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# **FINAL ACCOUNT**

*A Film by Luke Holland*



*Official Selection – 2020 Venice International Film Festival*

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# **FINAL ACCOUNT**

## **Logline:**

Final Account, over a decade in the making, is an urgent portrait of the last living generation of everyday Germans to participate in Adolf Hitler's Third Reich – raising vital questions about authority, conformity, national identity and responsibility, as men and women ranging from former SS members to civilians reckon in very different ways with their memories, perceptions and personal appraisals of their own roles in the greatest human crimes in history.

## **Short Synopsis:**

In 2008, British filmmaker Luke Holland began interviewing the last living generation of Germans to have participated in Adolf Hitler's Third Reich--not the infamously chilling names in history books, but the everyday citizens who carried out the plans made by the architects of mass-scale genocide. These were the young men and women, then just starting their lives, who became SS members, Wehrmacht fighters, concentration camp guards and silent civilian witnesses. More than a decade and 250 interviews later, Holland has created *Final Account*, a raw and urgent document that reflects, in the most direct and personal way, on the question of how otherwise ordinary, aspirational human beings took part in one of the most extraordinary of all human crimes. As Holland mixes in-depth witness statements, previously unseen archival material and haunting current-day footage, what comes to the fore is a portrait of how rapidly moral norms can evaporate and how myths and denial can fill the vacuum. No two of the film's subjects have the same response to the reality of the past. In the midst of childhood recollections that quickly turn unsettling--and their attempts to describe the enormity of what they saw, heard, felt and did in the moment—there is both lamentation and justification, reckoning and refusal. At once arresting and troubling in its insistent humanity, *Final Account* reverberates with themes of our times—examining the perils of authority, conformity, national identity and ideological mythmaking; and laying bare both the dark fog and piercing clarity of human memory.

***“Monsters exist, but they are too few in number to be truly dangerous. More dangerous are the common men, the functionaries ready to believe and to act without asking questions.”***

– Primo Levi

Eight decades have passed since one of the greatest crimes against humanity in history—and in that time so too have passed most of those who were eyewitnesses to the systematic annihilation of European Jews, whether as planners, perpetrators, bystanders or survivors. The generation who carry these events in their bodies and memories, as part of who they are, will soon be gone, and the promise to “never forget” will grow infinitely more demanding.

Yet, what of the vast numbers of everyday men and women who participated in the Third Reich’s atrocities—not the infamous criminal architects of the Holocaust—but the laborers, soldiers and middle managers who carried out their plans? Their long-held silence reverberates. Many have never spoken to anyone, including their own families, about an era that was at once the prime of their youth and rife with destruction and depravity on an unthinkable scale.

Now time is running out. But are there urgent warnings to be found in their 11<sup>th</sup> hour remembrances of a world in which a devastating rift opened up between daily social life and moral responsibility?

This provocative question lies at the heart of Luke Holland’s *Final Account*, a daring and unflinching look at the last of the generation to take part in Hitler’s Third Reich. Driven by the secrets of his own Jewish heritage, Holland spent 10 years of his life conducting more than 300 interviews with everyone from former SS officers and concentration camp workers to secretaries and farmers, from those driven by deep regrets to the unrepentant still ready to defend Nazism.

The film traverses through themes of shame and denial, of blindness and complicity, of the trickiness and the necessity of memory. But *Final Account* also obliterates the comforting cultural depiction of the Holocaust as a monstrous aberration. For the film’s interviewees recount the Holocaust’s atrocities within a flow of banal life events we all recognize—joining a children’s club, entering the army, getting a job—as a stark reminder of how fragile the lines can be between the ordinary routines of society and the total breakdown of human decency.

Even as Holland was making the film, he was spying signs of hate, prejudice and fascist sympathies resurging worldwide. This made it all the more imperative to tell these stories of how and why people tolerated being part of a vast machinery they knew to be deadly to their neighbors and fellow humans. Alarming as his journey was at times, Holland took hope from it.

“My hope for *Final Account* is that people will think about its historical importance, but also that people will think about their own place in today’s inordinately complex world,” says Holland. “How do we become aware of when we’re participating in a crime, however subtly? How did some of these people I interviewed not know they were implicated in these terrible crimes until things had gone too far? I hope the film provides an opportunity to reflect on this. And the optimist in me says these lessons can still be applied.”

## **A PERSONAL ODYSSEY FOR ANSWERS**

*Final Account* began for Luke Holland as part of a quest to come to terms with his own family history, which had long been withheld from him. Holland's Viennese maternal grandparents perished in Nazi concentration camps. His refugee mother later gave birth to Holland in Shropshire, England; but in 1952, his family settled in Paraguay, where Holland grew up in a German-speaking, Christian community, as well as amid indigenous tribes. Amidst these various influences, Holland was never told he was Jewish. The stunning truth precipitated an inquiry into what that identity meant to him.

"I was brought up completely ignorant of my Jewish heritage," Holland says. "My mother simply didn't speak about it, perhaps because she was carrying a burden of guilt over having left her own mother behind in Vienna in 1938, right after Kristallnacht, as the Nazis moved in."

Realizing how much of his own past had been hidden from him, Holland felt propelled to learn more—only he kept coming up against brick walls. "There came a point early in this millennium when I decided to explore my family in more detail," he explains. "I especially wanted to better understand the circumstances that had led to my grandparents' deaths. At first, I embarked on a project with the completely improbable aim of trying to find the people who had killed them. It was quickly clear that I was not going to achieve that. But I realized I *could* actually meet their peers. I could meet people who had also raised their arms and their guns for Hitler, people who had committed atrocious crimes. And maybe through them, I might better understand the context in which the Holocaust played out in the heart of a supposedly civilized Europe."

At this point in his life, Holland was already an accomplished filmmaker. He had made a number of lauded documentaries ranging from the BBC series about his home town of Sussex, *A Very English Village*; to the powerful *I Was a Slave Laborer*, which had bolstered the campaign for slave labor compensation; to *More Than a Life*, following his brother Peter's journey with multiple myeloma, as well as *The Journey of Death* and *Gene Hunters* about the Human Genome Diversity Project. He also directed an earlier, acclaimed WWII-era film, *Good Morning, Mr. Hitler*, hinged around extraordinary color footage of Hitler's 1938 visit to a Munich festival two weeks before WWII began.

But *Final Account* was far more imposing on every level—from logistics to ethics to its profound personal impact—than any he had undertaken before. In the beginning he wasn't even sure how he would find his subjects, let alone convince them to bare long-held private, even perilous memories. Some of the people around him told him point blank it was a crazy idea.

"How does one find former members of the SS? It's not easy and it wasn't straightforward," Holland confesses. "I also faced a good deal of discouragement initially. People told me I was bonkers, mad, unwise to embark on this. I was told you won't find them, they're all dead, and even if you do find them, they won't speak to you, and even if they do speak to you, it will all be lies and rubbish."

Nevertheless, Holland was determined to make the attempt, to see what might be possible if he knocked on every door he could find.

It is hard today to fathom the sheer immensity of the Nazi project to deport, persecute and murder Jews and others the Nazis deemed less valuable as human beings. The numbers of people involved throughout Europe were on a staggering scale; for example, some 900,000 Germans served in the SS and another 900,000 manual laborers worked just on the railroad system that transported men, women and children to the numerous camps. After the war, the majority of these people were regarded as functionaries rather than war criminals and returned to their lives, professions and families without any formal reckoning with what had taken place.

So, Holland knew there were still those out there harboring unspoken memories of the Nazi era. It was a matter of finding those senior citizens willing, and at this point, able to speak. He relied on a variety of strategies to uncover leads: “I used a network of friends across Europe, principally Germany and Austria; I trawled through every archive and old newspapers; I spoke to historians and researchers; but I also just spoke to people wherever I went,” he explains. “For example, on train journeys I would purposefully sit opposite an elderly traveler and engage them in conversation. And sometimes one thing led to another.”

Even as he found his subjects, questions lingered about how best to conduct the interviews—how to engage those who had bottled up these stories of grievous acts for decades, how to form some bond of trust without extending a shred of solace or absolution.

“There was some initial skepticism and fear that the film could seem to forgive the people who committed these great crimes,” notes Holland. Yet, Holland strongly believed that to understand is not to forgive. They are separate processes and he was solely interested in the former—and its power to shed light in places we might find unnerving to look.

“My feeling is we have an obligation to attempt to understand all aspects of the Holocaust, although whether we achieve that understanding is another matter,” says Holland. “I had many people warn me of the danger that I might go soft on the Nazis, and I carried that warning into the field and into my interviews, but I didn’t go soft on the Nazis. Rather, I came to understand the Nazi era more than I had before I embarked on this work, which was the aim I started with.”

Preeminent Jewish historian Raul Hilberg wrote that “without an insight into the actions of the perpetrators, one could not grasp history in its full dimensions.” Holland felt this in his very soul as the interviews proceeded. For the first time, he felt he was seeing the bigger picture of how a genocide had been carried out by his family’s countrymen, how Nazism and its fanatical, anti-humanist stance had taken root across the continent one young mind at a time.

In preparation, Holland absorbed the work of others who had previously entered the murky waters of Nazi memories, including psychologist Robert Jay Lifton’s seminal study of medical professionals who participated in genocide, *The Nazi Doctors*, as well as biographer Gitta Sereny’s portraits of Franz Stangl, the commandant of Treblinka and Sobibor, and Albert Speer. He also looked to Claude Lanzmann, who Holland first met in the 1990s, after Lanzmann

had completed his landmark nine-hour cinematic epic of first-person testimonies, *Shoah*. That monumental film, a work of art on multiple levels, had made the past visibly present in ways few had anticipated and set a tone for asking people to speak about the unspeakable.

Holland notes, however, that he was starting from a different era, which changes everything. “It has been 20 to 30 years since many of the best-known works on this topic, and the timing changes the context. For one thing, because many of the older generation are gone, I was talking to people further down the pay grade if you will, the small fry of Nazism, the little people, the more ordinary people. Also, when Lanzmann did his work, people he interviewed were in their 40s and 50s, so memories were fresher and not as influenced by movies, books and cultural influences. But also, perhaps my subjects were willing to speak more freely because they recognized that they and their peers were so close to their demise.”

Early on, Holland decided against the conventional approach of contrasting the voices of Nazi participants with those of survivors and experts. “I felt that by including survivors it would suggest that there was an equivalence between them,” he says. “Or it might imply that one could reach a balance between the two perspectives and that seemed to me total nonsense.”

The focus remained solely on the raw memories and their continuing aftershocks. That said, Holland hopes the film, and the larger archive of interviews he has collected will become part of larger conversations among film audiences, but also historians, scholars and writers. “The interviews collected in the film will certainly benefit from further analysis and study by those who can bring those skills to bear,” comments Holland, “even on the fundamental question of who is or isn’t telling the truth.”

Throughout the decade-long interviewing process, Holland worked closely with a much younger colleague: associate producer Sam Pope. Pope has actually known Holland since he was a child growing up in Sussex. Soon after Pope graduated from film school, the two were unexpectedly reunited. “I’d come back to Sussex and by pure chance bumped into Luke,” Pope recalls. “He very briefly described to me the film he was working on, interviewing aged Nazis, and suggested I come down to the studio and take a look at what he was doing. At that time, I didn’t speak a word of German, so I couldn’t really understand what the interviewees were saying until Luke started translating on the fly, but I could feel the importance of it. We began talking right away about all the issues being raised—and the conversation lasted 9 years.”

Pope has no regrets about devoting much of the first decade of his career to this unforeseen project. “Almost a third of my life has been working with these interviews,” he reflects. “But it’s been transformative in terms of my personal understanding of history and humanity. I think there’s a lot to be learned from the emotional honesty of the interviews, which isn’t the same thing as the factual truth. These are memories and they can be hazy or even lies. But I think you get to see first-hand how some fell into the trap of supporting mass murder not through direct action but through inaction. Today we often see Nazis as cartoon bogeymen, but when you put a human face on Nazism it asks you to think about it in a whole other way.”

Still, it never for a moment became easy to look into those human faces and reconcile them with what they had done. “I had some long, dark nights of the soul in the first few years,”

Pope admits. “I’d never heard people talk openly about mass-killing before. But it was also fascinating because Luke chose people who were so relatable in some ways—who were desk clerks and farmers, not people in power. As I watched, I often couldn’t help but wonder who I would have been if our places were switched and I had been a young German in that time.”

Much of the footage Pope worked with was breathtakingly mundane, but that also made an impact. “The revelations that you see were mixed into hours and hours and hours of ordinary, banal stories about their youth and that time in their lives, so it’s that insidiousness of it that gets to you,” he explains.

Pope’s dismay at some of what he watched was balanced by the inspiration of witnessing Holland’s persistence against the odds. “Luke is a force of nature and a character in his own right,” he describes. “There was never anything methodical about his approach. It was all very organic. There was no day that was ever set in stone; and if the day was set, it often changed in an instant. It wasn’t unusual for him to just jump on a bus to go meet with someone who contacted him out of the blue, not knowing anything of what he might discover. Every situation was filled with uncertainty. And yet, he did it almost all himself, as a one-man crew operating the camera and doing the lighting, all while very carefully navigating these tricky conversations. It was a Herculean task and his personal dedication and drive were remarkable.”

### **SHEPHERDING THE FILM**

As he continued amassing interviews and pouring through archives, Holland faced financial and health challenges that, at times, left the film in limbo. Then a breakthrough came via executive producer Diane Weyermann, Chief Content Officer at Participant. A passionate champion of documentarians, Weyermann had known Holland for decades, but as soon as he showed her a few of his unusual, troubling interviews, she was moved to get involved.

“Luke initially showed me only a few roughed-out scenes, including the astonishing Wannsee House scene, and I found it all extraordinary,” Weyermann recalls. “He was capturing something that can never be captured again. But his focus wasn’t just on the past. He was also making an urgent inquiry into how perpetrators are not born but made. The selection of his questions and the structure he had created for the film were designed to take the audience from normal childhood experiences to terrifying ideology and violence, and then the aftermath of war, illuminating the remarkably banal circumstances in which genocide can take place.”

What hit home most with Weyermann is how necessary Holland’s inquiry seemed at this very turbulent and uncertain juncture in world history. “All the questions Luke was looking at through these interviews—questions about what kind of responsibility we have to reflect on our everyday actions and about what makes a person complicit in larger events—felt massively relevant to this moment we are living through in so many different ways,” she comments. “I think Luke has made a film that is really about *us* as much as it is about them.”

Weyermann also found great value in the way that Holland had invited his interviewees to speak their final piece while denying them any shelter or exoneration. “No one was let off the hook,” she concludes. “But Luke is very intent on understanding human behavior, and he did

see the interviewees as human beings, no matter their flaws or crimes. That is important, because I think what really deeply unsettles you in the film is the realization that all humans are capable of evil acts,” she says. “I think the film will spark self-examination, especially into those things we might see occurring right now that are dangerous or immoral, yet stay silent about.”

With Holland facing a colossal editing job, Weyermann tapped the extensive filmmaking experience of two-time Oscar®-winning producer John Battsek (*Listen To Me Marlon*, *Searching For Sugarman*, *One Day In September*) to shepherd the project toward the finish line. Joining him was British-based producer Riete Oord (*Canvey: The Promised Island*, *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer*, *The Leader*, *His Driver* and *The Driver’s Wife*), who has known Holland for many years.

Battsek says that the concept of probing the unreliable but volatile memories of elderly former Nazis was instantly compelling. But, as with Weyermann, it was his first overpowering peek at Holland’s interviews that convinced him the filmmaker was onto something rare, something that could make the past feel present. “The footage I saw very quickly told me that Luke was bringing an entirely fresh perspective,” Battsek says. “Stories of this era can seem so familiar to us, but Luke was telling the story in a way that felt new and provocative. I found it an incredibly exciting—and also incredibly challenging—prospect to bring the film to completion.”

Oord has long known and respected Holland as a fellow filmmaker, though this is her first time working with him directly. “I knew Luke had been interviewing aged Nazis for many years, but when I saw the scope and range of his research it was so unique and compelling,” says Oord. “My parents were in the resistance in Holland so I’ve always had a personal interest in this era, and I agreed strongly with Luke that it was very important for us to hear from these ordinary men and women, the foot soldiers of the Third Reich if you will, while still possible.”

Battsek and Oord were especially stirred by Holland’s fervid commitment to finishing the film to which he had devoted so much of himself. “It’s quite moving the way that his family background, and having lost family members in concentration camps, gave him an intense drive to make the film. His persistence and energy were amazing,” describes Oord.

Adds Battsek: “I was super impressed with Luke’s dedication and also just the sheer brain power he put toward every facet of making the film. He’s incredibly smart but his approach has a kind of straight-forward power to it. The film is the opposite of academics analyzing history. He gives you direct access to the people who lived these events articulating what their participation was like.”

Perhaps most motivating for all of the filmmaking team was the increasing timeliness of the project, which seemed to grow by the hour with recent headlines about rising hatred and propaganda. “If you close your eyes during the film, you sometimes think they could be talking about right now,” notes Battsek. “The film’s transcendent power is that it speaks just as much to our generation.”



## **INTERVIEW STRATEGIES**

Each and every interview that Holland conducted was an individual journey. Though he armed himself with research, there was no way to anticipate who would speak openly at length and who would hesitate or obfuscate. Yet, for the most part, Holland found that the majority of interviewees were more willing than anticipated.

“I often wondered why people wanted to speak to me,” he says. “I think for some, they wanted perhaps to construct a narrative to explain to themselves why they had done what they did. I think also in a certain sense there was a therapeutic aspect, though I hesitate to use the word. I’m not a psychiatrist nor was providing therapy to Nazis anywhere on my list of motivations. And yet I often felt there was a sense in which the people I talked with wanted to unburden themselves to me.”

As Holland discovered, many had never talked to anyone—not even their own children, let alone strangers. These members of the age bracket known in Germany as *Tätergeneration*, or the generation of perpetrators, appeared to have nailed boards over the windows to the past, to all the unraveling emotions of guilt and trauma. Soon after the war, they had gone silent nearly *en masse*, until few asked to hear about the past anymore and few broke the taboo against telling stories from the time of unspeakable darkness in a kind of feedback loop.

“Many people, and I include myself in this, have perhaps lived under the illusion that this generation did not want to speak,” Holland proposes. “But I think there was more so a long period of time when people did not want to hear. I think if you had asked the questions, you’d have gotten some answers, but people were not questioning them. The next generation was not questioning them. They did not challenge their parents to explain, because who wants to know about their father’s or mother’s Nazi crimes? So, when I asked the questions, those who had not felt able to speak could do so for the first time.”

In addition to the psychological shocks that ensued—and sitting with those who chose to deny, defend and shrug off grave moral failings could be unravelling—Holland had to prepare himself for subjects who were in some cases losing their physical and mental faculties. “I found myself sitting opposite individuals, some in wheelchairs, some less able to coherently articulate answers to my persistent line of questioning,” he describes. “So, I developed during the course of this journey certain strategies to encourage people to tell me their stories.”

These strategies evolved over time. “Initially I had a clipboard with a list of questions and I quickly realized that was not the way to approach this. I had to learn to listen rather than to keep hitting these people with a succession of questions. I had to put them at ease to some degree. I learned to tell them: ‘I’m a memory hunter searching for gifts from the past.’ What older person doesn’t want to share gifts from the past? I also wanted them to know I was not working as a ‘Nazi hunter.’ At the same time, they knew I wasn’t their fan.”

Holland acknowledges the interviews only represent those willing to communicate, regardless of their motivations. “What’s interesting is this cohort were self-selecting to an

extent. I only interviewed those who agreed to be on camera, so you've got to take that into account. Others did not agree, and they might have had other things to say," he points out.

In some instances, Holland did try to charm recalcitrant interviewees into opening up when they shut down or suddenly went quiet around a subject. "I remember trying to set up an interview with a former SS man named Semit Richter. He told me to leave my camera in the hall," Holland recalls. "I relied on all my most persuasive charms and my fluency in German to take a risk, telling him, 'people like you say that people like me know nothing about this period. Now you can either drop that charge or you've got to allow me an interview.' Then I told him, 'If you don't like what you've said, I'll share the master tape and you can chuck it in the bin.' He agreed and we went on to record him for three full hours."

Only when asked did Holland reveal his Jewish background. "I'd made the decision not to tell any lies nor use hidden cameras," he notes. "It seemed to me these crimes took place in broad daylight, so likewise, I wanted the interviews to take place in a context of transparent exchange. While I didn't volunteer that I was Jewish, if someone asked directly, I answered in the affirmative. Sometimes, they would try to avoid putting the question to me openly, which prompted strange conversations. For example, someone said, 'You remind me of that scientist with a lot of hair ... Einstein, that's it, have I offended you?' and I said, 'No you haven't, absolutely not' and then broke for coffee with the subject of my Jewishness unresolved."

He also never inserted his own judgments on what was being said, no matter how ghastly or dissonant the stories. "I went out of my way to put judgement on hold," he says. "I was very aware of the door when I was interviewing and sometimes interviews did come to a premature halt. On one occasion, I was interviewing a former soldier and when we got into quite difficult terrain, his wife announced, 'My husband has a headache, Herr Holland.' Well, there's no way I would say to a 94-year-old, 'I don't think you've got a headache,' so the interview was over."

Over time, Holland learned how to swerve around many varieties of evasiveness. "Sometimes, if I sensed there was more this person had to report, then I would work very hard indeed to get to what was not being said. I would perhaps end one session talking about something uncontroversial because I was already rehearsing my return, when I would ratchet things up, put more pressure on and ask tougher questions. To some extent there was a bit of a combative element to it, but I saw it more as Tai Chi than a boxing match."

Of course, the nature of memory is such that it often comes in sudden flashes, so sometimes the most unfiltered stories emerged when least expected. "I did my research, so I was particularly surprised in circumstances where, without having asked a question, individual interviewees would volunteer information which I knew nothing about. One example of this was with Dr. Linar, a young medical orderly who saw the massacre of an entire village by Hungarian SS men on horseback. He gave an unbelievably vivid and shocking account of people being rounded up as they ran out of burning houses. This story came suddenly, it wasn't something I'd solicited, and I didn't sense he was trying to impress me. It felt to be an honest account."

Another time, Holland was packing up his equipment when former SS member Karl Hollander stopped him. "He said, 'Herr Holland, do you have a bit more time? Come, I want to

show you something.’ I followed him up the stairs— this sequence is in the film—and he took out a box and produced all his war medals. I thought, ‘What is this all about?’ But I also thought, ‘I’m not going to miss the opportunity to ask some tough questions.’ That’s when I got him to acknowledge that he still honored Hitler. He hadn’t said it downstairs and he hadn’t said it in seven hours of interviews, but now he was saying it. It became a very important and troubling scene that I expect is going to make an impression on audiences.”

Could all of his subjects’ memories be trusted? Holland acknowledges that “memory is complex, it’s an elusive and malleable phenomenon, and one’s attitude toward memory is not uncomplicated.” But that was always part of the story he wanted to tell—about how we handle the most incendiary and unwanted memories in families and societies, what happens when we try to tamp them down and bury them, and what we do with them in the aftermath of catastrophe.

Even with the careful ground rules Holland set up, the interviews took a personal toll. “There were times when I could barely contain my anger, or my frustration, pain and sense of outrage at the ways some people were trying to exculpate themselves or to lie or to construct a narrative to get themselves off the hook as it were,” he admits. “Reconciling the ordinariness of my elderly interviewees with the terrible things that they had done was never straightforward. It raised a host of issues, which I am still dealing with, in a sense.”

Always in his mind was the stark reality of genocide’s most terrible enigma: that mass killings are committed not by forces beyond comprehension, but by people much like ourselves, perhaps even like himself. “There were occasions when my interviewees said to me, ‘Mr. Holland, what would you have done in my situation?’ It’s uncomfortable to say but not difficult to acknowledge that I might have done as they did. If I’ve learned anything from this long and difficult journey it is that we are all capable of doing very good things, and all capable of doing very bad things. It’s complex terrain but at the center is the truth that we all have that capacity.”

For the producers, the interviews were sometimes stultifying to watch unfold. “A lot of the footage shocked me to be honest,” says John Battsek. “I didn’t expect that there were people living in that much denial or living with regret not that it happened, but that it didn’t happen as effectively as they would have liked.”

Adds Riete Oord: “What continues to shock most of all is that so many people simply carried out orders without questioning themselves. That’s why it’s so important to hear these stories straight from the horses’ mouths, so to speak, to see even how they struggle to explain.”

## **THEN AND NOW**

The idea that anyone might allow themselves to benefit from, partake in, or simply turn a blind eye toward acts of extraordinary cruelty has always been one of the challenges of talking honestly about the Holocaust and other mass criminal acts. But it also may be the most important part—the part that can open up insight to stop future tragedies. After all, if we are all watching the horizon for wildly deviant monsters, we might miss the very real, even mundanely human, perils in front of our noses.

Holland openly admits that he couldn't always find the lines between who was a perpetrator or a bystander. The borders between complicity and passivity can get so blurred in the fog of war. How could you know for sure which person was an ideological true believer and which had been overwhelmed by social, judicial and financial pressures to obey authority, surrendering their moral agency? And how many shadings were there between those poles?

"I became very conscious of these complex issues about what defines a perpetrator and the question of who was a witting or unwitting participant," Holland says. "But I'm not sure I could answer the question myself in many cases. I would say the singular thing all the people I interviewed had in common is that they each viewed these events from the Third Reich perpetrators' side. They each threw their lot in with the perpetrators."

From within that view, however, Holland saw certain patterns emerging that gave him a deeper understanding of inculcation. He became aware that for many of his interviewees, Nazi ideology attained an everyday "normalcy" well before they were adults. "The story of the Holocaust is most often told in a five-year period of the war," Holland elucidates, "but I think one has to look at the full 12-year time scale of the Third Reich, during which a generation of children became adults. Then you see there are incremental stages to becoming a Nazi. You had children go into Hitler Youth, based on the Boy Scout Movement, where they were singing Nazi songs and learning that mythology before they ever raised their arms for Hitler as adults."

The outcome of young people growing up on poisonous myths is again raising red flags in today's world. In the last few years, groups targeting race and religion have been blooming with frightening speed not only among the world's youth but also its leaders. "It is a source of deep anxiety, sadness and alarm for me," says Holland. "We live in dangerous times right now. I'm not sure you can put a lid on it—but what you can do is challenge it wherever you witness it, whether it's in the classroom or in political parties."

In one of the film's most striking, unnerving sequences, former SS member Hans Werk, regretful of having served in the Buchenwald concentration camp, speaks with a group of young adults in Berlin's historic Wannsee House, where in 1942 plans were announced for the mass deportation and extermination of all Jews on German-held territory. Some of the young adults are variously unconvinced or incensed by Werk, despite his palpable emotions.

"It is an extraordinary moment," reflects Riete Oord. "What is most unsettling is that some of the boys are angry that he is not proud of his actions. You see the stark challenges that we continue to face in trying to reach those who don't want to learn from the past."

Holland was also disquieted by that moment. But it has not dampened his belief that the onus is on us right now to keep trying to break down the barriers to communication. "You see in that scene that some are not interested even when given the opportunity to listen to a former SS man who acknowledges he was complicit in a terrible, terrible crime. Some remain unpersuaded," Holland observes. "On this issue, I'm both a realist and an optimist. But the optimistic part is why I have been able to do this work—the continuing hope that my films will inform, inspire, challenge and engage. The optimist in me says: we must keep educating and learning, and we must do everything we can to stop anything like this happening again."

When the filmmakers showed the finished film to a survivor of the Rwandan genocide of the 1990s, Sam Pope recalls that the man was deeply moved and left hopeful by Holland's quest. "He told us that to hear people talk openly about crimes of the past felt like a weight being lifted. It was a cathartic experience for him," says Pope. "For us, that was a reminder that there can be an incalculable value in hearing people say 'I was wrong.'"

### **FINAL ACCOUNT?**

Shocking and raw as the interview footage can be, *Final Account* also has a countervailing beauty to it. The camera lingers on tranquil, present-day views of landscapes that were previously scenes of horror in the interviewee's memories and archival documents. They serve to both situate the film squarely in the present and provide a spacious contrast to the tension of the interviews.

"If one were to run the interviews unbroken, back to back, it would be pretty hard going. We needed moments of reprieve," Holland explains. "In part, the photography of locations where crimes played out was intended to provide the audience with the occasional breather."

Adds Pope, "We didn't want to allow ourselves or the audience to ever become numbed by the narratives. Our priority was always to keep the film as raw and fresh as possible."

Another role the landscapes played for Holland was a chance to reclaim territory that had been distorted and stained by Nazi imagery and violence. "For example, there's an opening sequence in the film about the noose tightening on German Jews in 1936, and you see a sign in a forest saying Jews are not welcome here. By returning to those woods, I had a desire to give the forest back to the Jewish community, to give it back anyone who enjoys forests."

While Holland spent years chasing interviews, the film's greatest challenge still lay in what came after: tackling over 500 hours of footage to cull and sculpt. Holland worked closely with Battsek, Oord and veteran editor Stefan Ronowicz (*The Square, Warsaw: A City Divided*) to whittle the film down from several early three-plus-hour cuts to a lean 90 minutes.

"There was such a huge amount of material," muses Oord. "You could actually make a strong second film with the footage we didn't use."

"Stefan had this incredible ability to find just the right threads in each interview and weave them together," says Pope.

Adds Battsek: "The task for us was helping Luke to see always the woods for the tress and not get bogged down in too many stories and too much detail. We were looking for the strongest moments but there were very many, so the process was not always easy."

Holland was gratified by all the creative assistance he received. "I was well supported by extraordinary colleagues who have made many films before, who've dealt with these issues of choosing from large amounts of footage," he says. "And we had a brilliant editor in Stefan."

Adding another layer of haunting beauty to the film is music by Jóhann Jóhannsson, the late Icelandic composer who passed away in 2018. Known for his weaving of traditional and electronic instrumentation, the Oscar®-nominated and Golden Globe-winning Jóhannsson's film work includes James Marsh's *The Theory of Everything*, Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival*, *Sicario* and *Prisoners*, and Panos Cosmatos's *Mandy*.

“Jóhann's music is evocative, powerful and effective,” comments Holland. “I especially like it for the sequence which serves as a kind of memorial to Kristallnacht, the ‘night of the broken glass,’ when synagogues were destroyed, 30,000 Jews were arrested and many murdered, which should have served as a warning to anyone who hadn't tuned into the crisis that was unfolding. Jóhann's music serves as a kind of stand-alone artwork within the film and as a moving ode to the deported, the departed and the murdered Jews.”

As the film slowly and meticulously took shape, the title *Final Account* took on multiple meanings. “In the most literal sense this film served as the final chance for the interviewees to tell us what happened from their particular perspective,” says Holland.

Yet the title could just as easily be a question mark. “The paradox in the title is that discussion about the Holocaust will never end, so there cannot truly ever be a final account,” says Holland. “In a sense, you could say the title is a challenge to other filmmakers, writers and historians to keep looking for new questions to answer about what has been recounted.”

Pope also sees the title as layered and thought-provoking. “There was always a ticking biological clock on these interviews as we knew time was running out. Most of the people Luke interviewed are dead now, so in that sense there was a finality,” he notes. “But from the start, Luke has also thought a lot about his responsibility to history. His intention was never to make any kind of final statement about the history as a whole but to look at one of its many shadows.”

While some unheard accounts will undoubtedly flicker out as this generation takes their leave, the burning question becomes, what we do with the memories that remain? How do we live with remembrances of humanity at its worst and how do we appreciate the value of the terrible but crucial knowledge they can give us?

At the end of his journey, Holland is still wrestling with even the most basic questions, and he hopes that wrestling won't ever cease. “As I talked to so many who allowed themselves to take part in unimaginable horrors, I kept wondering—and I still do—how is it possible that people could do these things and remain human? It's not a question that I can answer easily even now, and I think it must continue to challenge us.”

###

## ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

**Luke Holland (Writer/Director/Producer)** ran the Independent production company ZEF Productions from Sussex, the setting for his 5-part BBC Storyville Series *A Very English Village*, (BBC4, BBC2, BBC1). Other documentaries include *I Was a Slave Laborer* – the inside story of the campaign for forced and slave labor compensation, which in 1999, helped secure a \$5 billion settlement; *More Than a Life*, the story of his brother Peter’s terminal struggle with Myeloma; the BBC Wildscreen, Golden Panda Award-winner *The Journey of Death*; the 5-part Channel 4 Series *The ‘Savage’ Strikes Back*; the C4 Prix Europa and Emmy entry *Good Morning Mr Hitler* and *Gene Hunters*.

Luke’s mother is a Jewish refugee from Vienna. He spent his 1950s childhood in the Bruderhof, a German-speaking, Christian community, in Paraguay and among the Lengua, Angaité and Sanapaná Indians of the Paraguayan Chaco. He ran an arts project in inner-city Birmingham (1971-76) and worked as a photographer in S. America and in Andean archaeology (1977- 80).

Throughout the 1980s Luke worked with Survival International on indigenous land and cultural rights. He played a key role in developing the UK screening initiative Docspace; was President of the Joris Ivens Jury at the International Documentary Filmfestival Amsterdam; was a founder Board Member of the Joods Film Festival, Amsterdam and has given documentary masterclasses at film events worldwide. He played one of the leads in the Amos Gitai feature film *Eden*, with Arthur Miller and Samantha Morton. Luke spent more than a decade amassing hundreds of oral histories to create *Final Account*.

**John Battsek (Producer)** is one of the most successful producers in feature documentary filmmaking. Starting with Academy Award®-winning *One Day In September*, which Battsek conceived and produced, he has since been responsible for some of the most acclaimed documentaries in recent years. Battsek’s most notable credits include Academy Award® & BAFTA-winning *Searching For Sugar Man*, Academy Award®-nominated *Restrepo & Winter On Fire*, Primetime Emmy®-winning *Manhunt: The Story Of The Hunt For Bin Laden*, BAFTA winners *The Imposter* and *Hillsborough*, Grammy-nominee *Eric Clapton: Life In 12 Bars* and BAFTA nominated & Peabody winning *Listen To Me Marlon*.

In 2020, Battsek launched his new production company Ventureland with long time collaborators Kerstin Emhoff, Ali Brown and Paul Hunter.

Battsek is currently in production on a range of titles including films about Sir Alex Ferguson, the Paralympics, Charlie Chaplin and John Belushi.

**Riete Oord (Producer)** is a producer and director of a range of primetime, high profile and award-winning documentaries for BBC 1 and 2, BBC 4, Channel 4, The Discovery Channel and Participant Media. Her best known projects include the BAFTA-nominated *The Leader, The Driver and the Driver’s Wife*, the RTS and Grierson-award-winning *Aileen Wuornos – The*

*Selling of a Serial Killer*, the RTS-nominated *Luton Actually* and the BAFTA-nominated series *Who Do You Think You Are* with celebrities Rick Stein and Amanda Redman.

Riete's most recent film, *Canvey: The Promised Island*, was short listed for the Radio Times Ethics award. Additional credits include *When the Games Came to Glasgow*, *Make Me a German* and *The Town that took on the Tax Man* for BBC 2. She is currently producing and directing *The Cut-Out Girl*, a story of war and family set in the UK and the Netherlands.

Born in the Netherlands, Riete has taught documentary making at the National Film and Television School and she is an Associate Professor at London's UCL in the Anthropology Department where she teaches as part of the MFA program in Creative Documentary by Practice.

Born in Wiltshire, **Sam Pope** (Associate Producer) first met Luke Holland in 1997 at the age of eight when he moved with his family to the same small village in East Sussex. During his studies he developed an interest in film and photography, his work included in a collaborative exhibition with Photoworks and Glyndebourne Opera House and lighting the SXSW Grand Jury Award Nominee *The Third One This Week*.

Two months since graduating with a First from the Metropolitan Film School in 2010 and after a chance meeting, Sam began working with Luke to develop the Final Account Project: filmed testimony of witnesses from the Third Reich perpetrators side. For the next nine years he worked almost exclusively with Luke to build the collection of interviewees, develop the archive with their archival partners, cutting promotional films from the footage and eventually joining the editing team for *Final Account*.

**Jeff Skoll** (Executive Producer) is an entrepreneur devoted to creating a sustainable world of peace and prosperity. Over the course of nearly two decades, Skoll has created an innovative portfolio of philanthropic and commercial enterprises, each a distinctive catalyst for changing the issues that most affect the survival and thriving of humanity – including climate change. This portfolio includes the Skoll Foundation, Participant, Skoll Global Threats Fund, Capricorn Investment Group, and new ventures – all coordinated under the Jeff Skoll Group umbrella.

Skoll's entrepreneurial approach is unique: driving large-scale, permanent social impact by investing in a range of efforts that integrate powerful stories, data, capital markets, technology, partnerships, and organized learning networks. Operating independently from one another yet deeply connected through shared mission, Skoll's organizations galvanize public will, policy, and mobilize critical resources that accelerate the pace and depth of change.

Inspired by the belief that a story well told can change the world, Jeff founded Participant in 2004. Participant is the world's leading entertainment company focused on social impact. Participant has produced more than 100 full length narrative and documentary films. These films collectively have garnered 74 Academy Award® nominations and 19 wins, including Best Picture award for *Spotlight*.



Companion campaigns run by Participant have shaped consumer's beliefs and actions, and in some cases have been instrumental in changing national and international policies working hand-in-hand with non-profit partners.

As the first full time employee and President of eBay, Skoll experienced firsthand the power of combining entrepreneurship, technology, and trust in people. His work today embodies those critical lessons learned from eBay. All of Skoll's organizations rely on the premise that people are basically good, and that if good people are given the opportunity to do the right thing, they will.

**Diane Weyermann** (Executive Producer) is Chief Content Officer for Participant, responsible for the documentary feature film and television slate for the company dedicated to entertainment that inspires and compels social change.

In addition to the upcoming documentaries *John Lewis: Good Trouble, Collective, City So Real*, and *Sing Me a Song* Participant's recent documentary projects include, *American Factory, Aquarela, Foster, America to Me, The Price of Free, Far From the Tree, Human Flow, An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth To Power, The Music of Strangers: Yo Yo Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble* and *Zero Days*. Previous releases include Oscar®-winning films, *CITIZENFOUR* and *An Inconvenient Truth*, Oscar®-nominated *RBG*, Oscar®-nominated *The Look of Silence*, Oscar®-nominated and Emmy®-winning *Food, Inc.*, and Emmy®-nominated *The Great Invisible*.

**Andrew Ruhemann** (Executive Producer) is the founder and CEO of Passion Pictures, the double Academy Award®-winning independent production company he established in 1987. The company is a world leader in character animation and is known for its many award-winning commercial campaigns, including Compare the Market and the acclaimed Gorillaz music videos. Passion Pictures also has a film and television department specializing in documentary features, which Andrew started in 1997 with business partner John Battsek.

Their first film, *One Day In September* (directed by Kevin McDonald 2000), was the winner of an Academy Award in 2000 and since then they have produced more than 20 award winning films. More recently, Passion has opened offices in Paris and New York and expanded its commercials department by launching a live action division, Passion Raw. Andrew has also launched Passion Planet which makes programs about the environment and wildlife. Across these varied activities Andrew has teamed with the most talented directors, designers and producers who are able to create engaging characters, tell compelling stories, and produce work of quality. He continues to oversee the running of the company and searches for talent and new markets for its work.

In 2010 Andrew made his directorial debut with an animated short entitled *The Lost Thing* which he co-directed with Shaun Tan, the Australian author of the book from which the film was adapted. *The Lost Thing* was produced in association with Screen Australia. The film won an Academy Award® for Best Short Animation in 2011, in addition to many other awards at film festivals worldwide.

**Claire Aguilar** (Executive Producer) is a programmer and independent consultant and strategist. She is formerly the Director of Programming and Policy at IDA (International Documentary Association), overseeing IDA’s professional development, education, mentorship and training initiatives. Aguilar was the primary programmer for IDA’s biennial “Getting Real” documentary conference. She is the former Director of Programming and Industry Engagement at Sheffield Doc/Fest, one of the leading festivals for documentary and digital media where she curated and directed the film program for Doc/Fest 2015 and 2016, programming over 350 films and working with over 200 filmmakers and media creatives. At the Independent Television Service (ITVS), she served as Vice President of Programming and Executive Content Advisor, working on program content and strategy for the organization, including commissioning programming from international and U.S. independent producers.

She co-curated the Emmy® and Peabody awarded series Independent Lens, PBS’s prominent showcase of independently produced films. She has served as a festival juror, programming consultant and panelists for IDFA, Dok Leipzig, DocAviv, the Ford Foundation, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Rockefeller Foundation, The National Endowment for the Arts, the Pew Fellowships in the Arts and many other media organizations and film festivals. She is Vice President of the Board of Women Make Movies, and serves on the Executive boards of Firelight Media and the Why Foundation. She is a second-generation Filipina American and lives in Los Angeles.

**Stefan Ronowicz** (Editor) has over 40 years of experience as an editor and has been involved in many award-winning documentary films. His credits include *Warsaw: A City Divided*, *Unknown Male Number 1*, the Oscar®-nominated *The Square*, *The Enemies of the People*, *Terror in Mumbai*, *Shooters*, *Homecoming*, *Serbian Epics* and *Dostoevsky’s Travels*.

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LUKE HOLLAND  
RIETE OORD

Executive Producers  
JEFF SKOLL  
DIANE WEYERMANN

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ANDREW RUHEMANN  
CLAIRE AGUILAR

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