

Welcoming Remarks Exhibition Opening “Claude Lanzmann. The Recordings” by Lena Altman, Co-CEO der Alfred Landecker Foundation

Madam Director, Hetty Berg,
Foreign Minister,
Your Excellency,
Ms. Lanzmann,
Ms. Coulmas and Ms. Steinfeldt-Levy,
Dr. Lewinsky,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Today, we open an exhibition that places listening at its core. It offers access to voices, memories and moments previously unheard, from another time.

Together with his two assistants, Corinna Coulmas and Irena Steinfeldt-Levy, Claude Lanzmann spent years capturing these voices, as part of his preliminary research for his masterpiece Shoah.

The tapes we are hearing here for the first time are the prelude to Shoah. They are, in a sense, the “source before the source”. They document the search itself. A tentative approach to something barely comprehensible, still less bearable – and yet something that must be told, and above all, heard.

In one of the many interviews conducted in the mid-1970s, Pauline Werbin, a survivor, asked Lanzmann: “Don’t you think it’s a little late in the game to make a documentary right now, after so many years?” He replied: “It’s late, but it has never been done before.”

And so it was. It had never been done before. As we know, Claude Lanzmann spent twelve years working on Shoah. Across fourteen countries. Over 350 hours of footage. No archive material, no re-enactments. Just places. People. And countless preliminary interviews, recorded on the small tape recorder visible in the display above. He and his small team interviewed witnesses, survivors and perpetrators.

We owe a deep debt of gratitude to Claude Lanzmann and to you, dear Corinna Coulmas and Irena Steinfeldt-Levy, for this work. That you undertook this task over so many years, with such perseverance and dedication—despite the uncertainties of the project, the obstacles in its realisation, and above all, the immense psychological strain – is nothing short of extraordinary.

The interviews and the film were clearly not just another film project. Listening to the tapes, one can already hear: this was an exceptional undertaking. For Lanzmann, the Shoah, the fate of the Jews in the 20th century, was a deeply personal subject—shaped by his own experiences of the demands and burdens of Jewish existence in Europe.

I myself was born in 1980. I only saw Shoah much later, at a time when we believed that the memory of these horrors had taken firm root. That, it turns out, was a mistaken belief. And perhaps it is this, too, that means the film, and the voices I have already heard in this exhibition, continue to haunt me.

Each of us no doubt carries certain scenes from the film that have become seared into our memory.

For me, there are two:

>> The perpetrator, filmed with a hidden camera in his own living room. Calmly, with precision, he describes the procedures, timing, and routines of extermination. Two hours to move people from fifty train wagons to the gas chambers at Treblinka. His face remains expressionless. Yes, he says, it was very cold in December – even for us! Then he sings the song the Jews arriving and not killed in the gas chambers right away were expected to learn quickly. A scene so harrowing it chills me to the bone.

>> And then the other side: the survivor, who covers her face with her hands as she speaks with Lanzmann. She weeps. Marked by what she knows, and by the fact of her survival. A moment in which memory becomes almost too much to bear.

Lanzmann's interview technique in the film, and already in the preliminary conversations, deeply impressed me. One hears in these very recordings—the quality of which is, incidentally, remarkable—his extraordinary restraint. His

interviews are shaped by a rare intuition for the other person, for the situation. It is a technique not of confrontation, but of revelation—one that exposes repressed guilt and denied complicity, makes silence audible, and demands of the survivors a labour of memory that often brought them to the very limits of what they could endure.

He does not only show what happened.
He shows how people speak about what happened.
And how memory comes into being.

At the Alfred Landecker Foundation, remembrance of the Shoah lies at the heart of our mission.

We are committed to keeping the memory of the Shoah alive, and we research how this memory is changing—and how the history of the Shoah can be communicated in ways that resonate with people whose attention is constantly in demand across countless channels. We work with academic researchers, civil society actors and policymakers, not only in Germany, but especially here.

Now more than ever, in a time when memory is being questioned, pitted unduly against other histories, relativised and distorted.

- Our Landecker Digital Memory Lab explores how digital technologies can enable new forms of research and remembrance.
- With Shoah Stories, we provide schools with curated short videos for teaching the topic in ways that truly connect with pupils, spark their curiosity and deepen their understanding.
- Last Seen makes the last traces of deportations visible.
- The first German-Israeli doctoral programme Belongings, a collaboration between Leipzig University and Hebrew University, investigates what everyday objects can tell us about Jewish life and persecution.
- We bring policymakers to sites of extermination that are otherwise rarely acknowledged, and we bring art created in Auschwitz to the public eye. And in all this, we never forget what this work is really about: the survivors – whom we can and must continue to support, in Europe, in Israel, and in the United States.

All of this work has now led us to this extraordinary source of remembrance, which the Jewish Museum Berlin is making accessible to the public today.

Its impact is plain to see: those who listen to the survivors — and to the perpetrators—cannot easily shake off what they have heard.

Such testimonies cannot simply be “put aside”; they demand contextualisation, reflection and transmission.

I would like to thank the Federal Foreign Office and you, Minister, for supporting this project together with us.

If I may make one wish at this point, it would be that the Federal Government continues to support museums such as the Jewish Museum Berlin, memorial sites across the country, and the many initiatives dedicated to teaching about National Socialism, with the same seriousness of purpose. The new concept for memorial sites is an important step; what is needed now is the funding required to bring it to life.

And I thank you, Ms Berg, and you, Dr Lewinsky, for your outstanding work.

My thanks also go to you, Ms Lanzmann. Without your support, this project would not have been possible.

It is a privilege for us as a foundation to have been able to contribute.

Thank you very much.