauma and is on a mission to bring together the descendants of victims and perpetrators.

The Cellist and the Commandant is the story of how, eight decades after Auschwitz, Hans Jurgen Hoess and Anita Lasker Wallfisch – both survivors in their very different ways - come face to face, together with their children, to explore how the Holocaust has impacted on all their lives. It’s a historic moment - the first time the descendant of a major war criminal meets a survivor in such a private and intimate setting – and the beginning of a conversation. As Anita says: “*At the end of the day, we have to talk to each other…*”

Told through first-hand testimony, letters, personal and historical archive footage, this feature-length documentary is about a mother and daughter, a father and son, and the shadow cast down the generations. Raising questions about love, guilt and forgiveness, it is also a story of hope, acceptance and compassion.

As well as being profoundly enriching, this multi-layered film makes a potentially transformative contribution to Holocaust Education.

**EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES**

There is a tragic irony that weaves in and around this extraordinary story. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, having survived Auschwitz – is now deeply worried about antisemitism: “*we were safe when we came here. I can’t believe we are now in a situation where we are worried about the future for our grandchildren.”*

Equally, Hans Jurgen Hoess – whose father murdered 1.1m Jewish people – is also deeply worried about antisemitism in Germany. “*I hear it more in conversations around me, in some of the politics, and it scares me.”*

The rise in antisemitism in Europe is happening alongside a decline in Holocaust knowledge and awareness. 58% of New Yorkers are unable to name one concentration camp; 28% said the deaths of six million Jews were exaggerated or a myth. More than half of Dutch people are unaware that six million Jews died. Even some students at Jewish schools in London are vague about the numbers and details.

In an increasingly divided world where disinformation and fake news fuel hatred against minorities, Holocaust denial has become ever more sophisticated. Social media analysis carried out for the UN last year shows a significant problem with misleading and harmful information about the Holocaust across five major platforms – Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, TikTok and Twitter; some deniers evade content moderation through the use of humorous memes which normalise anti-Semitic ideas.

We are approaching the point when there soon there will be no living witnesses to the worst crime in history. It is more important than ever for new generations to hear the son and grandson of the Commandant of Auschwitz share their testimony – “*this is what our father/grandfather did.”*

In addition, there is perhaps in this story the most powerful weapon of all – the voice of Rudolf Hoess himself. Weeks before he was hanged, he was made to write his autobiography. It is a graphic, painstaking account of how the Holocaust was carried out, day to day. Primo Levi says “*this book is filled with evil and reading it is agony. But it is one of the most instructive books (on the Holocaust) ever published…”*

The voice and testimony of Rudolf Hoess will be present throughout the film; the extracts read by his son and grandson will be amongst the most impactful moments. Hoess’ brutally truthful account cuts through today’s trivialisation, distortion and denial of the Shoah.

“*The smaller children usually cried but when their mothers comforted them, they became calm and entered the gas chambers, playing or joking with one another and carrying their toys. I noticed that the women who either guessed or knew what awaited them found the courage to joke with the children, despite the mortal terror visible in their own eyes. On one occasion two small children were so absorbed in some game that they quite refused to let their mother tear them away from it. The imploring look in the eyes of the mother, who certainly knew what was happening, is something I shall never forget. The people were already in the gas chamber and becoming restive. I had to act. Everyone was looking at me. I nodded to the junior officer and he picked up the screaming, struggling children in his arms and carried them into the gas chamber, accompanied by their mother who was weeping in the most heart-rendering fashion.”*

One aim of this project – a third act of the film - is to potentially get Hans Jurgen and Kai back to Auschwitz or – ideally – to Israel.

We want the film and its protagonists to help teach us where hatred and prejudice can lead. To take an honest look at human nature and confront the truth of Primo Levi’s message:

“*It happened; therefore it can happen again.”*