

***Shoah: Les quatre soeurs (Annihilation: The Four Sisters)* is a July, 2024 LVCA double-disc dvd donation to the Hugh Stoupe Library of the Heritage Methodist Church in Ligonier, Pennsylvania, United States. Below is Kino Ken's review of that documentary dvd set.**



**Israel / United States 1970s; dvd release 2017 color 273 minutes
live action feature documentary in German, French, Hebrew and English
Synecdoche / ARTE France Producer: David Frenkel four episodes
a Cohen Media Group double-disc dvd release**

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement

9 of a possible 20 points = average film

Points:

- Direction: Claude Lanzmann**
- 0 Editing: Chantal Hymans**
- 1 Cinematography: Dominique Chapuis and William Lubtchansky**
- 1 Interviewer: Claude Lanzmann**
- Music: Jérémy Azoulay**
- 0 Lighting: Christine Szymkowiak**
- 0 Sound**
 - Sound Editing: Béatrice Wick**
 - Sound Recording: Yannick Boulot and Philippe Dongé**
 - Sound Mixing: Anne Laure François**
- 2 Interviewees: Ruth Elias, Ada Lichtman, Hanna Marton, Paula Biren**

- 2 Research: Laura Koeppel*
- 2 Insightfulness
- 0 Creativity
- 1 Ambience
- 9 total points

Shoah: Les quatre soeurs (Annihilation: The Four Sisters) is the final installment of various appendages to Claude Lanzmann's epic 1985 documentary *Shoah*. Comprised of four episodes, each an interview with a female Holocaust survivor, it's fundamentally a series of static Q and A sessions of variable quality.

The most interesting subject is Ruth Elias, an opportunistic young Jewish woman during the Nazi occupation years of 1939-1945. Her episode, titled *Le serment d'Hippocrate (The Hippocratic Oath)*, begins with memories of experiences in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Germany. Later she returned to Czechoslovakia. But Ruth only recovered a sense of relative security by moving at last to Israel.

During her Tel Aviv interview she sings and accompanies herself on an accordion. Ironically, in the background is a beloved German Shepherd, one not kindly disposed to music. Ruth became pregnant during the war years. She and her Jewish boyfriend survived by hiding among Czech Christian villagers for about two years. Then they were reported to the Nazis, arrested and transported to Auschwitz, along with other members of Ruth's family. There Ruth encountered a "charming, handsome gentleman" named Josef Mengele, who failed to detect her parturient condition and passed her into a work detail instead of an extermination group. By systematic lying, Ruth managed to repeatedly avoid fatal consequences of various selections, getting herself eventually on trains, first to Hamburg and then to Ravensbruck. Having given birth to a baby girl, she was forced to watch it sicken from lack of nourishment as Mengele made it the focus of a personal study concerned with how long a human infant could survive without nourishment.

Confronted with the torment of watching her child waste slowly away, Ruth ultimately accepted the assistance of fellow inmate Maza Steinberg, a Jewish doctor who obtained morphine in order to mercifully end the torture ordered by Mengele. Maza herself, due to the Hippocratic Oath she had taken to "do no

harm,” insisted Ruth deliver the lethal injection to her child. She agonizingly did so, once again foiling Dr. Mengele’s plans. Later, after Ruth’s liberation from Nazi internment and subsequent recovery from nearly suicidal depression in a Czech sanatorium, she and Dr. Steinberg reunited in Israel and became best friends.

In the second episode, titled *La puce joyeuse (The Merry Flea)*, Ada Lichtman, a native of Galicia in Poland, was living in the Krakow area when the Nazi army arrived in September, 1939. Shortly afterwards, all the Jewish men in her village were taken out to the woods and executed. Ada describes how the women set out to recover and bury their bodies, despite lack of cooperation from non-Jewish local authorities. She herself was then arrested and sent to an aerodrome to await further relocation. Her next destination was Sobibor, where she met the infamous SS Oberscharfuhrer Gustav Franz Wagner. When the latter determined Ada had previously taught kindergarten he resolved to make her his housekeeper. While serving as a domestic, she witnessed old Jewish men forced to dance with young Jewish girls. Those female beauties were subsequently often forced into sexual relations with camp officers.

Nauseated by such nearby activities, Ada got herself transferred to laundry duty, then to doll-stitching assignments. She had to repair toys stolen from Jewish girls and infant boys so they could be sent to Germany for Nazi children to cuddle.

During her interview, Ada is still preoccupied in refurbishing dolls, most likely still haunted by memories of wartime labors. She and her husband both survived the Sobibor camp uprising in 1943. Neither wish to generalize about their experiences, limiting themselves as much as possible to reporting only events in which they were directly eyewitnesses or eavesdroppers.

Paula Biren, interviewed in the United States, is the focus of Episode Three, titled *Baluty*. Baluty was another name for the Lodz ghetto in Poland.

At age seventeen, Paula was sent to that slum along with other members of her family. It was developed from a former red-light area of the city and became home to some two hundred thousand Jews, of whom forty-five thousand died from starvation. Beginning in 1942, survivors were railroaded off in freight cars to Auschwitz and Chelmno camps, where most were subsequently gassed to death.

However, a small number of youths were registered on a preservation list and told by a Judenrat committee they were to be trained as agricultural workers destined for occupations and residency in Palestinian kibbutzes. With Mordechai Rumkowski heading this shielding council, a sort of Young Pioneers group came into being. Paula worked in a vegetable garden daily. Teenage members of her collective received a year or so of mixed vocational and academic instruction, as well as larger, more balanced meals. This made them into a ghetto aristocracy, whether they liked it or not. Graduates were enrolled on a special list for transport to Terezin in Czechoslovakia rather than to Auschwitz in Poland. Unfortunately, other members of Paula's family had no such protective designation and ended up in extermination centers such as Auschwitz-Birkenau.

While Paula remained alive in Terezin, the Lodz ghetto was wiped out completely in August of 1944. Terezin was liberated in May, 1945 by Soviet Army troops. Paula found it impossible to restart normal civilian life in Poland as pogroms resumed in that country after V-E Day. For her, relocation to the United States seemed the best available option, if a protracted one.

Episode Four, titled *L'arche de Noé (Noah's Ark)*, centers on Hannah Morton, who is interviewed in Tel Aviv. She grew up in Cluj, a beautiful city with a substantial Jewish minority population. Both Zionists and Orthodox Jews were resident there in the inter-war period. They lived under Austro-Hungarian governance. Thus when Germany invaded Russia, its Austro-Hungarian allies sent Jews to work behind the Eastern Front battle lines. Jews were not permitted rifles, serving instead as supply line workers. Frequently they shared quarters with Italians, Germans and Austrians. Hannah's brother died while working as an auxiliary in Russian territory.

Meanwhile, Jews in Cluj remained unhindered in their homes until 1944. At that time, leaders such as Dr. Fischer, Dr. Kasztner, and Hillel Danzig entered into negotiations with Rudolf Eichmann to trade one thousand six hundred eighty-four Jews for looted cash. That number included Hannah herself and Hannah's fatalist husband. After much disputation, arrangements for their transport to Palestine were finalized, at a cost of one thousand dollars per Jew.

However, when the train carrying them to neutral Switzerland reached the Kistarca transit camp near Budapest, Hungarian authorities tried to reroute the passengers from Auspitz to Auschwitz. This obstruction resulted in an extended

stay at Kistarca while Germans debated with Hungarians. As the transport remained stuck, two families of Romanian Jewish descent were removed and deported to a death camp where they perished.

Dr. Kasztner was later put on trial in Israel as a German collaborator. Someone impatient with slow-moving judicial proceedings murdered him prior to a final verdict.

Hannah and her husband ultimately proceeded first into Switzerland and then ultimately to Israel. Yet for the rest of her days Hannah was plagued by guilt over having been “chosen” to survive while all others in her family were exterminated. Why she and not them? Was there any justice in the outcome?

Due to being constituted of four components shot in different locations at different times, there’s considerable unevenness of lighting, sound and photography among individual parts. With two directors of photography working independently, cinematography is also inconsistent in quality. Less than first-rate film stock was apparently used.

Virtues are present, though, as well. Laura Koeppel did an excellent job of historical research. And Ada Lichtman, Ruth Elias and Hannah Morton provide fascinatingly detailed biographical accounts.

Though not as completely compelling as 1985’s main *Shoah* release, this final installment is worthy of preservation and viewing. It’s completely inappropriate for juvenile auditing, yet adequately rewarding for adults.

Bonus features are a theatrical trailer and a fifty-five-minute combination of Lanzmann eulogies with an interview of Holocaust investigator and author Deborah Lipstadt.