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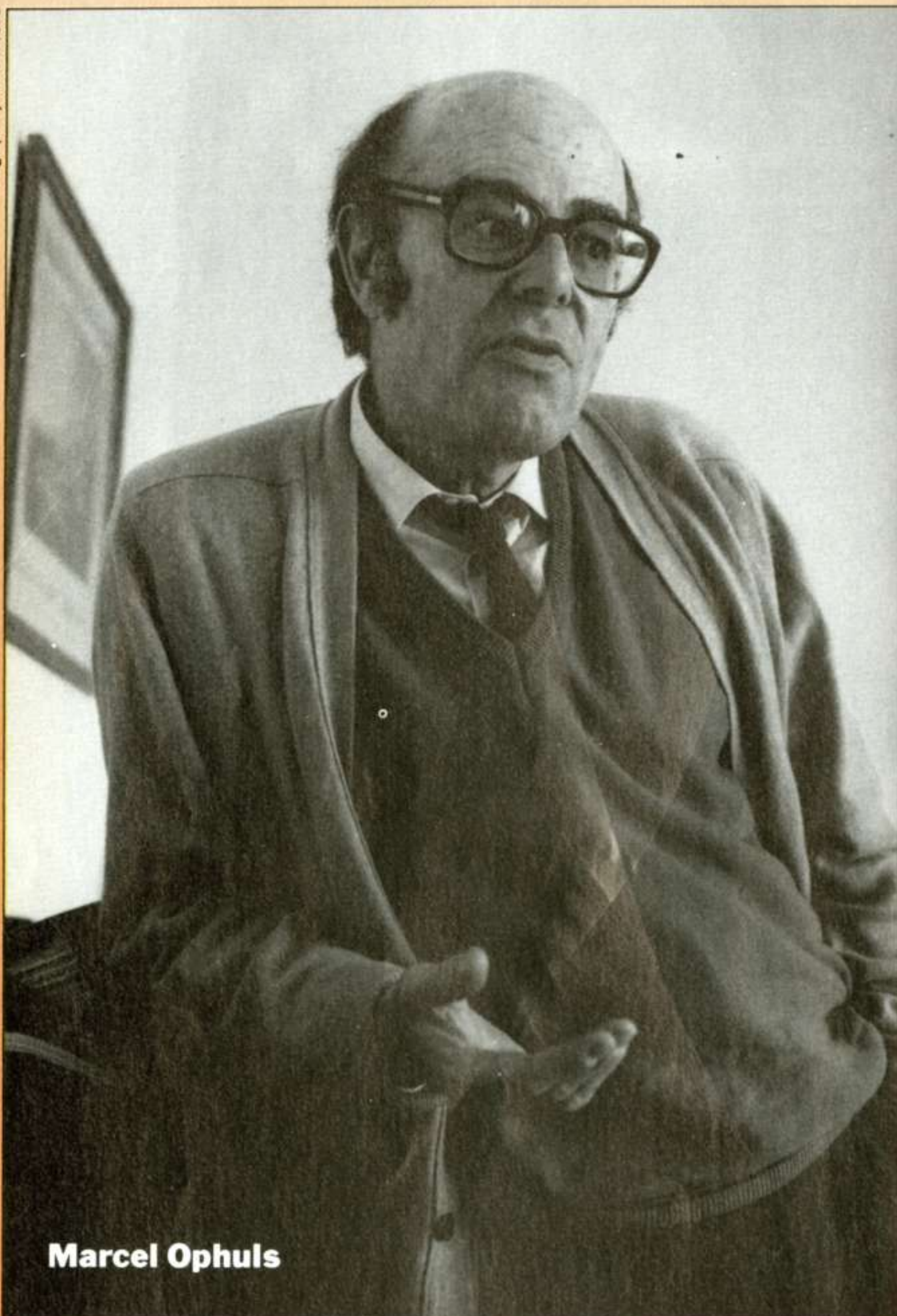
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# Joy to the World!

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARCEL OPHULS

Photograph by Marc Riboud



Marcel Ophuls

## BY MICHEL CIMENT

AFTER HIS LAST feature documentary, *The Memory of Justice* (1976), filmmaker Marcel Ophuls embarked on a new historical investigation. With *The Hotel Terminus: The Life and Times of Klaus Barbie*, he again took his subject from the events and participants of World War II in Europe.

Klaus Barbie was the Gestapo commander in occupied Lyons from 1942 to 1944, doubly infamous in France for torturing and killing the Resistance leader Jean Moulin. After the war, Barbie worked as an agent for the United States Army's Counterintelligence Corps (CIC). In 1951, with help from the United States, he went to Bolivia, fleeing French investigation of his Nazi past, and lived there under the name of Klaus Altmann for many years. Military dictator Hugo Banzer refused all extradition requests. Some time after Banzer's fall in 1978, the new reformist civilian government headed by Hernán Siles Zuazo extradited Barbie to France in February 1983. The "Hotel Terminus" was the headquarters which Barbie worked from in Lyons and stands not only as a symbol of the termination of Barbie's victims but also as the end of his humanity.

*The Hotel Terminus*, which played at Cannes unofficially (under festival rules, documentaries are not permitted into competition), so impressed the critics that they honored it with the International Critics Prize.

Despite the tragic subject matter of *The Hotel Terminus*, Ophuls feels that "there may be something entertaining, even joyful, in the fact that a filmmaker is able, with the camera, to turn the tables on the secret agents, the liars, the people who covered up for Barbie and make viewers laugh at them by ironic juxtaposition."

**The renowned director describes the difficulties he faced in filming *The Hotel Terminus*, his documentary on Nazi war criminal Klaus Barbie.**



**American Film:** You spend usually five or six weeks shooting your documentaries. How long did it take for *The Hotel Terminus*?

**Marcel Ophuls:** Not much more. One of the difficulties was that we were forced to shoot at random in a very dispersed way. We had difficult crews. We could not keep the same cameraman because it took two years to complete the film. But the actual shooting took between thirty-five and forty days.

**American Film:** There were a number of shifts in the process of making the film. Originally you thought of using scenes from the Barbie trial as a dramatic device as the circus was used in *Lola Montes*, your father's 1955 film. But the trial was put on hold and so you had to look for another approach.

**Ophuls:** The original idea had been to use the trial as a dramatic device, not the trial proceedings themselves—that's for historians—but all the hype surrounding the trial and doing flashbacks to Bolivia, to the friends and neighbors, and to the Americans who covered Barbie. We

were going to take the limelight surrounding this one rather arbitrarily chosen historical figure, Klaus Barbie, the Butcher of Lyons, and from that go back and talk to his childhood friends, his bodyguards, his neighbors in La Paz . . . in other words break the chronology. But of course Barbie's situation in his Lyons prison where he was being kept in custody ruined that idea. As you said it could have served the same purpose as the circus in *Lola Montes*, creating the necessary distance from "the scandal" of life by filming a spectacle.

I admit that if there had never been a trial I could never have finished the film. The film would have been a victim of the nontrial. . . . This is not *Shoah*. It is a film about the life and times of one man who comes to judgment, and if the judgment had not taken place, the film certainly could not have been a substitute for that judgment.

**American Film:** But the trial did take place and you still didn't use it as you first intended.

**Ophuls:** I didn't have the opportunity

since the French did not permit any filming at the trial. At first I thought that the complete absence of the trial in the film would make things difficult only on a dramatic level. I didn't anticipate the solution to this problem would in turn cause moral problems. Because I had to deal with the initial reluctance of the French to put Barbie on trial, I was put in the position of having to make moral judgments [within the film].

When I initially explain that I did not want to make these kinds of judgments in the film, people tend to assume that I am reluctant to judge Barbie. That was not the point at all. I think he's guilty as hell! The point is, that for the purposes of just putting a film together, I had to be selective in what I included and part of that necessarily subjective process had to do with my own assessment of different people's credibility.

In this case, that's almost an intolerable position for a filmmaker to be in. Of course, we know that all creative forms of communication consist of making choices, but I felt different about it this

AP/Wide World (2)



**K**laus Barbie's school portrait (Barbie's father, the schoolmaster, has his hand on Barbie's shoulder).



**B**arbie in his Nazi uniform during the war.



time because so many of the participants in the film appeared in front of the camera with their own message.

When I have a three-hour, filmed encounter with Barbie's lawyer, Jacques Vergès, it's no big deal because it's anybody's guess who is manipulating whom. It's just a kind of game—a harmless and I hope entertaining one—because he's doing what he feels is his job, and I'm trying to do mine. But when the moment comes when I have to fit an eighty-five-year-old lady's testimony into the context of the film and I discover certain confusions or contradictions in her statement that might be due to age, or to the presence of a camera, or to my own inadequacy as an interviewer, then I really become aware of the difference between an honest individual's testimony and the necessary confrontation of evidence by documented proceedings in a civilized courtroom.

**American Film:** How did your point of

view evolve as the trial proceeded?

**Ophuls:** The trial was extremely important because the challenge was put to French society to have Barbie in the court of justice. It was a matter of knowing whether the French would be gutsy enough, fair enough, and civilized enough to be able to sufficiently distance themselves to have this trial.

One of the many complications surrounding the trial and causing its delay was the French ambiguity about the wisdom of exposing the truth about wartime France. There was a fear that the unity of the French Resistance—which never existed—would be shattered and that the divisions, the carelessness, and the double agents would come under the spotlights. Former Resistance fighters especially feared resurrecting the question, Who talked?—under torture, that is, although I think this is an outdated fear. The younger generation doesn't seem to feel anything but bore-

dom and disbelief about the Resistance, and the modern consensus seems to be that almost anyone will talk under torture, so I don't see why such fears should have blocked access to historical truth.

**American Film:** Did you ever fear that the trial wouldn't happen at all?

**Ophuls:** As far as my own evolution is concerned, let's say that I got out of my paranoid corner. I was quite convinced for a long time that the trial would not take place—that the powers that be, because of Jean Moulin, did not want it to happen, and that the French were afraid of their past and did not have the political courage to face the consequences of the trial. I was very happy to be proven wrong. I am not convinced though that I was entirely wrong. A great many forces in France worked against the trial—more than people are willing to admit.

**American Film:** But what forces made it happen?

**Ophuls:** Decency. Also to some extent

Peter McFarren (2)



**B**arbie and his friends having fun in Cochabamba, circa 1970.

**B**arbie, who once would end sessions of torture to play piano for awhile, takes a musical interlude in Cochabamba, circa 1970.





perhaps international pressure.

**American Film:** Your conception of the documentary essay certainly does not see the interviewer as a distant observer. You yourself are asking questions that are often ironical and you take part in the discussion.

**Ophuls:** I have no set conception. It depends on the film. In *The Sorrow and the Pity* most of the people we met were trying to convey their own remembrances as sincerely and as honestly as they could. There was therefore no reason to put them on the grill or to interfere with them. *Shoah* is about the death camps and, when Claude Lanzmann is talking to Polish peasants who are obviously anti-Semitic, there is every reason for him to get angry and to want to interfere. And as a member of the paying public and perhaps also as a fellow Jew, I expect him to involve himself in the action. People who think he should behave more like a gentleman are proba-

bly people who think he should behave more like a Gentile gentleman.

In *The Hotel Terminus*, I am dealing with people who are mostly lying. At the beginning, that was a great handicap. In a way, making a film about Barbie is a stupid idea because it closes doors instead of opening them. If you make documentary films, you should make them about something that helps people to talk, not the opposite. Klaus Barbie is a subject that has a tendency to make people want to shut up.

The series "Columbo" is very popular in France. I myself am a great "Columbo" fan, just as Truffaut was, and "Columbo" probably influenced me in the way that I constructed this film. The principle of "Columbo" is taking Hitchcock's idea that suspense is not the same as mystery—so much so that in the first five minutes you know who the guilty person is. The rest is watching Peter Falk investigate the crime and seeing how people lie

and how the crime was committed.

**American Film:** Has anything changed in your approach since *The Sorrow and the Pity*?

**Ophuls:** I can perhaps best explain the changes by talking about the historical circumstances. *The Sorrow and the Pity* was made at a time when there was probably more of a consensus about the Holocaust. Things are now much more splintered. For various reasons—among them Israel, the whole tenor of the last decade—people with anti-Semitic feelings are much less defensive about them.

So I feel you have to come out strongly in this kind of film today. You have to with certain subjects, and I'm ready to say the hell with people who feel that Jewish filmmakers shouldn't speak their minds! When Lanzmann talks to Polish peasants and they reveal their anti-Semitism [in *Shoah*], he gets angry; when Barbie's bodyguard in Bolivia says he

Reuters/Bettmann Newsphotos



**J**acques Vergès,  
Barbie's defense attorney.

**N**azi hunter Serge Klarsfeld  
with wife, Beate, discovered  
Barbie was living in Bolivia.



UPI/Bettmann Newsphotos



feels there's no reason anymore to get angry about all this, I get angry.

Why is it that documentary filmmakers are supposed to be shrinking violets? What are they hiding from? I've always maintained that cinema verité was bull.

**American Film:** You've always said that one should not have a preconceived idea or a plan while preparing a documentary. How did your point of view on the Barbie affair evolve as you put *The Hotel Terminus* together?

**Ophuls:** The sense of discovery is not as joyous as it used to be. This may have something to do with the times we live in. As you know, I never volunteered for this kind of job. But I've become very angry; I've become convinced that Lanzmann and I are fighting rear guard actions, and we have to denounce the murderous, narcissistic indifference all around us—to denounce by showing, not by "teaching." The hell with "teaching" the Holocaust! Denounce and be angry! I feel frustration, bitterness, and revolt, and, because I believe that documentaries should reflect the mood

of the moment, it's all up there on the screen. Since I've never wanted to use "voice of God" commentary as a narrative device, my previous films relied on sharing a sense of irony with an audience. This time around, it's more likely to be sarcasm.

To me the enemy that is bigger than Barbie or the CIC is the moral relativism; the refusal to see what is specific about the Holocaust, the stupid idea that prosecutors are necessarily bad people and that criminals are always the underdog. These are the things that I find more and more disgusting . . . I feel very close to Allan Bloom's book *The Closing of the American Mind*, which attacks the position that any one idea is worth another and that there are no objective values. This is what allows the Vergéses of this world to be as successful as they are and makes it possible in people to listen to the revisionists.

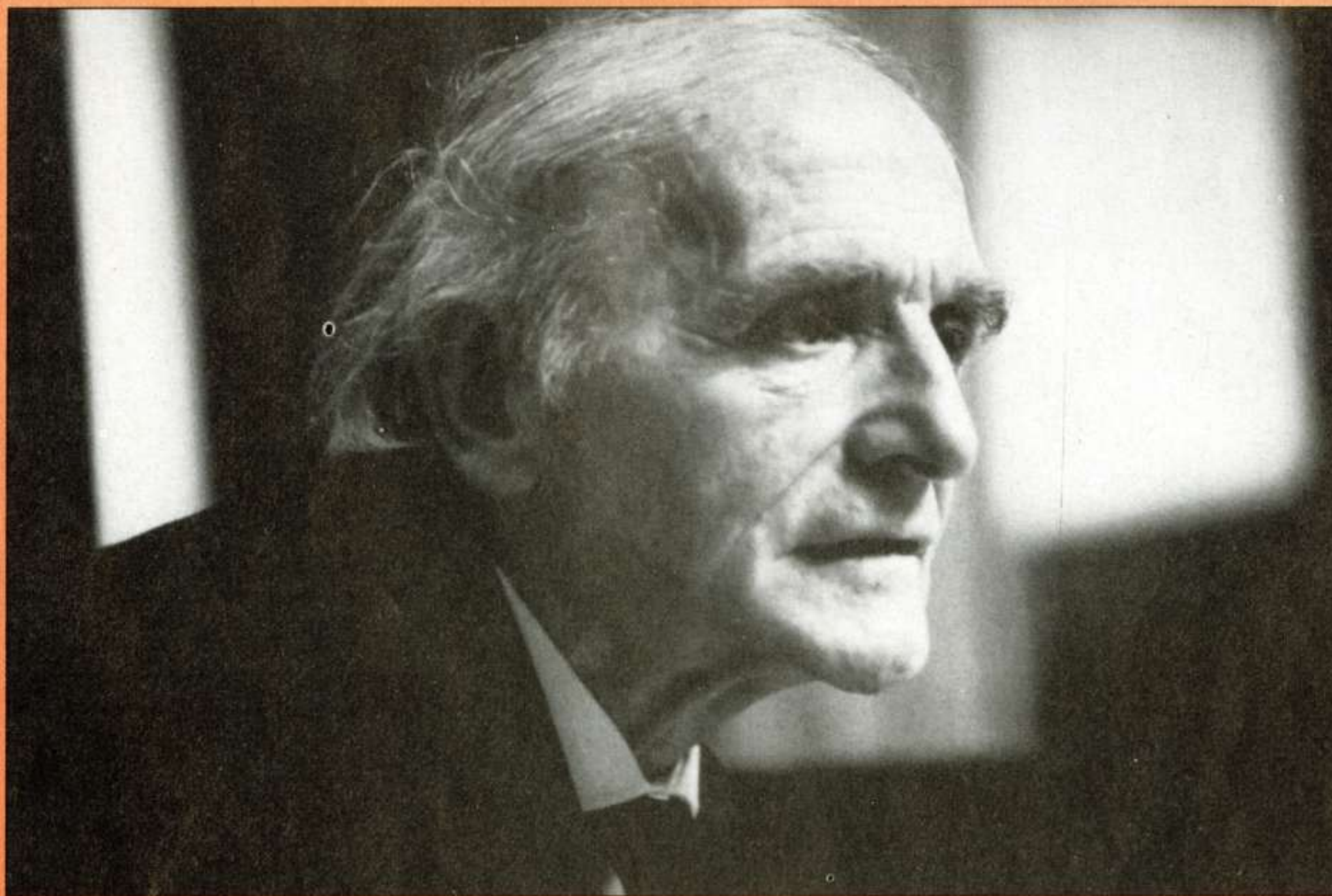
**American Film:** Do you think this film could still be seen as a continuation of your previous work? Have you become a specialist in French guilt trips?

**Ophuls:** If so, it's without much help

from the French! The truth is that I've come to feel very defensive about that. There's always that suspicion now: "Watch out! Here comes the Sorrow-and-Pity man"—the notion that this is my self-assigned mission in life. Even Claude Lanzmann said, "Ah! So you're going to do for Lyons what you did for Clermont-Ferrand!"

Lanzmann and I found that we agree on most things, including the advisability of pestering Polish peasants and Bolivian bodyguards, but he's a French Jew, and I'm a naturalized Frenchman and the American son of a German Jewish refugee. I guess even he feels that our fellow Frenchmen should somehow be protected against my muckraking, while my feeling is that such collective protectiveness is not in any country's long-term interest. Even Serge Klarsfeld, the man who with his wife, Beate, hunted down Klaus Barbie in La Paz, suddenly draws himself up in front of my camera and declares: "I have nothing against the French!" I resent that. I think *The Sorrow and the Pity* was a patriotic act.

**American Film:** How do you deal with



Marc Riboud

**B**arbie stands trial.



the relationship between Barbie and the American authorities?

**Ophuls:** Well, mostly around the Christmas tree, I guess. I was toying with the idea of calling this film "Joy to the World" because many of the interviews with the former American CIC agents who employed Barbie after the war and covered up for him take place at Christmastime. We're sitting around their fireplaces and Christmas trees somewhere in Vermont and all they can talk about is Western civilization. But there's no scoop there; no major revelation, just a gradual process of corruption spreading from the vanquished to the victors [which is no revelation at all]. I think Barbie started working for the Allies before 1947.

If you ask me, those former American secret service agents who were willing to talk to us about eating bratwurst with Klaus Barbie and his family in Augsburg [location of CIC "safe house"] in the good old days are carrying out some mysterious assignments—perhaps self-imposed, but more likely not—of preventing media attention from


expanding sideways, and more particularly upwards. Especially upwards! . . . John J. McCloy, for instance, who was U.S. High Commissioner in Germany when Barbie was sent down "the Rat Line" [the Nazi escape route] to Bolivia, refuses he says, "to philosophize about Nuremberg." I understand that in Washington he's known as the "Godfather of the American Establishment." Joy to the world. . . .

**American Film:** In the film there is no final truth.

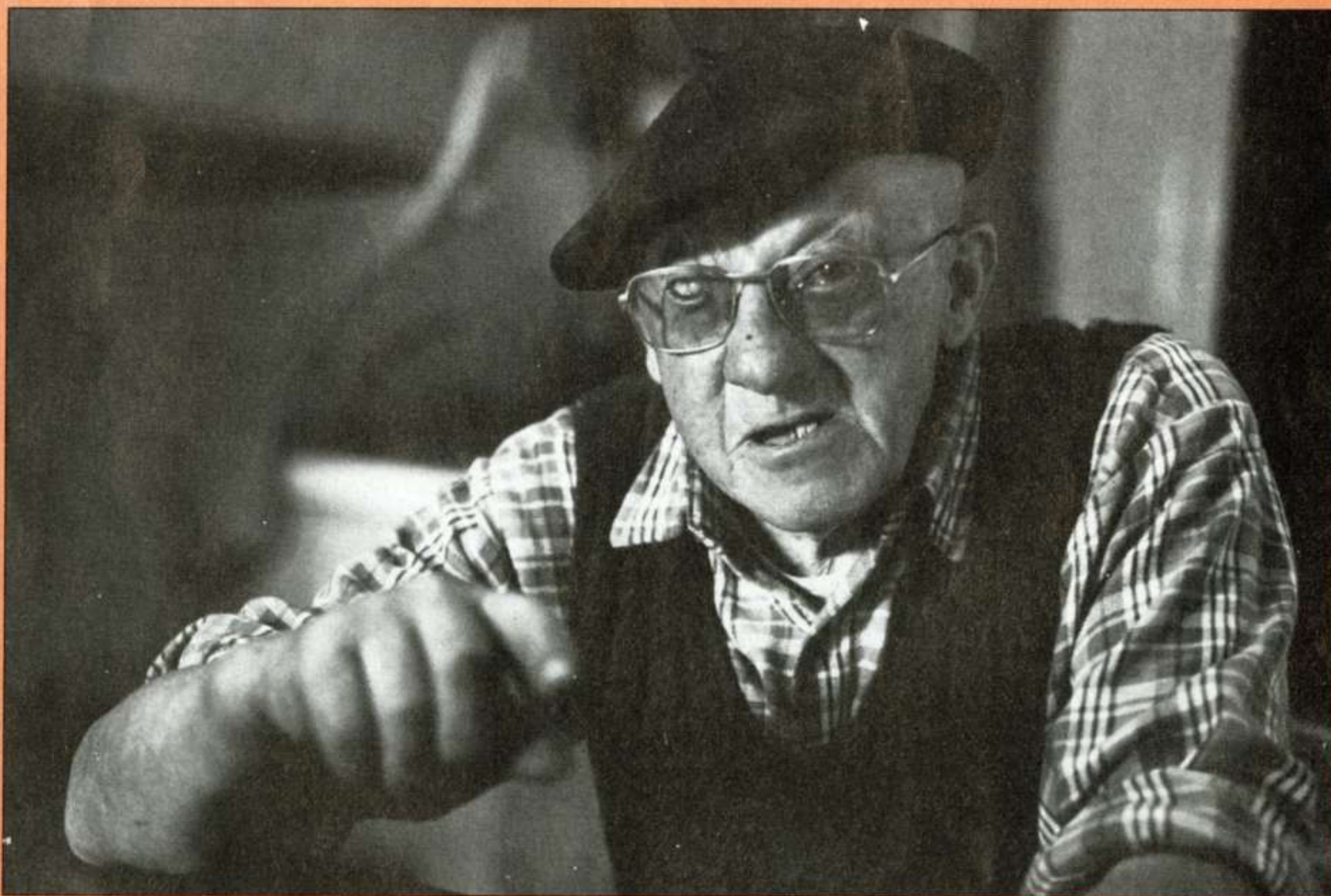
**Ophuls:** Because I don't know what the truth is about in this case and I don't think anybody does. Barbie probably knows! Some people expected him to speak out. Others were afraid of it. Others tried to prevent it and prevent the trial from taking place because they were afraid of revelations. No trial of such complicated events, of such tremendous crimes, of such crucial parts of the history of our time can give you the answer. What it can do is give you a decent sense of what human justice should be about. And this I think is what the French have done, and it is to their

great honor because it was not easy. It was an act of collective courage.

**American Film:** *The Memory of Justice* and *The Hotel Terminus* both deal with the law courts. Is this a coincidence, or have you a special fascination with the law?

**Ophuls:** My father said that there were two careers he did not want me to take up: career officer and lawyer. I always sympathized about his judgment on the first one, but I never quite understood what he had against lawyers. I am very interested in the law. It makes a good film subject: look at Billy Wilder, Fritz Lang, Hitchcock, Preminger . . . Trials are dramas because, like tragedy and comedy, they have to do with winning and losing — the just and the unjust. Law is about how society tries to make life less random, less chaotic. There is no art in chaos. This is one of the few areas in which my father was wrong. 

*Michel Ciment is on the editorial board of Positif. He has written Le Dossier Rosi and Jerry Schatzberg: From Photography to Cinema.*



Marc Riboud

**J**ulien Favet is interviewed in *The Hotel Terminus*. At age twenty-four, he was a witness to Barbie's rounding up of children for deportation to concentration camps.