From Our Own People:

REPRESENTATIONS OF JEWISH COLLABORATORS IN CONCENTRATION CAMPS (KAPOS) in Israeli Cinema AND SOCIETY

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Following the liberation of the concentration and extermination camps and the discovery of the murder of millions of Jews by the Nazis and their assistants, it emerged that some of their “assistants” were Jews who had been forced to collaborate with the Nazi authorities in the camps and ghettoes as the heads of blocks and work companies. They were referred to as “Kapos,” from the German word *Kameradenpolizei*. Like their fellow Jews, the Kapos and members of the “Jewish Police” were persecuted by the Nazi regime. At the same time, they enjoyed certain powers and privileges in comparison to the other prisoners. This reality places them in a complex moral category within the story of the Holocaust – one whose borders shift between the positions of victim and executor. Our central attempt here is to examine the way in which various political, ideological, social, cultural, and genre-based factors influenced and continue to influence the way we, as an advanced human society, understand the complexity of the question of collaboration with those involved in murdering your own people. We seek to understand the actions of prisoners trapped in a monstrous and labyrinthine mechanism, whose beginning and end are immutable. We consider the ways they coped with the range of emotions and opinions about this role over the years – from total negation to reserved understanding. How are these aspects reflected in the depiction of this historical character, with its various ethical and moral characteristics? What can we learn from this about the change that has occurred in Israeli public opinion over the years?

In Israel, discourse on this sensitive issue has a seismographic quality, the prevailing mood varying according to several parameters:

⦁ Psychological and personal-emotional;

⦁ Social and communal – survivors and affinity groups based on the camp where they were incarcerated alongside the Kapos;

⦁ Jewish nationalism, responsibility, and solidarity;

⦁ Legal and moral, in a sense that examines the tension between an unnamed and unparalleled action, which can be judged in human terms, and a criminal act committed under coercion or by consent.

There are two foundations to the way Israeli society has attempted to understand this shocking issue. The first is the prohibiton in *halakhah* (Jewish religious law) against handing over a member of the Jewish community to foreign authorities. Under foreign rule in Exile, Jews were often forced to collaborate with the authorities in order to survive in the places of residence where they found themselves. The harsh realities of their lives often forced them to cope with demands from the authorities to report on or hand over fellow members of the Jewish community. This issue was mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud, which prohibited Jews from turning over members of their community to aliens; instead, tThey were instructed to solve their problems within the community.[[1]](#endnote-1) Maimonides also discussed this issue, saying: “It is forbidden to inform about a Jew to the gentiles and endanger his physical person or his property. This applies even when the person concerned is a wicked person who commits sins, and even if he causes one irritation and discomfort”.[[2]](#endnote-2) Maimonides further distinguished between types of informers: “There are two categories of ‘those who betray Jews to gentiles:’ one who betrays his fellow [Jew] to the gentiles so that they may kill him or beat him; and one who gives over his fellow’s money to gentiles or to a person who commandeers property and is, therefore, considered like a gentile. Neither of the two has a portion in the world to come.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

Secondly, the segments of Israeli society that did not experience the Holocaust and the horrors of the war in Europe were unable to understand the role of the Kapo. They instinctively viewed this function as an immoral act committed out of choice. These Israelis were shocked when they witnessed the charged and violent encounters between survivors and their Kapos in Israel when they chanced to meet in the public domain. During the early years of the State, there was a lack of perspective that would have permitted a distinction between the nuances of the appalling experiences of the survivors, and an inability to appreciate the paradoxes and absurdities Jews faced under the Nazi regime in the camps. Everything was judged in terms of good and evil.

A gradual change in the sociopolitical climate in Israel began with the trials of Jewish Kapos from the camps and policemen from the ghettos who had survived and arrived in Israel.[[4]](#endnote-4) They were accused of collaborating with the Nazis against their coreligionists.[[5]](#endnote-5) The trial that received the most media coverage was the Gruenwald trial of 1955, also called the Kastner trial.[[6]](#endnote-6) Kastner made a deal with the Nazi leader Eichmann to rescue a trainload of Jews in return for diamonds, gold, and money. He also agreed to remain silent about the fate awaiting less fortunate Jews deported to Auschwitz. The trial quickly became a public argument over whether Jews should have resisted the Nazis or attempted to mollify the Nazis by complying with their orders in the hope of delaying the deportations and diminishing their pace and scope. The verdict rendered by the presiding judge charged that Kastner had “sold his soul to the Devil.” This phrase became a popular expression in Israel, which intensified the already negative Israeli attitudes towards the Jewish leadership during the Holocaust.

This harsh judgment was moderated by the Eichmann trial in 1961. Survivors provided previously unheard evidence and testimony about their lives in the concentration camps and the ghettos.[[7]](#endnote-7) In recent years, it has become common to examine each Council and prominent leaders such as the Kapos and Jewish Police on a case-by-case basis.[[8]](#endnote-8)

However, the trials and the scandals that erupted surrounding the subject of the Kapos were confined to a relatively small circle of people, primarily the survivors of the camps and their relatives. The encounters were bitter, and the survivors sought vengeance for the death of their loved ones. The tremendous complexity of the events gradually permeated the Israeli discourse. Who were the Kapos? How were they chosen? What did they do? Did they perform their function willingly or maliciously? Did they have any real choice? What motivated their actions?

During the early period, the guilt of the Kapos and others who collaborated with the Nazis appeared to be clear and unequivocal. Discourse about those who collaborated with the Nazis during the Holocaust was highly charged and oscillated between two poles: an accusatory position and a non-judgmental position. Moreover, the discourse on this subject included a profound kernel of guilt. The subject faded as the years passed and was rarely discussed openly, in contrast to discussion of the Holocaust in general and its presentation in the theater and the arts. Israeli cinema was no exception to this rule. The narrative of the Holocaust was largely absent from Israeli cinematography, and all the more so a complex and multi-faceted issue such as the Kapos. At the turn of the millennium, this trend began to change. An early harbinger of the change came in 2000, when the film *Kapo* (directed by Tor Ben Mayor, Danny Setton and produced by Danny Paran) won the Emmy award. This was a documentary film that included first-hand testimonies of both survivors and Kapos. The film presents the complexity of the issue and the dilemmas that the prisoners faced. It explores their emotions during and after the war and during the filming many years later. The relatively comfortable backdrop to the discussion enables a measure of openness and honesty on the part of the former Kapos. This is a daring film in every sense of the word. It is revealing in a way that would have been impossible just a few years earlier.

Through discussion of the film *Kapo* and its contributions, this article explores several issues:

1. It attempts to understand the cruel and evil social experiment undertaken by the Nazis among the prisoners in the camps, in an unmediated manner, through the personal testimony of those who filled the function of Kapo.

2. Given that films reflect the society in which they were created, we examine the manner in which the film manifested the spirit of its time and the attitude of the Israeli public from the end of the war to the present day.

3. As a formative film, we examine its influence on other works in Israeli culture that examine the character and complexity of the Kapo, for example *The Kozalchik Affair* (2015) and *Kapo in Jerusalem*. On the one hand, these reflect changing attitudes on this issue, and on the other hand they sparked reactions and led to a wave of reexamination, including a more compassionate understanding of this unfortunate group of people in Israeli public opinion.

Divide and Conquer: “Jewish Collaborators” or “Appointees”?

Following Germany’s occupation of extensive territories, millions of Jews came under the control of the Third Reich – approximately two million of them in Poland alone. As part of the racist agenda of the Nazi regime, a policy was introduced of segregating the Jewish population in the areas that came under German control. This process reached its climax in the incarceration of Jews in the ghettoes and concentration camps.[[9]](#endnote-9) The tactic adopted by Nazi officials for coping with and controlling the large Jewish population that came under the rule of the Third Reich was by recruiting Jews from within the various communities to serve in administrative and executive functions. This was a clever move, since it reduced the involvement of the officials themselves to a minimum. In most instances, the Germans served in a supervisory role, while Jews who implemented the regime’s policy and maintained order.[[10]](#endnote-10)

There were several prominent examples of Jews who held executive positions under the Nazi regime.[[11]](#endnote-11) One was the Judenräte (singular Judenrät) or “Jewish councils” established by order of the Germans in the ghettoes and Jewish communities of Europe. A second was the Ghetto Police, whose members followed orders given to them directly by the German authorities or indirectly by the Judenrät. A third was the Zonderkommando – Jewish prisoners in the extermination camps charged with removing bodies from the gas chambers and burning them in the crematoria. A fourth was the Kapos, who served as the heads of units in the prisoner system in the camps. They were appointed by the German commanders from the elite SchutzStaffel (SS) forces. The practical function of the Kapos was to lead the prisoners to their place of work, ensure that they worked efficiently, and be responsible for them meeting their work quotas. The Kapos’ function could be seen as a type of executive arm for the policy of humiliation, physical injury, and discipline imposed in the camps. Relative to the other prisoners, the Kapos enjoyed certain privileges in the camp. At the same time, they suffered from distrust from both sides.

A report on the website of the Israeli national Holocaust memorial museum, Yad Vashem, notes “the term ‘Kapo’ is sometimes used to refer to a functionary and collaborator in the camps as well as to a collaborator in the service of the Nazis in general.”[[12]](#endnote-12) This sentence powerfully illustrates the inherent duality of the term Kapo. On the one hand, “collaborator” is a judgmental term that marks the person concerned as an ally of the Nazis more than a persecuted victim. The use of the term as a generic term for collaborators underscores the reality that the Kapo became the most maligned among the various types of functionaries listed above. Conversely, the term “functionary” is more formal and does not convey any sense of judgment. Thus, this quote reflects both of the prevailing attitudes regarding this historical figure – the judgmental (and some would say accusatory) attitude and the non-judgmental one.

In chronological terms, the accusatory attitude was particularly prevalent during the 1950s and 1960s, when there was a general atmosphere of hostility and even the hunting down of collaborators. Researchers Segev and Yablonka separately described routinely occurring incidents in Israel of identification of a person as a Kapo and that person’s arrest by the police.[[13]](#endnote-13) The tone of the debate was intensified by former members of the underground resistance movements. They did not show any sympathy for collaborators as being trapped between the hammer and the anvil or having shown leadership and imagination in their efforts to save anyone they could in an impossible reality. They referred to the collaborators as “traitors,” and this perspective soon permeated public discourse and gained ground.[[14]](#endnote-14) One of the few people who wrote more sympathetically about the members of the Judenräte was Yehuda Bauer, who would later become a leading historian of the Holocaust.[[15]](#endnote-15) During this period, individuals suspected of having served as Kapos faced harassment, extortion, and mutual libel suits.[[16]](#endnote-16) Michael Gilad (a Holocaust survivor and an investigator in the Eichmann trial) recalled:

It was sufficient that someone argued with his neighbor for him to begin to shout “I bet you were a Kapo in the camp.” There were real complaints and there were fake complaints based on personal vendettas, which the police found had no interest for the public […] Apart from this, the Germans themselves made sure (during the Holocaust) that people who were really collaborators did not remain alive (so that they could not testify).[[17]](#endnote-17)

The Israeli police allocated one officer and three sergeants to the task of processing public complaints. The 400 complaints received led to 160 trials.[[18]](#endnote-18) With one exception, most of the trials were against “Jewish collaborators” under the terms of the Nazis and Nazi Collaborators (Punishment) Law of 1950. Yablonka argues that in accordance with the demand of the community of Holocaust survivors in Israel, the law was applied mainly against Jews.[[19]](#endnote-19) Many researchers agree that the trials were intended to allow for release of the survivors’ feelings of revenge toward the Kapos.[[20]](#endnote-20) The public preferred to concentrate on the victims.[[21]](#endnote-21) In addition, the public clearly distinguished between the informers of the Judenräte and the victims, or between the Warsaw Ghetto fighters, as exemplified by Antek Zuckerman, and the Judenräte functionaries.[[22]](#endnote-22)

It was extremely difficult, during this period, to present the complexity of the subject of collaboration with the Nazis.[[23]](#endnote-23) As noted above, suspects faced harassment, extortion, and mutual libel suits.[[24]](#endnote-24) Thus, the accusatory attitude dominated internal discourse among survivors regarding the Kapos. This position radiated outward and had a negative impact on the official position, as manifested in the Kastner trial, for example.

However, the Kapo trials were not widely reported in the press. A prevailing sense of embarrassment discouraged journalists from tackling the issue.[[25]](#endnote-25) In his book *A Kapo in Albany*, Itamar Levin explains: “The number of pages in the newspapers was small – no more than four pages, and the number of newspapers was also small, and they all received information from a single news agency – Itim. Something that appeared in one newspaper could also be found in the others. As a result, the information was concise and based on the trial minutes, without interpretation or additions.”[[26]](#endnote-26) A further reason to adhere closely to the records was the fact that the trials determined the personal fate of the defendants.

Another feature of the attitude toward the survivors and collaborators was the accusation that the victims did not resist and went “like lambs to the slaughter” – in contrast to the fighters of the underground resistance movements. Influenced by the Zionist passion of the period surrounding the establishment of Israel, a perception developed that the Holocaust could have been prevented if only the Jews had revolted. The result was that many Israelis downplayed the importance of the Holocaust due to their inability to confront the event.

Other factors were also involved. Israeli society in the 1950s was highly politicized. The attitude toward the survivors embodied in “The Nazis and Nazi Collaborators (Punishment) Law” was more political than might have been assumed. The Kastner trial (1953-1958) highlighted this politicized reality. Kastner became a member of Mapai and the Rescue Committee. His critics were Revisionists, who effectively blamed the Jewish leadership in pre-State Israel for abandoning the Jews of Europe and accused them of de facto collaboration with the Nazis. Right-wingers wanted to investigate the failure (or lack of desire) of the Jewish Agency to save the Jews. Conversely, Meir Wilner of the Israeli Communist Party called for a struggle against the new Fascists – i.e. the Americans – who were benefiting from the services of Nazi war criminals. The politicization of the Holocaust continued up to the time of the Eichmann trial.[[27]](#endnote-27)

An example of the argument between these sides can be found in Nathan Alterman’s poem “On the Two Paths” (1954), which was silenced by his political opponents on the left:[[28]](#endnote-28) “Those who fell, weapon in hand, may not be able to accept the barrier / Between them and the death of communities and the heroes who headed them and interceded for them.”[[29]](#endnote-29) Alterman implied that there was no difference between the underground fighters in the ghettoes and the members of the Judenräte, and that the latter should not be judged on the basis of a rigid and dichotomous law.[[30]](#endnote-30) Alterman’s opening volley on this subject from the mid-1950s reverberates to this day. His attitude was exceptional and considered provocative at the time. However, to some extent it has become normative. “Research and public discourse have long since exonerated the Jewish masses of the accusation that they went ‘like lambs to the slaughter,’ and the attitude toward the Judenrät has also changed dramatically.”[[31]](#endnote-31) In an exceptional interview, Ben-Gurion declared: “I believe that we should leave the trial of history to a later generation. Jews who were safe and sound during the days of Hitler should not assume the role of judging their fellows who were burnt and murdered or the few who survived.”[[32]](#endnote-32)

The Eichmann trial changed the attitude toward the survivors – both collaborators and victims. This was the first trial of a Nazi, as opposed to a collaborator. It was the first time that someone who gave the orders sat on the bench. For the first time, Israeli society was able to confront the murderer and hear the experiences of his victims. The prosecution of the murderer granted legitimacy to his victims. The tendency to blame the victim was abandoned and there was increased empathy for their distress and anxiety.[[33]](#endnote-33)

The Supreme Court also set the tone for a new attitude toward those who collaborated with the Nazis. In January 1956, in an appeal submitted by the State Attorney’s Office against the verdict of Justice Levy in the Kastner trial, Justice Agranat wrote that Kastner’s behavior should not be judged in hindsight. Instead, one should put oneself in his shoes and understand his motivations at the time. This approach also influenced future rulings, such as the 1964 verdict in the case of the Jewish Police commander in Zaglambia, who was sentenced by an Israeli court to five years in prison.[[34]](#endnote-34) However, Shaked, whose conclusions considered to be accepted as accurate by researchers in the field, notes that this ruling was followed by a protracted silence regarding the stories of the collaborators. Beginning in the mid-1980s, however, the subject was once again tackled outside the courtroom and in the public domain, including public judgment in the cultural and artistic domain. An example of this was the play *Kastner*, which strongly emphasized the non-judgmental tone of the above-mentioned court ruling.[[35]](#endnote-35) Ayala Shklar expanded on this issue further and reached similar conclusions.[[36]](#endnote-36) On the basis of these assumptions, we can conclude that the 1980s marked the consolidation of a less judgmental attitude toward Jewish collaborators. We might therefore anticipate that the depictions of Kapos and collaborators would now become more complex, as in the play and later the television drama *Kastner*. However, the subject disappeared as quickly as it had emerged.

Significant changes in the perception of the role of the Kapo has been seen only in recent decades, especially in the academic domain, where a non-judgmental attitude toward Jewish collaborators has been expressed clearly. A new call to revive the debate surrounding their story can be seen in articles published in the 1990s by Yablonka and Weitz in the journal *Cathedra*. These articles examine, for the first time, the trials of Kapos held in the 1950s and 1960s.[[37]](#endnote-37) Two additional platforms calling for a reexamination of the subject and appreciation of its complexity were Michal Shaked’s article, published in 2000 in the journal *Alpayim*, and Idith Zertal’s book *The Nation and the Death*, published in 2002. Shaked highlights the gulf between collective and consensual memory regarding the Kastner trial surrounding Agranat’s ruling, which came to be perceived as liberal, enlightened, and a turning point in the attitude toward Holocaust survivors and collaborators, and the actual ruling, which she argues actually represented the dominant position of the Zionist establishment.[[38]](#endnote-38) Zertal’s book criticizes the difference between the State of Israel’s treatment of the Judenräte, and particularly individuals with strong connections who served in these bodies and enjoyed protection, and the more junior Kapos, who were themselves persecuted by the Nazis. She argues that Israel’s condemnation, prosecution, and penalization of the Kapos was a classic example of punishing those on the lowest rung.[[39]](#endnote-39) A further relevant work in this context is Tuvia Friling, whose book *Who Are You Leon Berger? A Story of a Kapo in Auschwitz* reexamines the complex character of the Kapo Eliezer Greenbaum from an objective and scholarly standpoint.[[40]](#endnote-40)

The above review delineates a somewhat linear development in the attitude toward the historical character of the Kapo, from an accusatory attitude in the 1950s and 1960s to an attempt to reemphasize the complexity of this story from a non-judgmental standpoint in the 1980s, and particularly in the 2000s. A manifestation of this change can also be found in Israeli cinema, which may also be seen as a discursive medium whose works are almost always consistent with the hegemonic Zeitgeist.[[41]](#endnote-41) However, early Israeli cinematic depictions of the Holocaust did not include the character of the Kapo. Presumably influenced by the cautious attitude toward this subject, cinematographers did not want to touch such a volatile issue, to the point that they completely ignored it. A marginal and negative mention in Tzipi Tropé’s *Tel Aviv – Berlin* (1987) may be the only exception. Change came only later, with a genuine and honest attempt to discuss this highly complex issue. This attempt yielded more questions than declarations.

***Kapo* – Tor Ben Mayor and Danny Setton (2000)**

*Kapo* is an Emmy-award winning television documentary film that was broadcast in Israel and Germany in 2000.[[42]](#endnote-42) The film was directed by Danny Setton and Tor Ben Mayor, Israeli cinematographers who have worked together on various documentary films.

*Kapo* focuses on several types of collaboration during the Holocaust, presenting the stories of Kapos, collaborators, Zonderkommandos, and members of the Jewish Ghetto Police. All of these were referred to generically as “Kapos,” which became a catch-all term for Jewish collaborators. The film may be categorized in several ways. First it is as an example of “history as documentary,” in the sense that its makers composed an edited composition including testimonies, interviews, legal documents, and footage addressing the subject of Jews who collaborated with the Nazis and the trials of some of them in the 1950s and 1960s.[[43]](#endnote-43) The second category the film belongs to is documentation and historical awareness. It is a documentary film that records historical reality and stimulates a desire to enrich and expand the viewers’ existing knowledge. The layers revealed by this process create collision and interest.[[44]](#endnote-44) The third category focuses on characters and their motivations.[[45]](#endnote-45) The fourth discusses broad and narrow understandings of collaboration with the Nazis, comparing between the social, moral, and conscious meanings that leave the viewer with an emotional experience, and realistic judgmental and critical meanings.[[46]](#endnote-46)

The declared goal of the film is encapsulated in remarks by producer Danny Paran in an interview for the Israeli news website *Ynet*: “We didn’t have any intention of judging the collaborators for their actions in an unequivocal or subjective manner. We tried to present their point of view, taking into consideration the time and place where the events occurred.”[[47]](#endnote-47) Thus, for example, alongside the testimonies of women who served as Kapos in Auschwitz, the viewer simultaneously encounters Holocaust survivors who describe the cruel behavior of those who filled these positions and who forcefully condemn them, as well as others who warn against a schematic judgment of this position and the period in general. Throughout the film, however, the voiceover emphasizes the function and responsibility of the Nazis in creating a hierarchy that broke Jewish solidarity. This narration appears to be designed to clarify who bears the true blame for this situation.

Throughout the film, the director uses the archival material and the accompanying voiceover to simplify the work and make it more accessible to broad and diverse audiences.[[48]](#endnote-48) Rare archival materials obtained through a meticulous search offer a unique and significant tool for shaping the film’s message.[[49]](#endnote-49) In some instances, it fills an illustrative and explicative function[[50]](#endnote-50) regarding important events and historical and social processes.[[51]](#endnote-51) The film opens with archive footage of a trial. A prosecutor is showing a witness a picture of a large-bodied woman in uniform raising her baton over a woman prisoner, while a male soldier in an SS uniform accompanied by a dog stands by. When the prosecutor asks the witness what the picture reminds her of, she replies “a Kapo.” “Is that what it looked like?” the attorney asks, and the witness replies, “Yes – and worse than that.” She later confirms and recalls additional pictures drawn by survivors. The opening point, then, is an exposition of the subject of the Kapo, so that the viewers can understand the discussion and form their own opinion.[[52]](#endnote-52)

The film then moves on to present the Eichmann trial, contrasting this proceeding with the trials of Kapos – a rhetorical cinematic choice that underscores the acute distinction between the two.[[53]](#endnote-53) The voiceover integrates the two situations, despite the narrative contrast. The theme of the film creates the context: while the Eichmann trial provoked reactions in public and international discourse and was held in public, the trials of Jews accused of collaborating with the Nazis were held out of public view.[[54]](#endnote-54) “This film tells their story,” the narrator explains, recognizing that this is a subject that has been suppressed and silenced and that the makers of the film are seeking to open discourse on the topic and to give voices and names to survivors whose stories have not previously been adequately documented.

The chronological structuring of the film mirrors, to an extent, the development of public discourse in Israel concerning Jewish collaborators.[[55]](#endnote-55) The first part of the film gives historical information about the Jewish functionaries and the trials themselves, which promotes understanding of the context and period. The filmmakers also break down the codes from the past that form the heart of the film and translate them into simple language for viewers. The goal is to provide a logical setting and social context to issues that are familiar in the viewer’s contemporary reality.[[56]](#endnote-56) The viewer is exposed to the testimony of Holocaust survivor Reuven Waxelman, which in a broader context represents the accusatory attitude in the film. He argues that there can be no justification for the actions of the Jewish functionaries. In addition, legal protocols and photographs, particularly relating to the Kapos, are heard and shown. These harshly describe the actions of which they were accused and effectively create an extremely negative image of their function. On the basis of this judgmental position, which as noted can be identified primarily with the 1950s and 1960s, the filmmakers build the second stage of their discussion, which introduces the complexity of the issue. This part of the film highlights the stories and testimonies of the functionaries themselves, powerfully exposing the viewer to their narrative in a pendulum motion that serves as the activating mechanism of the film: a testimony that is then challenged by counter-testimony.[[57]](#endnote-57) These expressions of reservation are interwoven by the use of editing techniques used to jolt the viewer. The viewer evaluates the testimonies along a scale from collaboration at one end to resistance and a willingness to maintain human dignity at any cost in order to secure the minimum conditions for survival at the other; as well as unarmed resistance, whether organized or intuitive.[[58]](#endnote-58) An example of this can be found in the comments of Michael Gilad, a Holocaust survivor and former researcher in the Department for the Investigation of the Nazi Crimes. Gilad explains the difference between the various functionaries: “Some of them were faithful to moral principles, while others did everything – and I mean everything! – possible in order to survive.”

Gilad uses the term “survive” and emphasizes that it is wrong to generalize regarding the functionaries. However, the tone of his comments and the abrupt ending of his sentence at this point leave the viewer with the sense of ambivalence.[[59]](#endnote-59) This section is followed immediately by still images of hungry and emaciated children and of the corpse of a child lying in the street, illustrating the implications of collaboration with the Nazis. A Holocaust survivor, Noah Flug, then describes experiencing five years of hunger, once again challenging the viewer’s assumptions by asking: “How can anyone judge that?” Thus the need for survival is emphasized here, too, as a justification for accepting the position, while Flug’s question acquires the character of a response to Gilad’s closing remarks, although we cannot be certain that he is directly addressing the distinction between the different functionaries. This practice is repeated when Flug describes the actions of the Kapo in his camp, who “killed people every morning” and was “an abnormal sadist.” Shortly after this testimony, Gilad appears again, describing his Kapo, Fritz, who never raised his hand against any person, with the exception of one instance when Fritz slapped Gilad’s face after Gilad looked directly into the eyes of an SS soldier. Fritz then went on to save Gilad’s life. This strategy of juxtaposing edited depictions of the different positions can be seen as a reflection of a desire on the part of the filmmakers to adopt an objective and didactic stance that might be seen to mirror the discussion of the function of a person who is both victim and executioner through cinematic language.

The discussion of the complex issue of the functionaries raises a substantive question concerning their motivation in accepting their position. Why did they not refuse? The images of hunger dispersed through the film through still photographs and the survivors’ testimonies appear to be intended to provide the answer: accepting the position became a tool for survival. The film also emphasizes that some of the functionaries had no choice. The eyewitness Gilad explains that in most cases a refusal to accept the position of Kapo was a death sentence. Walter Reichman, another Holocaust survivor, is asked whether he would have accepted the position of Kapo if he had been offered it. He replies: “I would have taken it with both hands.” Magda Hellinger, the commander of the women prisoner’s camp at Auschwitz, employs mystical language to answer this question: “I feel that fate chose me to save, to help through every action I performed along the way.” Her assistant, Vera Alexander, does not see any moral problem in the fact that she was forced to serve in this function in the camp: “I don’t know today what it was – this thing about living! Living!” The expression of these positions serves as a type of comparison and reference to films such as Pontecorvo’s *Kapo*, *Escape from Sobibor*, *The Grey Zone*, *Triumph of the Spirit*, and *Son of Saul*, in which the characters of the Kapo and the Zonderkommandos are both central and ambivalent. Sometimes they beat prisoners to death, sometimes they save their lives, and sometimes they seek opportunities to save lives.

Regarding the Zonderkommando, one of the main arguments that challenges the theme of survival as a justification for assuming the position is that in all probability the functionaries themselves would ultimately be killed. Immediately after this argument is presented, the voiceover explains: “Refusal to collaborate means a death sentence; on the other hand, obedience may only postpone the inevitable death sentence. But who would forego even the remotest chance of staying alive?” This is followed immediately by the comments of Frances Kossel, a block commander at Auschwitz, who reinforces this message and adds a further argument: “To refuse would have been foolish… particularly after I saw them trampling and humiliating you while I had an opportunity to feel more like a human. I do not think that anyone in the world would have done this (refused the position – author).” Kossel’s comments show that in a situation when everything possible is being done to crush the prisoners’ dignity, the position offered not only relative freedom of movement, clean clothes, and food, but also a renewed sense of dignity and humanity. However, it is difficult to determine the extent to which such an argument evokes empathy on the part of the viewer, given that the preservation of the Kapo’s humanity entails the usurping of the humanity of others. While the viewer ponders this dilemma, retired Supreme Court Justice Haim Cohen appears toward the end of the film. Cohen who heard the appeal by the commander of the police in Bedzin Ghetto. He says:

I could not free myself of the sense that we are totally incapable of judging these people, of putting ourselves in their place – and that is what we need to do in order to sentence them. If someone does what he does under threat of his own death or that of his children, you can’t bring him to account on matters such as solidarity with others. First of all, he acts out of solidarity with himself and his children. This is not only natural, but it is also moral and permissible.

Cohen is followed by Waxelman, who states: “These aren’t things that came to me in a dream. I experienced them with my body, my soul, and my memory. There is no forgiveness; there is no resurrection of the dead.” The placement of Waxelman’s comments immediately after Cohen might appear to be an attempt to present both sides of the coin and balance the judge’s remarks. However, the combination carries an important message. The judge’s position reflects what is ostensibly the rational approach, and thereby nullifies Waxelman’s comments, which are clearly motivated by his personal involvement in the situation. Accordingly, Waxelman’s remarks do not serve as a counterweight to those of Cohen. The filmmakers’ message is further accentuated by this technique, while at the same time being perceived as an act of “objective” cinematography. In some cases, however, the powerful testimonies of survivors condemning the functionaries create an elevated sense of identification with them on the part of the viewer, since the audio-visual medium inevitably has an emotional impact. The filmmakers ostensibly adopt a stylistic approach that seeks to depict all those involved equally. All the eyewitnesses are filmed in a similar manner, using the familiar “talking heads” documentary technique. Accordingly, the fact that Magda Hellinger, the head Kapo from Auschwitz, is filmed in exactly the same way as Reuven Waxelman, a rank-and-file prisoner, might suggest that both are given the same status: both are survivors. Despite this, the camera appears to more easily accentuate the emotional expressions of eyewitnesses recalling the actions of the functionaries. An example of this is a zoom-in on Flug’s face as he tells the story of the Kapo in the concentration camp where he was incarcerated, who used to kill people every morning. The attention of the camera to every nuance and facial gesture symbolizes the affinity the viewer feels for the speaker at this point. By contrast, the camera does not treat the female Kapos in the same manner. There are no extreme close-ups of their faces at any point, even when they express pain or regret for their actions. The camera shows Frances Kossel from a slight angle, and not straight on, as in the cases of the other eyewitnesses. Both she and Magda Hellinger have an Aryan appearance, which is emphasized by the director through the use of photographs from their youth, as if hinting at a connection between their Aryan or German appearance and their function. This technique creates a measure of alienation, or even distaste, on the viewer’s part. Another interesting element that creates a contrast between the female functionaries and the male Kapos is the lack of any expression of regret from the former. The women argue that they filled their positions in order to save lives. This claim is supported by a prisoner who observed their behavior and stated that their actions were understandable, and that she would behaved in the same way if she had been in their situation.

However, a deeper examination shows that the filmmakers also made a tangible effort to encourage identification with the functionaries, probably due to an awareness of the highly effective impact of the moving testimonies describing the cruel acts the functionaries committed. In order to balance the picture, the Kapos’ humanity is conveyed in the film by presenting the regret and pain that were an inherent part of their function, as manifested in the filmed and narrated testimonies. A particularly effective segment, narrated by an actor from the diary of the Kapo Eliezer Greenbaum, is accompanied by photographs from the concentration camps. The selected passage describes Greenbaum’s feelings of pain and remorse after he slapped a prisoner who pushed into a line for food. “I didn’t know where to hide myself,” the narrator quotes. The passage is read in a slightly childish and emotional tone, as if seeking to create a sense of compassion toward Greenbaum; the accompanying poignant music enhances this sense. Another technique that seems designed to create a measure of identification with the role of the Kapo is the inclusion of segments showing the women Kapos interviewed in the film performing mundane tasks such as gardening, cleaning their home, or walking along the street. More than any other element of the film, this footage depicts the women in a human light, as normative figures, in contrast to the demonic image they acquire in the testimonies Waxelman and Flug present. It is therefore apparent that the filmmakers made an effort to nurture a level of identification with the functionaries.

A further acute question that arises toward the end of the film raises doubts regarding the attempt to avoid judgmentalism, which was noted is the filmmakers’ declared goal. Immediately after Hellinger’s testimony regarding her success in suppressing foment among new women prisoners who arrived at the camp, in order to prevent them from being shot by the SS guards, the narrator asks: “But on the doorstep of death, was it really so vital to insist on order and obedience? This question will probably remain unanswered.” This remark constitutes an extremely significant moment in Setton and Ben Mayor’s film, since it almost seems to negate the numerous protective measures that have been adopted hitherto in order to prevent judgmentalism. The remark embodies an overtly and extremely judgmental approach on the part of the filmmakers themselves. The rhetorical question they present can in many ways be compared to the classic question of why they went like lambs to the slaughter, which embodied an inability to understand the survivors’ experience – an inability that led to judgmental attitudes toward them. Accordingly, the producer’s declaration of intent to make a film that will avoid judging its subjects is somewhat contradicted by this question. This is certainly an important question to raise, and it is highly pertinent to the subject and encapsulates some of its inherent duality. Nevertheless, it reflects a clearly judgmental position and thus appears to deviate from the film’s goal.

***The Kozalchik Affair* (2015)[[60]](#endnote-60)**

It took another 15 years before another documentary film was produced in Israel that attempts to get under the skin of a character chosen to serve as a Kapo. *The Kozalchik Affair* takes place in the notorious “Block 11” – the harshest place in Auschwitz. The pendulum of judgment between the “good Kapo” and the “bad Kapo” swings once more with this film. While *Kapo* sits those who collaborated with the Nazis down in front of the camera to tell their stories, alongside those of the survivors who witnessed their actions, the hero of *The Kozalchik Affair* is not present, and his actions are described by those he saved and by his lost son.

The film begins by describing the efforts of Kozalchik’s son to find his father, who disappeared from his life when he was a toddler. After Kozalchik’s wife learned that he had served as a Kapo, she left him and told their son that his father had died. Years later, he learned that his mother had left his father, who lived for a few more years before dying penniless and broken-hearted, disillusioned at the failure of the survivors to help him prove his innocence in the face of attacks by other survivors, who accused him of begin an evil and cruel Kapo. As the son searches for the truth about his father, we are exposed to the incredible story of a man who dared to challenge the Nazis – and lived to tell the tale.

Yaakov-Shimshon Kozalchik was born in Krynica, Poland. He was a Jewish laborer who worked in various physical jobs in Poland, Cuba, and the United States. Once he served as the bodyguard to the renowned German boxer Max Schmeling. This connection later helped him to survive. He happened to be on a visit to Poland when the war began. He was captured by the Nazis and transported to Auschwitz, where he served as the executioner and manager of Block 11. Despite his cruel role as a collaborator who followed Nazi orders, Kozalchik gained a reputation in the camp for his kindness and the help he gave to those who came to him. Many survivors testified that he saved their lives by providing food and shelter and by protecting them from unspeakable pain and punishments. These aspects are emphasized in the film through the testimonies of the last remaining survivors. Proof of his positive actions can also be found in the research literature and in survivors’ memoirs.[[61]](#endnote-61)

The film also includes interviews with objective experts such as Polish researchers from the archives at Auschwitz. Dr. Adam Cyra, a senior researcher at the archives, summarized the findings of an extensive study into Kozalchik: “Yaakov was not proactively cruel toward the prisoners; he did not beat or torture them.” In a single sentence, the research encapsulated the ambivalent and impossible nature of the Kapo’s function. On the one hand, they lacked of choice, since the Kapo was also a prisoner who had to obey Nazi rules or be killed; on the other, this prisoner had the choice to keep others alive, at the risk of his own death, by misleading and deceiving the Nazis. In their interviewees, the survivors Shraga Nitzburg, Otto Fressburg, and Yocheved Galili describe Kozalchik’s boundless generosity and his willingness to risk his own life in order to save Jewish children. Despite this, he was maligned in the press and in public and lost his livelihood, which was bending iron bars in shows. By the time those he saved spoke out and sought to clear his name, it was too late. His grave remained unmarked until 2005. Meir Eldar, a Holocaust survivor who was incarcerated in the Plaszow camp at Auschwitz, came to Palestine together with Kozalchik on a boat carrying illegal immigrants and later met him in the country. Together with another friend, Amir Haskel, Eldar erected a tombstone on Kozalchik’s grave. Along with the usual personal details, the inscription declares: “He was called a saint and a hero, and so he will be remembered in perpetuity.”[[62]](#endnote-62)

Fifteen years after *Kapo*, *The Kozalchik Affair* provides further insights into the character and role of the Kapo. While *Kapo* takes the form of an informal trial on the themes of morality and choice, in the later film the exploration of Kozalchik’s actions and the interviews with those he saved emphasize additional values that formed part of his conflicted character. These values stem from the Jewish Shtetl and from Kozalchik’s own upbringing: communal solidarity, the defense of the innocent against arbitrary cruelty, the use of cunning to hoodwink the Nazis, a willingness to risk one’s life to help others, and compassion in a place where that very word had ceased to exist.

***Kapo in Jerusalem* (2015)[[63]](#endnote-63)**

*Kapo* and *The Kozalchik Affair* were both documentaries. *Kapo in Jerusalem*, by contrast, is a fictional work based on the true story of the infamous Kapo, Eliezer Greenbaum, a tragic figure who continues to be shrouded in mystery. The film depicts the story of the fictitious Bruno Kaminsky, a physician born in Warsaw. Kamisnky is a member of the underground resistance in the ghetto, injured during the uprising and sent to Auschwitz by the Germans. In Auschwitz, his fellow inmates suggest that he assume the role of block chief and the SS appoints him to this position. Kaminsky survives for two years in this function. After the war, he emigrates to Jerusalem and works as a physician in a public health clinic. Rumors soon spread in the city that in his role as block chief Kaminsky collaborated with the SS and killed Jewish prisoners with exceptional cruelty. Bruno attempts to defend himself and his decisions in Auschwitz, but to no avail. He resigns from the clinic, but the survivors continue to raise their accusations. One torches Kaminsky’s apartment. Someone else attempts to assassinate him. When war erupts in 1948, Kaminsky attempts to clear his name. In an act of desperation he joins the army and dies during the battle for Ramat Rachel on the outskirts of Jerusalem.[[64]](#endnote-64) After his death, it is questioned whether he had committed suicide or fallen in combat.

The character of Bruno Kaminsky is inspired by the story of Acha (Eliezer) Greenbaum, the son of Yitzhak Greenbaum, Israel’s first interior minister. He served as the chief of a block in Auschwitz toward the end of the war. Greenbaum was an extremely controversial figure in Israel due to reports of his actions in the camp and his excessive cruelty toward the Jews in his charge.

This is not the first film that adopts a dramatic, rather than a historical, angle in examining incidents from the Holocaust era. In 1994, the three-part drama series *The Kastner Trial* was broadcast. The exploration of the character of Dr. Israel Kastner as a dramatic figure creates room for an original interpretation of the man’s actions in Hungary in 1944-1945. The creators of the series challenge the viewer’s judgments and show how the survivors grapple with questions of morality, treason, and loyalty in impossible situations of mortal danger.

Despite its affinity to a true story, the plot and characters of *Kapo in Jerusalem* are entirely fictitious. Bruno Kaminsky’s biography differs substantially from that of Acha (Eliezer) Greenbaum, who was not a physician, did not participate in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, and did not serve as a block chief in Auschwitz, but rather as deputy chief. Kaminsky’s political orientation also differs radically from that of Greenbaum. Greenbaum was an anti-Zionist Communist, fought in the Spanish Civil War, and served as a member of the French Resistance. In Auschwitz, he was considered the cruelest of the Jewish Kapos. The characters of the survivors who describe their encounters with the Kapo encourage the viewer to engage in reflection, dramatically describing incidents that occurred in the camp, their encounters with the hero of the film, and offering genuine moral statements. The goal of the story is to offer a visual manifestation of profound and genuine internal processes experienced by the survivors – something that a fictional cinematic work can inherently do more successfully than a documentary.

In dramatic terms, the film is structured in a journal-like manner, based mainly on monologues by Bruno and the survivors who testify for and against him. This structure conveys the subjective experience of the memory of the struggle for survival in Auschwitz without observing strict cinematographic rules of mise-en-scène, which could mar the depiction. This is similar to *Kapo in Jerusalem,* whichalso positions the eyewitness heroes in front of the camera in their natural environment. However, while in *Kapo* the filmmakers attempt to refrain from interfering in the scene, the fictional genre allows for the creation of an atmosphere and setting that facilitate a deeper and more intimate examination of memory and testimony, emphasizing and sharpening the gulfs and contradictions between the survivors’ varying narratives. All these narratives are in turn juxtaposed with the responses offered by Kaminsky (Greenbaum). The discourse between the eyewitnesses and the defendant have a trial-like quality throughout the film. The viewers thus effectively serve as members of the jury in a play that raises existential questions that face all modern-day Western societies. These questions touch on the erosion of social solidarity between individuals in an age of stress, frequent wars, and globalization. It looks at the extent to which the human spirit can show greatness in the valley of the shadow of death. It shows the conflict between altruism and fellowship against opportunism and egoism as means for collective survival – a conflict that emerged in the acutest possible form in the microcosm of Auschwitz. The editing of the film also breaks the linear progression of the events, creating instead a collage of interconnected yet complete monodramas that contradict and challenge each other, combining to form a journey into the characters’ elusive conscious and subconscious.[[65]](#endnote-65) However, it is difficult to watch the film without sensing the filmmakers’ profound desire to clear Greenbaum’s name through Kaminsky, at least to a degree. As noted, it is important to note that the biographies of the two men differ in many details. The physician’s attempts to determine who was at a greater or lesser risk of dying differ from Greenbaum’s considerations, which were based on the political sensitivities and preferences that he applied to those under his control.

In contrast to the testimonies presented in *Kapo* (2000), the creators of *Kapo in Jerusalem,* filmmakers working in the second decade of the new millennium, take a postmodernist interpretation. The film seeks to apply deconstructionism to testimony, time, and period from the perspective of the individual as a constant victim, regardless of the prominence of the individual.[[66]](#endnote-66) The questions of morality and freedom of choice presented to the Israeli viewer are not confined to the context of the Holocaust, but extend across a broader, trans-temporal plane to the Israeli reality of occupation and relations between occupier and occupied. The filmmakers argue that a film presenting Greenbaum’s story “enables the observation at a very high level of resolution of life in the block in Auschwitz, the prisoners’ struggle for survival, the moral codes that could or should have applied in the block, and the impossible existential situation in which, although the prisoner has virtually no freedom of choice, he may still take significant decisions both in his inner world and in terms of his attitude to his fellows in the block.”[[67]](#endnote-67) The filmmakers defended themselves by emphasizing that he drew the idea for the film from Friling’s book, which provides a rich source of testimonies about the struggle for survival in the block. The picture that emerges is highly complex, or a nuanced “grey zone,” to use Primo Levi’s term.[[68]](#endnote-68) They argue that the film “clarifies the extent to which an observation of the prisoners in Auschwitz from a distance does not enable us to understand the struggle for survival and its sources in human nature, and underscores that the judgmental observation of prisoners and functionaries in the block must be undertaken sensitively and cautiously.”[[69]](#endnote-69)

**Discussion**

The depiction of the Kapo in Israeli documentary films since 2000 is complex and reveals a correlation between developments in discourse surrounding the functionaries and the development of their depiction. It is important to recall, however, that the testimonies and interviews took place long after the events. When discussing them, we must bear in mind that they are tainted by a measure of anachronism due to the later interpretations based on knowledge of the outcomes of earlier actions.[[70]](#endnote-70)

Setton and Ben Mayor’s film, *Kapo,* provides extensive information about the role of the Kapos, offering a balanced presentation of the two main positions regarding this function. Although the filmmakers attempt to soften the accusatory attitude toward the Kapo and to avoid overt judgment, the end of their film defeats this attempt, to some extent. In the 1990s and 2000s, a new debate emerged in Israel concerning Jewish collaborators, with an emphasis on the fact that they, too, were victims of the Nazi regime, as well as of the Israeli legal system. From this perspective, *Kapo* makes a further contribution to reviving this discussion. This television documentary directly examines the character of the Kapo in accordance with the objectives and documentary ethics of this genre, which ostensibly oblige filmmakers to provide an “objective” and didactic picture of reality. The viewer is presented with an informative and complex portrait of the various relevant issues. As discussed above, the film adopts a dual presentation strategy, whereby each testimony is matched with another raising reservations. This strategy seems to be consistent with the declarative objectives of the documentary genre and with the objectivism required of television content, which bear a stronger obligation to “realism” than the cinema.[[71]](#endnote-71) Accordingly, the genre and the medium are important factors in understanding the form of depiction.[[72]](#endnote-72) In the documentary genre, it is expected that the depiction will have a complex quality, since the character and his/her story function within the central plot. Moreover, as we have seen, the television representation depicts the Kapo “faithfully,” in the sense that it gives volume and life to the characters beyond the lexical definitions of the concepts “Kapo” and “collaborator.”[[73]](#endnote-73) The same is true of the film *Kapo in Jerusalem*. In this respect, it more closely resembles a documentary film that allows a situation to be observed from different angles through diverse speakers and witnesses who support or refute the hero’s version.

A further possible comparison is the attempt to identify the moral judgment of the Kapo, in an impossible time and place, with an ideal theory of morality in peacetime. Setton and Ben Mayor’s attempt to emphasize the complex and multifaceted nature of the issue may to an extent be seen as an approach that draws on modernity. The presentation of two narratives – “for” and “against” – and the effort to refrain from reaching a judgment on the moral issue embody the modern value of ensuring balance. In other words, consideration is given here to the conditions in which the complex category of victim-executioner emerged, and the action is not judged by universal standards. In *Kapo in Jerusalem*, postmodernism and deconstruction of the historical event (the Holocaust) are evident in the version presented through the subject’s eyes (as aggressor and victim) and in the generalization of his narrative (both survivors of the same situation). Rather than seeking to teach the viewer about the Kapo, this film seeks to teach us about the essence of a multifaceted debate.

A further reason – and perhaps an obvious one – for the complexity of the depiction concerns the date of production of the film. *Kapo* was made in 2000. Since the late 1940s, the Kastner trial (1953-1958), and the Eichmann trial (1961), considerable knowledge has accumulated regarding the role of the Kapo. The growing lapse of time since the Holocaust has enabled discussion, rather than judgment, of this character.

Setton and Ben Mayor were exposed to the new approaches introduced by researchers such as Yablonka, who served as a chief advisor for the film, alongside Yehiam Weitz. The film *Kapo in Jerusalem* is also the product of academic research, specifically that of Friling and his book *Who Are You Leon Berger?*, as well as on the writing of Motti Lerner, a productive scriptwriter and author. Lerner, who is well known for his left-wing political views, uses the platform to question the existing perceptions of the Kapos and to challenge viewers by offering new perspectives based mainly on *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, a trailblazing work in Holocaust discourse by Hannah Arendt. Arendt offered a new approach regarding members of the Jewish communities who she felt collaborated with the Nazis, and then proceeded to raise the question of the “banality of evil.” Her approach removes much of the liability placed on the Nazis for the killing, insofar as they formed only a small part of the monstrous mechanism of Nazis.[[74]](#endnote-74) The play *The Kastner Trial* adopted a similar approach.

The documentary film *The Kozalchik Affair* is also based mainly on archive extracts and historical research, in cooperation with Polish historians who currently work at the Auschwitz archives. The researchers unanimously confirmed that Kozalchik’s collaboration was coerced, and that when he was able to do so, he thwarted the Nazis’ intentions and saved prisoners from death. The insights from these three films suggest that the academic dimension has strongly influenced the depiction of this subject and can change the viewer’s preconceptions on the issue.

It is important to note that the gradual loss of the Holocaust survivors themselves may also explain the possibility of presenting the Kapo as a victim. As they pass away, there is less risk of offending them. This, accordingly, permits discussion of difficult questions that could not previously be raised in the discourse. A clear example of this is Claude Lanzmann’s film *The Last of the Unjust*,[[75]](#endnote-75) which confronts the chilling biography of the oldest Jew in Theresienstadt decades after Lanzmann documented the interviews.[[76]](#endnote-76) Lanzmann states that he wanted to absorb the material he heard by himself, and at the same time to ensure that the public is cognitively and emotionally mature enough to grapple with the testimony. This process took over three decades).[[77]](#endnote-77) Moshe Zimmerman also mentions the process of perceptional maturation in the context of depictions of the Holocaust in Israeli cinema, beginning from the 1980s. He describes this as a process entailing the normalization of the Holocaust and its acceptance as another process in the gallery of human processes – in particular, he alludes to the wars Israel experienced, on average, once a decade.[[78]](#endnote-78) This process also opens the door for different depictions of various aspects of the behavior of Jewish functionaries and for understanding these unusual behaviors in their true context.

Alongside the complex depiction of the Kapo, the filmmakers also use the voiceover to clearly emphasize that the Germans bore the responsibility for breaking Jewish solidarity. This position may be seen as an attempt to bring the Jewish functionaries back into the fold of victims and survivors, and to disconnect their association with the Nazis. In other words, we are no longer speaking of “the Nazis and their assistants,” as the law defines them, but as people who were persecuted in their own right, or as forced collaborators. Whether deliberately or not, the filmmakers appear try to redefine the boundaries of these categories. Until now, along the imaginary axis from the Germans to their victims, the depiction of the “collaborators” in film, and in the trials held, positions them close to the Germans. *Kapo*, *The Kozalchik Affair*, and *Kapo in Jerusalem* attempt to move them closer to the victim end of the spectrum by presenting their previously unheard voices.[[79]](#endnote-79)

In contextual terms, *Kapo* should be examined against the background of Israeli reality at the time it was produced. The Al-Aqsa (Second) Intifada (2000-2005) was a difficult period marked by numerous terror attacks that killed hundreds of Israelis. The attacks were accompanied by bitterness and existential anxiety in Israel, against the background of the failing Oslo Accords that tore Israeli society into right- and left-wing camps. Israel’s actions in the Intifada were condemned around the world. Anti-Semitic incidents occurred across Europe, without any sensitivity to the sense of terror facing Israelis. During this period, Setton and Ben Mayor produced films such as *Shattered Dreams of Peace* (2003), which examines the failure of the peace process following the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, and *In the Name of God* (2003), which criticizes the phenomenon of martyrs in the Islamic world and warns that this could lead to developments that have indeed since been seen in bodies such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Like *Kapo*, these films are also distributed outside Israel. It may be assumed that the emphasis on the victim status of both the survivors and the Kapos is not only the product of a research and historical orientation but also an act of Israeli-Zionist protest against a world that had forgotten the past and was engaging in victim blaming.

Another angle of reflection emerges from the clear connection between memory of the Holocaust and national and social objectives in Israel.[[80]](#endnote-80) The connection between the story of the Kapos in the Holocaust and the stories of Jews in Israel under the shadow of the conflict is glaring. As noted, the film was made during the period of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, a time that raised ethical questions concerning the occupation. Jews in Israel were forced to confront domestic and foreign judgment of Israel’s actions in suppressing another people as part of a struggle for survival – a situation that undoubtedly raises analogies to the stories of the Kapos. Accordingly, the filmmakers’ discussion of the moral dilemmas in the Kapos’ stories directly touches on the sharp moral dilemmas that emerged during the Intifada. *Kapo in Jerusalem* and *The Kozalchik Affair* were made after the intifadas and represent a clearer perception of the Kapo as an individual trapped between the hammer and the anvil and forced to make fateful decisions as to what was right in this period, and to account for their actions before their God and their community.

Be this as it may, the most significant fact about Setton and Ben Mayor’s *Kapo* is that it is the first film to engage directly with the stories of the Jewish functionaries during the Holocaust. The film constitutes the most profound and comprehensive audiovisual document on this subject. Above all, this depiction can symbolize the change that occurred in public discourse regarding Jewish collaborators. The limited depiction of the Kapo in the cinema is due primarily to the marginal role of this character in the historical story – something that cannot be said of the Holocaust victims, and particularly not of the Jews among them. The few depictions presented prior to *Kapo* seem to have a one-dimensional character and avoid confronting the complexities of the issue. Against this background, Setton and Ben Mayor attempt to revive this complexity, potentially implying a process of the acceptance of the Kapos’ difficult stories.

**Conclusion**

This article highlights the connection between the developments in public and academic discourse about the Kapos and the developments in their depiction in the media and cinema. The gradual emergence of a more forgiving attitude toward the function of the Kapo in public discourse is mirrored by a more complex depiction of their historical role in the films examined here with the passage of time since the Holocaust. Above all, our analysis shows that the depiction of this role is connected to numerous influencing factors. The genre in which the character is developed; the filmmakers’ ideological, political, cultural, and moral background; the sources of knowledge or funding on which they rely – all these may be influential in understanding how and why the historical figure was depicted at a given time and place. These findings may imply that the cinematic product cannot free itself of the social, personal, political, or economic context in which it operates.

Moreover, the depictions examined above show that the historical character of the Kapo functions as a type of symbol through which filmmakers reinforce social and national myths that seeks to emphasize the borders between what is desirable and what is forbidden, what is good and what is ugly, what belongs and what is cast out. The depiction of the Kapo during the Al-Aqsa Intifada symbolizes the ethical dilemmas entailed in the oppression of another people for the sake of survival, as well as the accusation that the world turned its back on Israel in its hardest hour.

Thus the figure of the Kapo is charged with different meanings according to the message that the filmmakers – who are themselves the product of their time – seek to convey, whether consciously or otherwise. We may, however, determine that the gradual disappearance of the Holocaust survivors has facilitated deeper discussion of this issue and the creation of a more complex depiction, since the potential offense to those who were emotionally involved in the situations under discussion is dwindling. In this respect, *Kapo* serves as the harbinger of an era of criticism and of the internalization of the ability of Israeli society to engage in profound introspection.

Films such as *The Kozalchik Affair* and *Kapo in Jerusalem* challenge the viewer regarding the question of the social responsibility for the survivors in Israel during the post-war period, including both their mental and physical wellbeing. In both these films the hero dies, whether of sorrow or on the battlefield. Thus, the price they paid during the Second World War continued to accompany them after their arrival in Israel. These films show a high degree of compassion, and to an extent even empathy, for the former functionaries – not from a position of compassion, but due to a fuller understanding of their stories.

*Kapo in Jerusalem* was produced in an era of relativism, postmodernism, and multiple narratives. It is only natural that the filmmakers raise less familiar narratives concerning the Holocaust story, including ones presented by the Kapo’s relatives concerning the price they paid, or narratives that confront the Kapo and the survivors in order to suggest that there is no one single truth and that the horrors of Auschwitz cannot be explained through analytic simplicity. The fictional character of this film also permits a measure of narrative flexibility that can soften or sharpen angles according to dramatic needs.

The film seems to adopt an adversary stance relative to our familiar conceptions regarding the depiction of the Kapo and collaborators. It is clearly influenced by films outside the realms of Israeli discourse, such as Nelson’s *Gray Zone*,[[81]](#endnote-81) which describes the Zonderkommando in Auschwitz just before the uprising launched by the underground, or *Son of Saul*, directed by the Hungarian László Nemes.[[82]](#endnote-82) Both these films adopt a compassionate and understanding attitude toward the coerced collaborators, describing their function and attempting to remain objective and faithful to the time of the occurrences.

Yaakov Shimshon Kozalchik closes the circle. His tragic character epitomizes the duality of evil: the ultimate function of evil in the infamous Block 11 contrasts with the function of the merciful father and brother he assumed toward the Jews under his charge.

1. . *Baba Kama* 5a. The Talmudic term *moser* refers to a Jewish informer who forwards information about his fellows to the authorities. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. . Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Chovel Umezik*, Chapter 8, Halakhah 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. . Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Teshuvah*, Chapter Three, Halakhah 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. . *He’asor Harishon*: 5708–5718, 49-52. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. . The trials were held pursuant to the Nazis and Nazi Collaborators (Punishment) Law, 1950. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. . Dr. Israel Rudolph Kastner (Hungarian: Rezsö Kasztner, April 1906-March 15, 1957) was a member of the Budapest Aid and Rescue Committee during the Holocaust and organized various rescue activities, such as the “Kastner Train.” Following the accusation by an Israeli journalist, Malchiel Gruenwald that Kasztner had collaborated with the Nazis, Chaim Cohen, Israel’s Attorney General, accused Gruenwald of libel. The trial, which aroused public interest, turned into a broad investigation of the fate of the Jews of Hungary during the Holocaust and Kastner’s actions during the war. This was known as the Kastner Trial. During the trial, Kastner was assassinated. See also Beeria Barnea, “Kastner: Savior or traitor?”, /https://israelkasztner.wordpress.com [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. . Hanna Yablonka, *The State of Israel vs. Adolf Eichmann* (New York: Schocken Books, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
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