

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Ken Burns on The Most Important Film He Will Ever Make

I'm Barry Weiss, and this is Honestly.

Ken Burns is the most famous documentary filmmaker in America.

He's made 35 films over the past five decades on historical and cultural subjects like The Civil War, which is the most streamed film in public television history.

It's about baseball, jazz, the Roosevelt's, Jefferson, Vietnam, Benjamin Franklin, The Statue of Liberty, Muhammad Ali, and on and on.

But of his most recent film, called The U.S. and the Holocaust, which he co-directed with Lynn Novick and Sarah Botstein, he has said this,

I will never work on a film more important than this one.

We tell ourselves stories as a nation.

One of the stories we tell ourselves is that we're a land of immigrants.

But in moments of crisis, it becomes very hard for us to live up to those stories.

I have watched many, many films about the Holocaust.

The Holocaust was beyond belief.

I've read a lot of books.

People just disappeared.

And I've had the honor of meeting survivors, so I didn't really think that I needed to see more, and yet Burns's film, which focuses on the U.S.'s role in the Holocaust.

But the golden door was not quite open.

We are challenged as Americans to think about what we would have done, what we did and didn't do, what we could have done and didn't.

And the way that Nazis derived intellectual, philosophical inspiration from ideas that were popular in America at the time surprised me.

I went into this conversation with Ken Burns, expecting to talk about FDR, about the anti-Semitism prevalent in the State Department, about eugenics, eugenicists, about immigration quotas, Charles Lindbergh, Father Coughlin and more.

And a lot of that we did cover, as you'll hear.

What I didn't quite expect was the intense exchange we had about the responsibilities of writing history, about the uses and misuses of the Holocaust as a political metaphor, and about the way his own worldview colors his work and how mine colors the way I see a film like this one.

So on the eve of International Holocaust Remembrance Day, a conversation with Ken Burns about his

latest film, about America's response to the worst genocide in human history, about the chasm between America's stated ideals and our actual reality, and about what pitfalls there are when we're drawing parallels between history and now.

Stay with us.

I'm excited to read this ad because this episode is sponsored by one of my favorite new publications.

It's called Sapir.

My friend and former colleague at the New York Times, Brett Stevens, is the editor-in-chief of Sapir.

And he's cultivated a space there that welcomes thought-provoking heterodox and practical ideas

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about how to create a thriving Jewish future from some of the most notable voices in our community.

Sapir's newest issue, available on January 25th, is all about culture and how the American Jewish community cultivates, creates, and consumes it.

Go to SapirJournal.org, that's S-A-P-I-R, journal.org, to read past issues focused on cancellation, on education, on aspiration, social justice, and more.

With writings by people you've heard on this podcast, including David French, Mati Friedman, Mayor Saloveic, Chloe Valdari, Leah Liebowitz, Dara Horne, and many others, joined policymakers, philanthropists, and others invested in bold ideas by reading Sapir.

Again, that's S-A-P-I-R, and the URL is SapirJournal.org.

I run a company called the Free Press, so you know that I believe that freedom of speech is a fundamental human right, and no American should fear exercising it, yet only one in three of us believe that we can fully exercise our free speech rights in 2023.

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No matter how loud the calls for censorship are, FIRE will always be the principled, non-partisan, non-profit defender of your rights and America's culture of free expression, because FIRE knows that free speech makes free people.

Join the fight for free speech today at www.thefire.org.

Ken Burns, thank you so much for being here today.

It's my pleasure.

Thank you.

Ken, you've made 35 historical films over the past five decades on everything from the Civil War to Muhammad Ali.

What made you decide to take on the Holocaust?

You know, history's a really complicated and at some point contentious thing, and we often repeat our lullabies to ourselves about our histories that are soothing and complementary and don't delve into complexity that much.

So the basic trope is that we liberated Europe and discovered shock, shock, these concentration camps, and that we were horrified.

But in point of fact, in 1933, the year that Adolf Hitler came to power, there were 3,000 articles in American newspapers talking about mistreatment of Jews, discrimination against Jews.

And so it seemed incumbent upon us to try to tell the story of the U.S. and the Holocaust, what our government did and didn't do, what its elected representatives did and didn't do, what the American people felt and didn't feel and wanted done or didn't want done.

And those are uncomfortable things because we tell ourselves some pretty interesting

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myths about a nation of immigrants, and in fact, we've been against letting people in as much as we've been for and what made the Holocaust so spectacularly tragic from our end of it.

And let's just be set the record, the United States has nothing to do with the Holocaust.

And in fact, it let in more refugees than any other sovereign nation.

But having said that, it only did a fraction of what it could have easily done, even under pernicious immigration acts.

And so you begin to feel a kind of culpability and responsibility for not rescuing enough people coming out of what we now call the Holocaust.

So I think it was for us an attempt to dive in and understand what the American antecedents were to that resistance, the prevalence of antisemitism, eugenics, racism, xenophobia, that reaction to the open borders from basically 1870 to 1920, then created the Johnson Reed Anti-Immigration Act that set quotas, proposed from eugenics that there were hierarchies of races that were better in the Nordic, Northern European Protestant, white, Aryan, Hitler would say, were much better and they had high quotas in places with Catholics and Jews and low quotas.

So the situation is ripe for us to be unable to accept and also illegally through our laws.

But also there's so much antisemitism in America that I don't think people realize the depth and extent that existed.

So it's a complicated subject and we also realized we also had to retell the Holocaust as well in a way that helped us in a horrific respiration, breathe in and out back to Europe, back to the United States, back to Europe, back to the United States.

I want to get in a little bit to the chasm between the perceived American ideal, the give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free and the actual reality, especially of what happened in the period of this film.

But I want to start with one of the first scenes of this six-hour documentary, which is about Anne Frank, a story that nearly everyone has heard many times.

Many have read the diary, but you decide to tell this well trod story in a new light by instead focusing on her father, Otto Frank, and the way that he tried to get into the United States, tried desperately to get the Frank family into the United States, but couldn't. Despite having all of the connections, you would think one would need to make it from Europe into America.

And this sort of launches into the theme that underscores the entire film.

So tell me about why you decided to open with this story of Otto desperately trying to escape instead of the story that we know of a little innocent girl hiding in an attic.

Yeah, well, we'll get to that.

And let's remember that innocent girl hiding in an attic whose diary is often the point of entry for many Americans and certainly school kids to the story of the Holocaust isn't about the Holocaust.

It's about everything leading up to the moment of her arrest and then overshadowing fear of the fact that they're hiding in this secret annex.

And we think we're disconnected from that, and we are not.

We are culpable.

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We had the possibility he was, as you said, comfortable.

He had connections in the United States.

He had crossed every T and dotted every I, and he couldn't get in.

And that's what the whole idea was, is that you didn't want to become a public charge.

They weren't going to fall and depend on social services at the time of the Depression.

He was going to come and be OK, and he wasn't let in.

And so I think what we wanted to do is leave our audience with a sense from the very beginning and then also at the very end, when the story catches up with itself, that she could be here.

Anne Frank could still be alive.

The point is, we're required to particularize this story in a way that we don't do.

We say six million, and that means nothing.

It's opaque.

It's dense.

You hammer on it, and there's nothing answered in return.

And so by particularizing it, you begin to also realize that it's not a number.

It's a set of individuals, and that the lost potentiality of those individuals is the great crime.

What symphonies weren't written.

What children weren't tended with love.

What gardens weren't raised.

Whatever it is, there's a lot of missing human beings as a result of the madness that we call and retrospect the Holocaust.

The narrator says sort of eerily at the beginning of the film about Otto Frank, he says this.

Like countless others fleeing Nazism, most Americans did not want to let them in.

The convenient narrative that a lot of Americans, including some American Jews, tell themselves about why the US did so little to save European Jewry is that, as you put it, they didn't know.

But what your film does is it makes the case methodically that they did know.

You show with historical footage, with newspaper headlines, with a radio archive, the extent to which Americans knew what was happening in Europe and still did not want to let more Jews into America.

For example, you show Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass, on the front pages of scores of American newspapers in 1938.

And in one really memorable chilling moment, you play tape of Edward R. Murrow in December 1942 saying this.

What is happening is this, millions of human beings, most of them Jews, are being gathered up with ruthless efficiency and murdered.

And this was broadcast to millions of Americans around the country.

In other words, you tell a story that flies in the face of this sort of accepted narrative that Americans just didn't know much about what was going on.

So first of all, I wonder how you grew up.

Did you grow up with the notion that Americans just didn't know?

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And how much of what you found surprised you?

Well, the latter question is the easiest to answer, Barry, it's just everything.

And that's true of every film.

We don't make films about subjects we know about and then tell you what to know.

That last time I checked, that's called homework.

We'd rather share with you a process of discovery.

So there's not a moment in this where it wasn't just overwhelming.

I grew up ostensibly Episcopalian.

My father was a cultural anthropologist.

He made me watch judgment at Nuremberg and particularly what sticks in my mind is still at a very young age, seven, eight or nine, when the prosecutors pulled on the shades in the courtroom and show the actual footage, the documentary footage there.

And so that was part of what I didn't get was the timeline until we had decided to do this.

I knew America had a complicated past.

It isn't always one thing or another.

We are a people embodied with what Emma Lazarus wrote.

But as the next scene after the opening prologue of the Franks tell you, there's Emma's poem and then Thomas Bailey Aldrich is saying, oh, white goddess, white goddess, and remember Jews were considered uncouth Asiatics, white goddess, is it well to leave the gates unguarded? He's worried about the hearing of Yiddish on the streets of cities and different customs and different religions and a kind of otherness.

And so we've never been sure, strangely enough, as a country of immigrants except for those native populations, that we seem to think we know each generation who's a real American and who's not.

And a lot of that has gotten us into an awful lot of trouble and continues to get us into trouble.

The failure of eugenics is, of course, it's a pseudoscience and there is no hierarchy of race.

There's only ethnicity or nationalities.

There's only one race and that's the human race.

And a lot of the ideas of democracy, of communism, of fair play, of the golden rule, as our scholar Peter Hayes tells us in the film, come from Jews who are actually without a state for most of their history and are moving around and influencing cultures in really positive ways, sort of trying to be not nationalistic, but remind us of a kind of larger human community. And that is threatening to authoritarian regimes.

And if you've emerged from a disastrous great war, what we call the First World War and are in the midst of a great depression, you are in Germany going to be susceptible to the idea of finding scapegoats and who could be easier to blame than Jews and Bolsheviks and sometimes they're exactly the same thing.

Same as true in America is that we see this influx.

We want to sort of close the door and make sure that Americans stay, the whole replacement theory that you hear bandied about on Fox News a lot is a direct steal from the time.

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You've got anti-Semites like Henry Ford who are buying the Dearborn Independent and reprinting the protocols of the Elders of Zion.

It's got the second largest circulation of any newspaper in the country.

And this is a Russian fake, a Russian hoax that is just as vile and anti-Semitic as you can imagine.

And he thinks Jews are responsible for the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and the change he detected in his favorite candy bar.

I mean, it's really irrational and there are people who believe this and all over America in great numbers.

And so at the time of Kristallnacht there's a poll and I think it's like 86% of American Protestants, 85% of American Catholics and 25% of American Jews don't want to let anybody in, even faced with the evidence of increasing Nazi persecution of the Jews in the ever-expanding Reich that's not only taken over the Rhineland, but also Austria and Czechoslovakia and etc. So to me it just, it begged for some much more complicated treatment that would understand nuance and undertow and see the ways in which Americans were conflicted.

It's often the case that when we tell the story we look for convenient villains, blame it on one person or we blame it on this thing and it's completely, we're all complicit and what it comes down to it seems to me is also a piece of paper, right?

Several times in the film people talk about how life-saving a piece of paper is that gets you across a border, right?

At the same time the pernicious ideas that promote these horrors don't need a passport and particularly the violence travel so quickly and are so infectious.

And I think we see today in what's going on that, you know, every film I've made, Mark Twain is absolutely right, history doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes and so no event has happened twice and what's, you know, the Old Testament, Ecclesiastes said, what has been will be again, what has been done will be done again, there's nothing new under the sun, which suggests that human nature doesn't change and that's right.

And so what we see as repeating is really that human nature reacting to the random chaos of events and we see patterns and we see themes, we hear rhymes.

And every film I've made has rhymes and this one, which was begun in 2015 in a very different kind of America, suddenly as we were editing began to rhyme more and more and more.

And I accelerated much to Sarah and Lynn's consternation that it was supposed to come out comfortably this fall, but I wanted it to come back out last fall to remind people that we are in a struggle.

I sort of borrowed unfairly, I think, from Deborah Lipstadt, the great scholar now an ambassador against anti-Semitism, ambassador level position at the State Department, who said the time to stop a genocide in our film is before it happens, to which I added the time to save a democracy is before it's lost.

And so I think that for us, we began to realize that the rhymes had grown so uncomfortably frequent that almost every sentence, every phrase, every image was rhyming with something that was going on, taking place somewhere in the world today.

I want to get to the parallels to today, which I think some resonate with me, some provoke me, and I'd certainly want to touch on a tension you raise, I think, between the lessons of

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this period of history, whether they are universalist, whether they are particularist. Before we get there, I want to stay on the film for a minute and talk a little bit more about the role of the media, because this was an element that surprised me as I was watching it.

I grew up, I think, like a lot of other people, certainly a lot of other Jews, hearing that the American press bore tremendous responsibility for bearing the story of the Holocaust. And there are so many facts that support that idea.

For example, 26 of the 24,000 front page New York Times stories during the entirety of the war were about the Holocaust, 26 of them.

And the Times' first story on the Nazi extermination campaign, which described it as the greatest mass slaughter in history, appeared on page five, tacked onto the bottom of a column of stories.

So I'm wondering, since your film makes the case that everybody knew what was going on in Europe, how do you understand the role that the American press played during this period?

So we can offer the role of the American media to say everybody knew.

And they did know.

And there were, as I said, 3,000 stories in 33 alone, right?

But you can also see, as Deborah Lipsdatt and others in the film point out, that where it is, if it's a tiny little thing on page six, she's saying, oh, you know, maybe the editors don't really believe it.

It's the hallmark of a war.

Right.

If it's on the front page, and all of a sudden it's somebody whose eye witness, then you've got a different sort of story.

And those do begin to accumulate.

So what you have is all the vestiges, all the traces, all of the smells that are retained from a country that is suffused in antisemitism, suffused in antisemitism.

And that's going to infect the ranks of your newspaper.

It's going to infect the ranks of the college that you maybe want to go to.

It's going to affect the conversations in the schoolyard between your kids and the neighbor's kids.

It's going to be there in the bloodstream.

And if you're reading Henry Ford's newspaper, and not whatever was the highest ranked thing, then you know in your bones how bad and evil Jews are.

And the children who are hearing this around the dinner table or the morning stuff are now grandparents or great-grandparents.

And if their views have shifted and they've undergone a more humanistic transformation, that's great.

Good ideas cross borders too.

But that's what we have to understand.

It's not at any point either of those polarities.

It's just so much of the in-between.

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And that's where story comes into.

It begins to negotiate this.

And we're able to come back.

Now admittedly, generations after the event took place with no ability to in any way retroactively save a life.

But perhaps because human nature doesn't change as Ecclesiastes suggests, and there's nothing to do under the sun, that you have the ability with a good story to change something else.

There's a 1938 poll that found that 60% of Americans admitted that they held a quote low opinion of Jews, labeling them as greedy, as dishonest, as pushy.

41 of respondents admitted that Jews quote had too much power in the United States.

And what's astonishing is that by 1945, after the revelation of the show of the genocide, this figure actually rose to 58%.

Were you surprised at just how much anti-Jewish sentiment pervaded American culture in the 30s and 40s?

It's not surprise, it's just sort of sorrow and reaction.

And unfortunately, you see that even today now.

It's hard to fathom why that's true, that once the concentration camps were liberated, once the Soviet evidence was presented, once everybody could go to the newsreels and see it, only 5% of Americans wanted to let in more refugees, that the already pernicious Johnson Reed Immigration Act of 24 limited, purely eugenics document with the quotas.

And so you just, it's painful, it's just hard as a human being and as an American to sort of think about this.

And you have Eleanor Roosevelt, who's always an amazing figure because she's right on absolutely everything except prohibition, right?

I mean, you give her a pass because her dad was a hopeless alcoholic and died in the throes of the delirium of really advanced alcoholism.

But she says, what's going on?

What's going on here?

You know, they've always contributed to who we are and made us better and stronger.

Pete Hamill in our film on prohibition said, you know, the immigration made us an alloy much stronger than the individual constituent stuff.

And we bought into that melting pot that, you know, amelazarus stuff and yet so much of our history doesn't or is often in conflict with one another.

And so it's, for me, incredibly sad and painful.

And this was the hardest film in many ways to do.

I knew a lot of the story.

In fact, our film on World War II had a fairly significant scene on the Holocaust, but, you know, nothing prepared us for the kind of experiences emotionally that we went to retelling.

One of the things I think is important in this film is you show that antisemitism wasn't just a gutter view held by undereducated Americans, who was something that pervaded the government and pervaded the State Department and other key institutions in American life.

So I wondered if you would tell me about one man in particular.

I wondered if you would tell me the story of Breckenridge Long, the U.S. State Department

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official who was in charge of matters concerning European refugees.

Yeah.

Well, let's not inoculate the American people.

They elected their representatives who passed the Prudicious Johnson Redact, right?

They elected people who appointed people like Breckenridge Long.

Roosevelt was trying to do some things and often gets blamed, and he's got a lot.

I think the film is pretty fair because we hold his feet to the fire for a kind of insensitivity or seeming lack of interest.

But at times he knows, you know, he's a superb politician.

He knows what he can and can't do.

And as some of the scholars say, he's got, in some ways, bigger fish to fry, unfortunately.

That is to say, he's trying to get the neutrality axe revoked.

And if he puts his political eggs in this basket about refugees, he's going to lose

votes where, if he can rescind the neutrality axe, which he does, things are different.

And you know, I made a film on World War II, and if they hadn't, we might be speaking German here, right?

Germans had trained a cadre of people to take over every section of the country.

I interviewed a GI who happened to have been a Jew from Waterbury, Connecticut, who basically was tending to a wounded German soldier, had been thrown into battle in the last things.

And he knew exactly where this guy was from in Connecticut.

And he was scheduled to take over central Connecticut and, you know, spoke perfect, accentless American English and knew not only—

It's like the man in the high tower.

Yes, and knew not only that the Nogatoc River, which anybody who knows New England knows flows through Waterbury, Connecticut, but also this little creek that he knew, and nobody knows that little creek, and he knew it, too.

And it was just terrifying, and it set a chill up and down my spine when I first heard it, and I wanted it in, and it's in.

So we know what the stakes are here.

So Breckenridge Long was an ambassador, I think, to Italy for FDR, and then retired, and it was a big fundraiser, we'd call him a bundler today, and he brought him back and put him in the visa thing, and he was an out-and-out anti-Semite.

I don't think Roosevelt put him in there because he knew that.

I think what happened is we all discovered that because other people, appointees, Henry Morgan Thaw and his assistant John Paley are the ones, the architects of the War Refugee Board, which Roosevelt wholeheartedly approved and had to sort of unstick it in all of the ways that the State Department tried to slow walk it through, but he's horrible.

He's making the rules pernicious.

I think if we'd live, I said we let in 225,000 human beings, more than any other sovereign nation.

If you had just stuck to the laws of the original Johnson-Reed Act, I think we could have gotten in five times as many people as that.

So you're now talking about subtracting a million from the six million, right?

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That's a significant thing, and maybe it's 10, right?

If you're pushing the boundaries and the edges of the law out of a concern for human life, out of just a broad...

These are human beings who in our country where we've articulated for the first time in human history, the idea of the rights of the individual to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, these unalienable rights to be self-evident, right?

We're not going to argue about this.

There's no lawyer's dialectic that is now going to be this.

We're just going to agree that like the air that we breathe, this is self-evident, that we couldn't do it and maybe let in 2 million, which puts a significant dent in it.

So it's on people like Breckenridge Long who raised the bar, moved the goalpost, whatever the metaphor you want to say, and then slow-walk stuff when Treasury's trying to do a good thing.

And so we're interested in that dynamic.

That's a story that we're interested in trying to tell accurately.

I doubt that most or even many American Jews know the story of Breckenridge Long or know his name, but they know this story.

And the reason they know this story is because it's their story, right?

And just in preparing to talk to you, my producer was telling me about how both of her grandparents from Germany tried for years to get into the United States, but they couldn't.

On one side, her family couldn't immigrate to America, and so they went to Cuba in the spring of 1939, and on the other, they could not obtain any visas even after years of trying because their passports were stamped with that infamous J, and all of them, except for her grandfather, ended up being murdered in Auschwitz.

My point here is that many Jews among ourselves in our community know this story.

So why is it that many of these stories, or at least this broad theme, are almost unknown to the broader American public?

Maybe they know the story of the St. Louis, but in general, many Americans don't seem to know this story.

Is it that they are not being taught it?

Is it that Americans are sort of conveniently ignoring the uncomfortable truth that would force them to sort of look at who they are?

What's the answer?

It's all of those things.

We like those comfortable lullabies about ourselves.

We're the greatest country on earth.

We're exceptional.

It's interesting that our kind of exceptionality is unexamined, right?

If you're going to be the best at something, you're constantly reevaluating and being self-critical.

You can't win in football, for example, the American religion.

The coach said, we just lost 62 to nothing, but I think our offense is good, right?

You don't last very long if you keep saying the bromides that we tell ourselves.

And we're also, I think for many people, particularly American Jews, there's lots of

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tensions at the time, which is, and all through the 30s, the Germans are exploiting it. On the one hand, do you speak up and risk hurting the people that are still in Germany, which is what the Germans threatened to have happen? Any time there's any concerted, united effort on the part of Jews in the United States or in the world to do something or to say something, they make it harder on the Jews that are still there.

So there's like, do I shut up?

And there's tensions when the Jewish community, Praskauer, who's, I think, a New York state Supreme Court justice says, you know, basically, and Rabbi Stephen Wise goes, no, let's shout it from every rooftop, let's have our rallies, let's talk about it.

But in fact, a lot of the reactive stuff, some communist longshoremen take down a Nazi flag from a ship in New York Harbor, and the Germans make the Nazi flag now the symbol, right? When a Polish Jew murders a diplomat in Paris, that's Kristallnacht.

So there is a cause and effect that people have been aware of throughout.

I mean, let's just take it away to a much larger human community every time we protested about the treatment, say, from the Nuremberg laws against Jews in the mid 1930s.

They're not talking about murdering yet.

They're just talking about, let's make it so uncomfortable that these Jews leave.

And then, unfortunately, they begin to take over territory and they realize we can't get them all out of here.

We're going to have to kill them all, and I hate to speak about it in such cold and clinical terms.

But when we protest, they look at us and they say, Mississippi, as the scholar Peter Hayes says in our film, meaning you've got laws in the South.

We studied those laws, right?

We studied the Jim Crow laws that you consider these people inferior, and you treat them that way.

You consider these people inferior, and we treat them that way.

So they based actually less pernicious anti-Jewish laws on the, you know, they defined being Jewish was in like four or five categories, and one drop of Negro blood, as the statutes in many southern states said, made you a Negro.

So we're sort of, our mythology about ourselves is at odds with the actual practice on the field in most instances.

Not all, but in most instances.

Well, that was actually one of the things I found most compelling and interesting about the film, which is you're telling a story of borders being closed to people, but you're showing the way that a border to very bad, evil ideas was wide open.

And you make the case throughout the film that the ideas that fed the Holocaust are not necessarily German ideas, they're not Nazi ideas, they're human ideas, maybe even American ideas.

You draw parallels between the first anti-Jewish laws in Nazi Germany and the Jim Crow laws in the South, and you show how Hitler found inspiration in American anti-Semites like Henry Ford and the eugenics movement, which was born in Britain, but also was exploding

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in the United States.

How did the transference of these ideas take place, and what do you think this says about American responsibility and accountability more broadly?

My feeling is that we cannot call these ideas American ideas, these are just hateful ideas by human beings who are hateful.

We trap ourselves into a binary thing by saying, this is the America's fault because we've sponsored this and they learned from our Jim Crow, they did.

I mean, Hitler admired our treatment of Native Americans, that is to say, we'd exterminate him, his word, and that we basically put the rest into what we call reservations, what he would call a concentration camp, just what you keep these non-citizens there, but there was not wholesale murder as a solution to what you do with these uncomfortable things. Is there murder in the United States by the state in the biggest and broadest sense of that word against African American citizens?

Yep, and still goes on to this day, but it's not just a one-way street.

Ideas and bad ideas travel just like good ideas do.

Our American Revolution, which is that all men are created equals for white men of property free of debt, no women, obviously no blacks or slaves or anything like that, and that idea travels the entire world in a good way, right?

Bad ideas travel that way, and Jews have been blamed for hundreds and hundreds of years all over the world.

One of the moments of the film that stuck with me is you have the writer Daniel Mendelsohn who has many family members who are killed in the war, and he bears sort of an eerie resemblance to one of his uncles, and he says toward the end of the film that learning about the Holocaust teaches you about the utter fragility of civilization.

The fragility of civilized behavior is the one thing you really learn.

Something that I really experienced in the wake of the massacre at my synagogue in Pittsburgh. And he says, these people who we now see in these photographs, these sepia photographs and they're receding into time, they're no different, no different from us.

These people are no different from us.

You look at your neighbors, the people at the dry cleaners, the waiters in the restaurant, that's who these people were.

Don't kid yourself.

Don't kid yourself.

And then you have Geister in one of the central characters of the film who was the only survivor of his family.

He then says this.

We have seen the nadial of human behavior, and we have no guarantee that it won't recur.

We have no guarantee that this won't recur.

If we can make that clear and graphic and understandable, not as something to imitate, but as a warning of what can happen to human beings, then perhaps we have one shield against its recurrence.

If we can make it clear and graphic and understandable as a warning of what can happen to human beings,

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then perhaps we have one shield against its recurrence.

Do you think we have done a good or a decent job as a society of trying to shield ourselves against its recurrence?

No, no.

And that's why among the modest things that Lynn Novick and Sarah Bottsin and I have tried to do was be part of that.

You have just quoted the last two comments in the entire film.

And that is after we've seen your synagogue, the people being brought out of your synagogue, after we've seen other manifestations.

We couldn't conveniently end this film in 65 when Johnson passes a new immigration law.

You couldn't.

You had to shoot past it to what's happening now and to own it and to share with it.

And that fragility.

Don't kid yourself.

This is a twice in the last hour of the film.

Don't kid yourself.

This is a hugely important thing for all of us, Jew and Gentile alike, to sort of grasp.

I mean, internalize in a way that isn't just the conversations on a podcast, the glib back and forth and exchange of ideas, whatever it is.

This is human life that we're talking about.

And Dylan Ruff was motivated not just by anti-black anger, but anti-submitted anger.

And they're saying in Charlottesville, Jews will not replace us.

All of that is being repeated now on a major news network almost every evening in some shape or form.

We have to say that.

And Daniel Mendelssohn is absolutely right.

The fragility of civilization, we do not fully appreciate.

And that I think the constant reminders of it help us ask ourselves individually, what do I value?

We have to be that as Guy says at the end.

We have to be some sort of bulwark against that.

Daniel Mendelssohn said, it doesn't have to happen, right?

These are exactly like us, the people who are waiting you at the der Eichler, don't kid yourself.

That's really important that these people in the CP of photographs, he said, are just like us.

And that if he said, I don't say the conventions are going to go that way, but if they say it's okay to kill grandmothers on Saturday and go to church on Sunday, that could happen because we've seen it happen.

So what we have to do is just, you know, the writer Richard Powers in his novel, The Overstory said, the best arguments in the world won't change a single person's point of view.

The only thing that can do that is a good story.

And so I felt when I learned that four or five years ago, I just sort of felt it was

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someone who had, I just spoke to some unformed understanding within myself.

If you tell a good story, if you separate yourself from the diminishing effects of merely adhering to dialectic, you have the opportunity of telling, now, now it doesn't change everybody in the broad center of things, no.

Most of the effects of these things are imperceptible and take places at the edges, but you need to continue to tell stories.

That's the way human, that's the basic human currency is a story.

Honey, how was your day?

You know, honey, how was your day?

And then you edit human experience into something coherent, right?

And that's what we do.

And telling stories actually liberates you from, say, the tyrannies of certain historiographies that want things to be entirely Freudian or entirely semiotics or deconstruction or queer studies or this.

It can be all of those things.

If you're telling a good story, narrative can contain all of that and more.

And by collecting them together, you begin to see that there's multiple ways to understand a subject.

And if you see that, then you're not fighting with somebody.

You've not made an enemy of someone.

You begin to say, oh, I see where you're coming from.

After the break, why Ken Burns didn't include Israel in his film and the limits and perhaps dangers of drawing parallels between then and now.

We'll be right back.

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Now back to the show.

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There are two broad lessons that I think Jews, not just American Jews, take from the Holocaust. One lesson, and it's the emphasis of this film, is about the importance of universal values.

And frankly, universal values that Jews have done a great deal to bring into the world.

Most definitely had to help bring into the world.

The idea that every human being is deserving of dignity, the idea that every human being is created in the image of God, the idea that we need a civilization that protects the vulnerable and the weak, that we need to defend those ideas in that civilization.

But there is another much more particular risk takeaway, and that is that Jewish history has shown that when Jews don't have power, this is what results.

And this was the apex of a long, long, long list of 2,000 years, 3,000 years of terrible things.

And I wonder if, and one thing I was wondering as I watched the film, is that it's missing a key event in that lesson, which is the establishment of the state of Israel.

And many Jews believe that that is the only way to deter another genocide, that the world back then claimed to believe in those universal values.

Jews in Germany were at the height of German society, they were assimilated, and those values and those ideals did not save them.

That's right.

Right?

You talk about in the film about how America brought in more refugees than any other sovereign nation, but that word choice is important because...

Very important.

Thank you.

You get to lay on the plane.

Because Israel was not yet established.

And I wonder, as someone who spent so much time with this subject, how you think about the two of those lessons, whether or not you see them as being in tension with one another, and where to you Jewish power fits into this story, the lack of it then, and the establishment of Israel in the wake of all of it.

As you know from watching the film, the state of Israel is mentioned once in one sentence.

It was a very conscious thing, and at times scholars argued with us to delve into things that the state of Israel had done wrong, and I just said, would you stop?

We are giving a country to people who have just had two thirds of their folks in Europe murdered.

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Just don't bring that up right now.

That's another film which you can get into, and you can argue or whatever.

But we also didn't want to pursue that anymore than just, this is what happened.

There are little antecedents, you meet Zionists along the way, you meet Golda Meir at the Avalon Conference.

There's that sort of connection.

That's not my job in that storytelling yet.

You're raising an important question, and you do this all the time, which is so important.

So my thing would be to go back to the first part, which is the less interesting to you part.

But it's all interesting to me.

I know.

I don't mean that.

I didn't realize that.

I came out.

I guess what I'm saying, Ken, is you're someone that doesn't hesitate to draw parallels.

You're not saying, I'm neutral.

No, no, no.

But a story has, stories have certain laws, right?

And so you can't, I mean, there's another film to be made about what we're now talking about.

But we did say, and it was in later edition that I insisted on, which is basically, if you wanted to be in the most cosmopolitan, most intellectually rigorous, most interesting place where everything in music, and in film, and in architecture, and in cinema was going on.

In political ideas, you would have no better place on earth than Berlin in 1930, and 31, and 32.

And then it wasn't.

And it was just like literally, as in a kind of reference to Daniel Mendelssohn's, what you described, it's gone, right?

So as you said, Jews have a certain kind of power.

And then you're saying, doesn't it, therefore, a priori, suggest that they should then have a country to center that power, correct?

I'm simply saying that no amount of stated ideals or idealism on the part of any civilized society has protected Jews.

And you could, as you just put it, you could look to no height of civilization greater than Berlin in the early 30s.

There's an incredible book about all of this called The Pity of It All.

And to me, one of the great moral takeaways of this entire period of history is the notion that the Jewish people cannot rely on other people to protect them in the end of the day, and that the state of Israel's establishment and the sort of return of the Jewish people to its indigenous homeland, to say nothing of the Palestinians' indigenous claim, to say nothing about current Israeli government policy.

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I'm saying nothing about any of that.

I don't think it's relevant.

That's not what I'm talking about.

What I'm talking about is, is one of the takeaways from this period of history that, because, as Mendelssohn puts it, civilization is so fragile, that it is essential to not just rely on stated ideals, but to also, in the very same way, that we're arming the Ukrainians right now because it's not enough to say, we protect your right to self-determination. We need to actually put our money where our mouth is, that I see that parallel back to this period of history.

And I just wondered if you had any thoughts about it, only because it's not unmentioned in the film.

No, no, no, it is not unmentioned in the film.

But I think the way we have done it is that I don't have the comfort level that I think you do, and I think that's what your role is, as opposed to mine, in being able to then synthesize these elements of our story into some actionable thing.

But I understand exactly what you're talking about, and what I'd rather do is put these things out and then acknowledge the free electrons.

And I think you are attempting, understandably and with great skill, of basically trying to essentially harness those free electrons and say, I can turn them into their own constituent atoms, and that's what you're doing.

I don't yet have the bandwidth to do that because I'm so dedicated to stories, and I'm not sure that we couldn't insert into your original equation just other people, too, who have had circumstances.

I don't think anybody's protected.

I mean, that's what the whole idea is, that they first came for them, and I said nothing, and they then came for that, and then they came for me, and there was nobody around to protect me.

Another thing that Mendelssohn said, he said that there's no bottom to the depravity that human beings can do to one another, and that's a terrifying thing.

There's no bottom.

We didn't see the bottom.

We saw really close to the bottom, but we didn't see the bottom, right?

Well, there are some distinct takeaways in this film, even if you're not hammering me over the head with them.

At the end of the film, it is very clear that you're trying to connect the tragedy of this period of history to whispers, maybe more than whispers, maybe shouts in America today, right?

We've touched on some of those things in our conversation so far, but the film basically ends with this montage.

400-word manifesto is filled with hatred for blacks, Hispanics, Jews, and sides.

He wanted to start a race war, as you said.

My first hour in office, those people are gone.

These cultures are changing us.

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We are not changing them.

Hundreds of white nationalists storming the University of Virginia.

We now know one person has died in addition to those five in critical condition.

11 Jewish worshipers have been killed at a synagogue in Pittsburgh.

A man has been charged with...

Images of go-home graffiti en masse, tapes of Trump yelling to build the wall, news clips of the Tree of Life massacre in Pittsburgh, the Charlottesville rally in 2017 with white supremacists shouting, Jews will not replace us, and then finally the January 6th attack on the Capitol.

Talk to me about the choice to end the film in this way.

It's so hard, so hard.

As I was indicating before, we just assume that you kind of go out when LBJ at the Statue of Liberty dedicates this new immigration bill, which has been the work of a manual seller, a Jewish congressman from Brooklyn who comes his first day to help change the laws that are about to be passed and can't stop the Johnson-Reed Act, and there he is at the end of his political career with Johnson having changed the pernicious thing.

But we couldn't do that just because of what was happening in our country.

We had to see not a through line, there's no through line.

We just, out of six and a half hours, there's a three minute montage that takes us from that time, so George Lincoln Rockwell, the American Nazi party, to others, to all sorts of things, and then ending out of the Camp Auschwitz, a shirt that one of the January 6th insurrectionists was wearing, and that's the last image of the film before you get to Mendelssohn and Geistern as you quite correctly.

I can't say it has anything but a kind of, for us, obligatory, but also open-ended sense of questions and worries, and they're not manifestos and they're not policy things, nor the even op-eds.

They're just, the shit is happening, and it's still happening, and it can still happen, and then what are you going to do with it?

And then at the end, when you finish a film and you sign it and you have the closing music, it's no longer our film, it's your film.

And that's what's so interesting about my conversation today is that I'm talking to somebody who has fully appropriated, appropriately, the film that we signed our name to because once that story is out, how it lands, how it's heard, how it's retold, how it's excerpted, how it's whatever is your business, and that's what makes this kind of exchange so thrilling because you realize that it's this ineffable something that is being transferred in story that permits us to have the kind of conversation that we've had today.

When I think about parallels between then and now, there's this moment in the film where one senator in the 30s says this.

This country belongs to the people of this country.

I'm not willing, while hundreds of thousands are hungry, millions of children underfed, and hordes of young boys and girls seeking jobs without ability to get them to let down the bars.

And we don't even need to name names.

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I mean, it sounds a lot like several Republicans today.
And there's another guy who says, right in 1940 or 1941, I can't remember, a senator says, I want to build a wall high enough that no one can get it.
Right, and it has the emotional effect.
Like it has, I don't know if this was the desired effect, I don't want to put words in your mouth.
The hair on my neck stood up, right?
I wonder what pitfalls you see in drawing comparisons between then and now.
Yeah, it's huge.
It's huge.
And it's a really smart question.
History has never repeated itself.
There's not been a single event that's happened again.
So it goes back to Ecclesiastes, that you've got human nature interacting with stuff.
The seemingly random chaos of the universe.
I say seemingly because our poor powers are so limited to be able to perceive larger patterns.
That's our work in life.
It's like, why am I here?
What is my purpose here?
What is the meaning of life?
This is, these are the essential questions that we're distracted by all of these grievances.
But here we are.
We're going.
The random chaos of events, the human nature, which is the same, the kind of quantities of greed and generosity, the quantities of puritanism and puritance, the virtue and vice, or venality, how whatever these couplets you want to have, they're always there.
And they're not just between you and another person, they're within you and within me.
And they're wars within people.
The idea of heroism, which we say we don't have any heroes anymore, or we give everybody that status, it misses the point that Greeks were saying, here are these gods, and we're going to teach you some lessons with these gods.
And look at this God.
He's got all these powers, but he's also got this hubris and this heel that keeps him, right?
So all of us have this, and that our job is to know thyself in the Socratic dicta.
This is what the whole thing is about.
You need to say it's just rhyming.
That's why I love Twain so much, that it's just an echo.
It's just a ghost.
It's a theme.
It's a motif.
There's stuff that's happening.
But it is still, we have an agency to make it different.

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So when Daniel Mendelssohn says, don't kid yourself, it could go that way.

It doesn't have to, but it could, and he's saying to you, stop the next one.

Right.

But I see Mendelssohn saying that, and I see a clip of Trump yelling to build the wall at an end of a six-hour film about the Holocaust, and I get a very distinctive political message from that.

Yeah.

It's not political.

It's us saying this stuff, the stuff that we watch, the authoritarian playbook is being practiced in lots of different places.

When somebody disagrees with you, and you fire them if you're an employee of the state of Florida and you just don't agree with your governor and you're fired, that's how to the authoritarian playbook.

People who are not authoritarians say, oh, you disagree with me.

Let's have a discussion.

Let's talk about it.

Let's see whether there's common ground.

Oh, Disney, we've given you favorable treatments for so long, but what you think that the LGBTQ community has the equal right?

Well, we don't.

We're going to take away those special privileges we have for you.

I was just trying to call out authoritarianism and say that, as Mendelssohn is saying, the fragility is the key thing, and the fact that these institutions are fragile means that we... Let me back up one second for you if you'll indulge me.

In the declaration, and we know how flawed that document is, but it's really a phenomenal piece of writing.

He says all experience has shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer while evils are sufferable.

It's like buried in the middle.

It's not in the beautiful beginning or the end and nobody ever reads the complaints about King George, so it gets kind of lost, right?

But think about what he's saying, right?

He's basically saying that everybody's been under monarchies or dictatorships or some sort of government for a long time because, in fact, it's a little bit easier to suffer them while evils are sufferable.

We're suggesting a new form of government that's going to take a little bit more action and a little bit more individual, civic, we might say today, engagement, right?

He didn't then say, therefore, this.

He just reminded us that, you know what, it's just been easier for centuries to just work the land of the master in Scotland, right?

Your father's been doing it, your great-grandfather's been doing it.

This is it.

Well, it's not it.

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We've just reset to zero here, and yes, we have not included any enslaved people or any women, a majority of our population, by the way.

We have not done this and done that, but the words are vague enough that when we say all men are created, me equal, we don't mean just white men of property free of debt.

As I said earlier, we mean lots of things and a lot more things.

So I just think that the storytelling is about sounding a question, which you've hit back at me in a really good way, but I'm not the guy to answer it.

You're the guy to answer it.

You have to actually respond to the narrative in that way.

Let me get it maybe another way, thinking about just the uses and misuses of history.

When I see people on the right saying that Fauci is like Dr. Mengele, or calling COVID vaccines Nazi shots, or Marjorie Taylor Greene likening mask mandates to the yellow star, I am absolutely disgusted.

It just seems to me an absolute abuse of something that should be untouchable.

And I guess I just wonder if we should be hesitant from whatever political perspective we're coming from in using Holocaust motifs and symbolism in trying to understand what's going on in contemporary American life.

Yeah.

Well, you're talking about a very important thin ice, which I think we then, after much reflection and soul searching and arguments and disagreements, said we had to skate out on that in those last three minutes, because if we didn't, leaving it unsaid, how many times the Jewish death rays are, you know what I mean?

What point do these crimes go if they're unanswered, what happens?

And at the same time, this is a singular event that we have to treat with the unbelievable respect that the singularity of that event warrants.

And so, yes, it shows our fragility and our failings, too, as well as the strength.

I think the ending is really strong.

I don't think we could have gotten away with any other ending but that.

But you're right.

What it does is it opens up a can of worms.

And does it say that you can use the Holocaust as something in your back pocket to get out of jail?

And I don't want that to happen.

And these were the kinds of conversations that we struggled over, because at what point, you know, and it's just back to Proskauer and Rabbi Wise, you know?

Exactly.

That's why I think it's so interesting.

What are we going to do here?

And at some point, I think you have to say, you know, Wise is wise.

He knows that there will be consequences to being more active and to speaking out.

And there were consequences.

And human beings lost their lives, right?

This is our age-old question.

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And I think this is what it is.

And this was, you know, we accelerated this by a year because we wanted it to come out and be part of a conversation, and it was.

And things were a little bit less bad than everyone thought they would be.

And I have no idea whether our film had nothing to do with it or a lot to do with it or just a tiny little bit or a smidgen.

It's probably a smidgen.

But that's good.

That was the reason to do it, right?

Was that maybe one person would go, you know what?

There's too much of this stuff today that's a lot like what happened then.

I don't want this to happen.

Or I do believe these institutions.

How is it that we've been around for 246 years and we have had the peaceful transfer of power?

We've had free and fair elections that haven't been, you know, challenged in overall ways.

We've had an independence of the judiciary.

I still want that.

That's an okay thing if you were to come out of being an American.

That would be a good thing for me if you said I had those things.

But again, as a storyteller, I am not telling you how to feel.

I am saying, here's a super complicated story and I will never work on a more super complicated story than this one.

And here's what are you going to do with it?

Right now we're living through a time when it feels to me like the country is in a kind of debate about American history.

And to be very crude about it, we got one side, we got 1619, which is a kind of revisionist history of America.

And it emphasizes the things that have been ignored and suppressed and whitewashed.

It focuses on slavery and racism and oppression.

And it's a deeply tragic view in many ways of our national story that contains a lot of stories and truths that many people have wanted to push under the rug.

And on the other side, you have the 1776 version of American history, which basically said, yes, we had flaws, we had slavery, but the ideas that this country brought into the world and made manifest were exceptional and slavery was something that was ended precisely because of those ideas.

And that is fundamentally a story about a word that's come up several times in our conversation today, exceptionalism, also pride.

Where do you fall and how do you understand this debate and how has this film changed your answer to that question?

No, no, no.

The film hasn't changed a thing because it's not a choice.

I don't fall in one or the other narrative, as I said before, is the thing that can bring them all together.

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It's not kumbaya together.

It's just you don't have to subscribe to one particular historiography.

And when you say 1619, you're just abbreviating a whole set of perspectives on American history. Of course I am.

Of course.

You're just abbreviating a whole set of perspectives.

So why can't you just have a multiplicity of modes of inquiry that permit you to see all of those from that to find?

I mean, I just wrote a sentence for the American Revolution, which is, this is a thing that's fought over land and representation that actually ended up manifesting some of the most noblest ideas yet advanced in humankind.

So this is a violent squabble between Englishmen that actually engaged dozens of other nations over ideas of land and representation and things like that, that also had this.

So I don't have to subscribe because the subscription in and of itself is a binary thing.

It just says red state, blue state, yes, no, good, bad, male, female, up, down, red, blue, north, south, east, west, you know, and it's neither, right?

I just came out with a book of photographs and they say you have black and white photographs. And I guess you go, yeah, they're black and white, but there's no black and there's no white.

There's only shades of gray.

And this is what makes narrative possible.

If there was a place where you could fall, there would only be conflict.

That would be it.

But there's not.

Actually, story is able to mitigate and ameliorate and inform not just conflict, but all sorts of things like psychology and love and relationship and loss and grief.

And, you know, you didn't ask me about any of that stuff, which is part of why I make films and where it is, and that'll be the next time we have a conversation.

Okay, last question.

You have maybe more than anyone else I've ever spoken to, spent your life looking at American history and looking into every corner and trying to illuminate people and stories that we've never heard about.

Where are we headed?

I don't know.

But based on what you know, where does it feel like we're headed today in 2023?

Because I'm asking you that because a lot of people have this sense that we're living through a really crazy time, right?

Yeah.

Right.

And it feels that way.

But sometimes I want to step back and say to myself, Barry, don't be so hysterical.

Everyone thinks they lived through a crazy time.

Don't be so historical.

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Yeah.

So, yeah, I used to say, you know, in the last couple of years, you know, this is the fourth great crisis.

The first was the Civil War.

The second was the Depression.

The third was the Second World War.

In which there was existential things going on.

And that I thought this was.

And that in some ways, the convergence of stuff happening from pandemics to flutuations with authoritarianism to racial reckonings to rise of antis, all of this suggested that we were in some incredibly deep.

And I really felt for the first time history makes you incredibly optimistic because everything's you've seen before, right?

It's yeah.

You've been there.

It's right.

It's rhyming.

Everything.

But there was so much about what's been going on the last few years that he's unprecedented in American history, at least.

And the precedents, by the way, are what the main topic of our conversation has been that I found myself for the first time in my professional life feeling pessimistic about the country that I love.

And I have since a little boy, I've just loved my country and known, you know, my map of the United States didn't have political borders.

It had native tribes on it because my dad was a cultural anthropologist.

So I knew all these names, the Asinoboyne and the, you know, the Mandan Hidatsa and, you know, the Salish and the Kutne and the Cheyenne and the Arapahoe.

These are names that are like the states to me, right?

And so I love my country and I was feeling bad about it.

And I realized in some ways that you check yourself, you go, OK, just a little bit of perspective, some little tiny thing that was going to happen.

Like, if we go over the speed bump, watch out, here it comes, then everything's going to fall out of the back of the truck, right?

Well, we went over the speed bump.

We lost a couple of things, but you know what, we're still got most of the stuff.

We're still headed down the road.

And all I want to do is just be have the grace of more stories to tell.

Ken Burns, thank you for making the time to talk about this really important film.

I so appreciate it.

It was my pleasure.

Thank you so much, Barry.

Thank you to Ken Burns for coming on the show today.

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Ken Burns on The Most Important Film He Will Ever Make

You can stream his new film, The U.S. and the Holocaust on PBS.

You can also get it on Amazon Prime.

And you can look forward to a new film from Burns on the American Buffalo coming next fall.

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