

LEO HURWITZ
THE EICHMANN SHOW 2015
Filming The Trial Of The Century

By Sandra E. Cohen

The Eichmann Show is not a film by Leo Hurwitz. It's a film about Leo Hurwitz (played by Anthony LaPaglia) and depicts an important period in Leo's life and work. It was 1961. The House Un-American Activities Committee had blacklisted him for his membership in the Communist party and he hadn't been hireable for ten years. This was Leo's comeback.

Milton Fruchtman (played by Martin Freeman), a 35-year-old American TV producer with an Israeli wife and connections in Israel, wanted to use the new technology of videotaping to televise the trial of Adolf Eichmann to the world. Eichmann, the SS officer accused of planning the "final solution to the Jewish Question" and ordering the death of millions of Jews, would be tried in Jerusalem. His trial would be "The Trial of the Century." Fruchtman needed a director and he knew Leo Hurwitz was the best.

First, though, he had to get Israel to agree to televise the trial. Prime Minister David Ben Gurion was against what he termed the "corrupting" influence of television. He didn't want this trial to become a "show trial" and he turned Milton Fruchtman down.

Fruchtman persisted, convincing Frank Smith, president of a small production company called Capital Cities, to work with him. He returned to Israel as Capital's representative. Ben Gurion agreed to sole televising rights with staunch restrictions. These restrictions, in addition to differing views for the focus of the filming, tested Milton Fruchtman and Leo Hurwitz's relationship.

Conceiving 'The Eichmann Show'

The idea for *The Eichmann Show* began when Producer Laurence Bowan was "doing some research into the trial ... [and] I saw one tiny little thread mentioning the producer, Milton Fruchtman. I started googling away and was interested to discover the first trial ever to be televised and, with four cameras filming, treated like a drama with close ups and zooming shots ... Every day, footage from the trial was sent to 37 countries where the material was shown the next day. It was the first time many people had ever heard the story of the Holocaust from the mouths of the victims. ..." Director Paul Andrew Williams

was equally enthusiastic about the project: “We’ve got a chance, through drama, to bring this subject back to people’s attention.”

Laurence Bowan was “even more intrigued when I discovered Milton Fruchtman had hired Leo Hurwitz.”

This 2015 enacted recreation of Leo Hurwitz and Milton Fruchtman’s story, written by Simon Block, highlights the challenges in filming this critical trial. More importantly, the film brings to the screen Hurwitz and Fruchtman’s too little recognized impact in the history of documentary television.

Finding Eichmann

The preamble to *The Eichmann Show* begins with fighting. It’s WWII and we see footage of the war. A narrator reminds us of the carnage: “September 2, 1945. The war is over. 50 million dead, including 6 million murdered Jews.” As we watch footage of Nazi’s captured, we learn that Adolf Eichmann, on top of the most-wanted list, has disappeared.

“It will take the Israeli Secret Service fifteen years to track him down to his hiding place in Argentina. On the 11th of May, 1960, a man living under the name Ricardo Klement is kidnapped and taken to a safe house in Buenos Aires to be interrogated.” Klement admits to being Adolf Eichmann. That admission is chilling.

Leo Hurwitz will try to find Eichmann, the man, in a different way.

Hiring Leo Hurwitz

A man in a black suit, white shirt, red print tie, black glasses, and serious face, is sitting in the middle of the back seat of a chauffeured car. The young, Milton Fruchtman, practices his pitch to Israel’s Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion: “Capturing the man responsible ... you’ve done something extraordinary. Tell the world what the Nazi’s really did ... only television can do this. Grant permission to Capital Cities to film the trial ... You become part of the most important television event in history – past, present, and - why not? ... Future.”

Fruchtman calls Leo Hurwitz: “Mr. Hurwitz?” “Speaking.” “I’d like to talk to you about a job.” “You do know no one’s hiring me right now?” Fruchtman answers: “Yes - Adolf Eichmann. It’s going to be the Trial of the Century. How would you like to film it?”

Leo packs for Israel. Tom, his son, at 14, is lounging on the bed: “The papers call him ‘The Monster.’” His dad responds: ‘Sure, because monsters sell more papers.’ Jane Dudley, Leo’s wife and Tom’s mother, comes in with a letter: “This says you’re officially off the black list.” Leo replies: “It’s the unofficial ones you need to worry about.” He knows.

Problems with Cameras and Judges

Leo arrives in Israel to unanticipated problems. Milton Fruchtman is on the phone: “Without cameras, we can’t film.” Turning to greet Leo, he says: “I can’t tell you how relieved I am to have you here ... we finally have our Director.” But, the Judges had come to inspect the cameras the day before and found them too loud and too visible. Leo is not happy: “I flew 5 ½ thousand miles and you don’t have permission to film?” Milton Fruchtman, the problem-solver and eternal optimist replies: “Yet.”

Leo and Milton travel through an Israeli marketplace for a tense meeting. Israeli government officials are not pleased with the obstacle. They tell the two filmmakers: “Survivors of the genocide are very often held in low regard here in Israel and the world needs to hear what happened to them from the mouths of the survivors.” Ben Gurion doesn’t feel Milton has done enough to address the concerns of the Judges. He lets it “slip” that he has NBC as a fallback network. He gives them three days to come up with a solution.

As they leave the meeting, Leo’s creative mind is working: “invisible cameras.” “That’s it.” Milton says: “We hide the cameras from view and make them part of the fabric of the courtroom.” As Milton prepares to get every carpenter and plasterer in Jerusalem on the job, a less optimistic Leo is ready to book the first plane back to New York.

Leo The Filmmaker

Work goes on to hide the cameras. Leo’s real interest is what’s hidden beneath the surface of Eichmann’s unfeeling demeanor. As Leo and Milton hold their breath in hopes the Judges will approve, Leo prepares his cameramen for the task at hand. We get our first view of how Leo approaches his filmmaking:

“Those cameras must now become extensions of your own eyes so that you can become extensions of mine. As you film, I will edit directly onto a master tape. I’m going to need 100% of your concentration. Our objective is to use images to reveal the events of that courtroom.”

Leo instructs his crew and we are given his vision for the central focus of the trial coverage; a vision that later comes in conflict with Fruchtman's own:

"I want shots of Eichmann as he speaks and reacts to things said and done in the court, feelings that he may try to mask emotionally may manifest themselves in a way that he cannot physically suppress." One young cameraman says: "You want us to climb into the box and ask: 'What kind of man are you?'" Leo responds, "Exactly."

Leo, with two psychoanalyst sisters and his own psychoanalyses, wants to know what exists in the recesses of this man's mind: "I don't believe in monsters, but I do believe that men are responsible for monstrous deeds. What transformed an ordinary man to someone who was capable of sending hundreds of thousands of children to their deaths while going home every evening and kissing his own children good night?"

We see footage of Jewish children in striped clothes. They are coldly marched to their deaths.

Eichmann: Ordinary Man or Monster?

Leo talks to his camera crew about the focus of their filming. He calls Eichmann "a human being like any of us." Yakov, the oldest of the cameramen, interrupts: "He is not like us. I am not Eichmann, Mr. Hurwitz." Leo persists, not knowing anything about Yakov or his history: "Under the right circumstances, anyone is capable of fascist behavior." Yakov responds with angry distress: "NOT I." We later find out why.

Cameras hidden, the Judges approve. Their answer comes late at night and Milton pounds on Leo's door: "Read it: 'Without publicity, there is no justice.'" Milton is jubilant: "We're going to film the trial of Fuehrer Adolf Eichmann, Nazi party #889895, SS#45326."

Filming proceeds. We watch Eichmann, his face disturbingly blank, as police escorts walk him into the trial. Count after count against him is read and, each time, he pleads: "In the spirit of the indictment, 'Not Guilty.'" There are fifteen counts in all. It is April 11, 1961. The trial of Adolf Eichmann has begun. At the end of the first day, we see copies of tapes shipped, by air, all around the world.

Leo says to his crew: "In showing this trial to the world, we invite them to ask not how Eichmann did it, but why?"

Survivors Testify

Survivor after survivor is questioned on the witness stand. They can't answer the question of why. Each recounts the terrors.

Eichmann's face, which Leo insists the camera must stay focused on, is not impassive; it is not innocent. We watch his mouth curling; or screwed up into a strangely grotesque expression as he chews the inside of his lip. What is this we see? Is it hatred?

One survivor, forced to work, describes how he waited to dig a mass grave as trucks arrived with bodies. The third truck pulled up and he tells the lawyer, his wife and two children were among the dead bodies he removed: "I laid by my wife and two children and I, I ... wanted them to shoot me ..."

Leo leaves the courtroom and goes out into the bright sun, a stark contrast to the testimony. He leans against a wall. His face is unbearably troubled. The crew sits at the table, sobered. One young man, in shock, says: "I never heard anything like it."

The next day, a woman testifies: "I felt him take the child from my arms and the child cried and was shot." She's crying. Leo instructs the cameraman to focus on Eichmann: "Do something, get close on his eyes; get close on his eyes ..."

Yakov, the oldest cameraman who had said to Leo, "I am NOT Eichmann," collapses. He, as a survivor provided slave labor in a camp: "We were skeletons covered in skin ... the beatings we were given for the slightest mistake. When I washed myself, I could not recognize my body. My ribs were like the keys to a piano." Milton wants Yakov to stop working: "No, it's important. I want to do it. For the first time, people who were there have permission to speak."

Witness after witness testifies as people in the courtroom lean forward, listening and not turning away. Finally, their horrors are believed. One witness says: "I've fallen out of planet Auschwitz and I am here because of the oath I have sworn to them [the murdered]. They gave me the strength ..."

Filming Visions In Conflict

Leo, directing his crew to focus on Eichmann asks: "What is Eichmann doing?" We see Eichmann contorting his face; touching his eye as if he does not want to see - or hear. A witness collapses; the camera is on Eichmann.

Milton Fruchtman is furious. The collapse is not on film. He yells at Leo: "I'm paying your wages, not to investigate the nature of evil." Leo begs to differ. He is focused on Eichmann, the man. The survivor, who collapsed, he says, is not a TV show, but a damaged human life. "The man responsible is right there in front of us."

Milton's concern is the trial as a whole. He wants total coverage. He yells again: "Mr. Hurwitz. Differ in your own time." The woman survivor leaves the courtroom on a stretcher and into an ambulance. Leo, with headphones, continues to direct the filming, focusing on Eichmann's face as more survivors tell their stories of terror. Milton grabs the controls and takes over.

Leo gets up, angered that his job as Director has been undercut. Just at that moment, he's told that someone is here to see him. Jane and Tom walk into the room, a surprise from New York City.

"And Eichmann Just Sits."

Tom watches the filming. At fourteen, he completely understands Leo's interest in staying on Eichmann's face. He sees not only the horror in the survivor's stories; but also, more explicitly, the dreadfulness of this man's indifference: "Is this true ... and Eichmann just sits?" Leo repeats: "and Eichmann just sits."

Leo, though, can't believe there isn't a bit of humanity, somewhere, inside. He wants the spotlight on Eichmann so the world can see his reactions to what he's hearing: "Coming face to face with the consequences of his actions has to make him crack. It has to ... it would be impossible for him to subvert his unconscious ... this is the unique power of film, is it not?"

But, we know as psychoanalysts that sometimes there is much more power in perverse unconscious defenses. Eichmann's face twitches and contorts, as he hears survivor's testimonies. We watch more and more grotesque and troubling images: a steamroller rolls piles of bodies, heartlessly, into the dirt - as if they are nothing. But, Eichmann comes face to face with what he has done with no apparent feeling. He never cracks.

Leo yells at the film image he's editing: "How can you just sit there, not turn away, not even flinch: Where are you? Where the fuck are you?!!"

It is clear; Eichmann was not an "ordinary" man. But, Leo Hurwitz felt he'd failed when he didn't find humanity in Eichmann. The fact is, though,

Eichmann refused to betray his Master. And, his Master was not first and foremost Hitler. Mostly, he could not betray the Master in his mind; the unconscious voice that denied reality, hate, and guilt.

Not Wanting To See?

Sadly, Eichmann was not the only one who didn't want to see. Attention to the Eichmann trial television footage was usurped by other happenings in the world. Journalists didn't return to the pressroom. The first man in space on April 12th the day after the trial began and the Bay of Pigs on April 17, 1961, preoccupied the media. It was horrifying to hear the testimonies of survivors. Perhaps people preferred to travel to outer space away from that reality, or to focus on another war instead.

The film ends with a narrator's voice; a warning for then and for now:

“For each of us who has ever felt that God created us better than any other human being, has stood on the threshold where Eichmann stood. And each of us who has allowed the shape of someone's nose or the color of their skin or the manner in which they worship their God to poison our feelings towards them have known the loss of reason that led Eichmann to his deeds. This is how it began ...”