

POLES APART: IN FILM AS IN LIFE

By Ralph Seliger

Katyn, the most recent work of the great Polish filmmaker Andrzej Wajda and a finalist for the Best Foreign Language Oscar in 2008, was held over for a month in its run at New York's Film Forum, the city's premiere art house. It depicts the Soviet murder of thousands of captive Polish army officers during the spring of 1940, and reverberations of the massacre's aftermath several years later.

During the war, the Nazis and Soviets fought a propaganda battle, accusing each other of the murders. There came to be dire consequences, in some instances fatal, for Poles who insisted on the truth after the war, as to who was really responsible for this atrocity.

Poland, a medium-sized country of approximately 30 million, mobilized a million men under arms when Nazi Germany struck on Sept. 1, 1939. The film opens on Sept. 17, with refugees fleeing the Germans meeting others running in the opposite direction from Soviet forces. Stalin's non-aggression pact with Hitler had sealed Poland's fate.

The filmmaker's father was among the victims at Katyn, a forested area near Smolensk, deep within Russia. This mass crime is so obscured amidst larger crimes that soon eclipsed it, that even the film and its promotional material vary in the number of victims cited: 12,000, 15,000, and 22,000. The variation may reflect the fact that some thousands of civilians—including intellectuals, professionals, clergymen and family members of the officers—were also executed by the NKVD in a number of prisons and killing fields aside from Katyn.

Wajda was a protege of Alexander Ford, a Polish Jew who headed Polish film productions in the immediate post-World War II period. Ford (who had renamed himself in honour of the American film-making icon, John Ford) was obedient to the Communist

regime's propaganda needs—as he had to be, to make films at that time. One of his efforts, *Border Street*, was strikingly “pro-Jewish” in its sympathetic depiction of the Jewish plight in the Warsaw Ghetto. It even features the saintliness of a pious old Jew—despite the Stalinist regime's militant atheism; it also highlights the fighting spirit of younger Jews (including one child) who resist with weapons in hand.

Border Street's production values, including battle scenes and plot lines, are extremely poor, undoubtedly reflecting both a limited budget and political requirements for preachy dialogue. Jews were visibly prominent in the new Communist state. The film as a propaganda tool proclaimed the need for Jews and non-Jews in Poland to work together to build a new progressive order; it emphasized that they faced a common Nazi foe during the war. Anti-Semitism, whether exhibited by Nazis or by ordinary Poles, is explicitly reviled in *Border Street*.

Stalin, like Hitler, his one-time ally, was a film buff who avidly screened films in private. Ford is reported to have been told in no uncertain terms by Stalin that *Border Street* was “too Jewish.” But it was not until 1968 that Ford was ousted from his job and from Poland during the anti-Jewish purges of that year. He lived in Israel, Denmark and the U.S. afterwards, making two films that were not well received before taking his own life at a Florida hotel in 1980.

By contrast, Wajda has had a long and illustrious career creating films of artistic note even during the Communist era. This particular film, *Katyn*, was somewhat disjointed. Postwar segments introduced characters who were hard to place in the story, at least for this non-Polish speaker.

What struck me as a Jewish film viewer is that there is nothing in *Katyn*, not even the dominant scenes of wartime and postwar Krakow, that indicates anything



Jewish. Yet scholarly research has identified 231 Polish-Jewish officers murdered at Katyn, and a couple of hundred more Jews (officers and civilians) in the wider killings carried out by the NKVD at that time.

By this I do not mean to argue that there's anything intentionally anti-Jewish in Wajda's work. Several of his films have Jewish characters who figure positively. But this work reflects what was a fact in wartime Poland: that the struggles of Catholic Poles and of Jews were of a completely different order. They suffered separately (especially after most Jews were ghettoized), even to the extent that Warsaw was the site of two totally separate anti-Nazi uprisings—the revolt of the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto in the spring of 1943, and the general Polish rebellion in the summer of 1944. Jews captured during the former event were doomed whether they were fighters or not. The Polish freedom fighters of 1944 were permitted to surrender to the Germans after a prolonged battle (depicted cinematically in Wajda's *Kanal*) and incarcerated as prisoners of war.

The Polish underground rebelled in Warsaw when Soviet forces were virtually at the city's gates. Yet Stalin ordered his armies to halt to allow the Germans to eliminate their ostensible ally, a fighting force loyal to the Polish government in exile in London.

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through me. And I could sense that troublesome somebody inside me, grinding his teeth and clenching his fists" (79).

Khirbet Khizeh became a best-seller in Israel and in 1964 was included in the high school curriculum, so it's surprising that an English translation has not appeared until now. Yizhar is also the author of a thousand-plus-page novel called *Days of Tziklag*, also about the 1948 war. He died three

years ago.

The translation seems graceful enough to this non-Hebrew speaker, but it doesn't square with the editor's praise of Yizhar as one of the great Hebrew poets.

The Israeli reviews are very concerned that we not take this novella in the wrong light, which apparently means granting it some extraordinary truth-telling power—a power which fiction just doesn't have. The existence of this work does not cast

a shadow over the State of Israel: history does that. The wrongs that Israel did in its struggle to establish itself will be judged more lightly than the wrongs it has done for so long as a secure and powerful state. *Khirbet Khizeh* is a novel that is filled with ironies. The major irony can also be found in the recent film *Waltz With Bashir*: oppressors who insist on thinking of themselves as victims. But isn't this the tragedy of Israel? ♦

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a leadership role in the National Coordinating Committee (later known as the National Refugee Service), a coalition of 18 social service agencies dedicated to bringing refugees from Hitler into the U.S. and assisting them in adjusting to their new lives. With Razovsky as Executive Director, it expanded to 800 employees and became the second largest social service agency in the U.S. Knowing that immigrants often faced discrimination and neglect in the U.S., Razovsky wrote primers to advise them of their rights and guide them in becoming citizens.

Since the U.S. would not liberalize its restrictive immigration laws, efforts were made to find havens in Latin America. In 1939, such an opportunity arose. The ship *St. Louis* departed Germany for Cuba, carrying 930 German Jewish refugees. Cuba reneged on its promise to admit them, despite heroic efforts by Razovsky and other immigrant advocates within the American Jewish community. The ship was sent back to Europe, where most of the Jewish passengers perished. However, in a similar situation the following year, the results were different. When the *Quanza* was turned away from Mexico, the majority of refugees received asylum in the U.S. Razovsky, acting in concert with a Christian refugee aid organization, won entry for the refugees by guaranteeing their financial support. Unfortunately, failures outnumbered successes. An attempt by Razovsky and others to bring

100,000 Jewish refugees (later scaled back to 30,000) from Italy to the Dominican Republic collapsed, due to Italy's entrance into the war on the side of Germany. Although only 500 arrived in the Dominican Republic, it was Razovsky's National Refugee Service that sustained them.

In 1943 Razovsky resigned from the National Refugee Service due to a reorganization that reduced her role. In 1944, she joined the American Joint Distribution Committee, where she continued her rescue and relief efforts. Stationed in Paris after the war, she assisted survivors in locating their relatives and provided emergency relief to refugees. She helped bring Jewish children out of the liberated concentration camps into havens in Western Europe, and aided in the rehabilitation and placement of other homeless Jews. She contin-

ued to insist that the U.S. admit Jewish refugees, but it was not until the early 50s that her efforts came to fruition.

Between the late 1950s and early 1960s, Razovsky continued her lifelong mission to help Jewish immigrants as a representative of HIAS (the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Service), facilitating the relocation of Hungarian and Egyptian Jewish refugees to South America. In her later years she lived in Mississippi and Texas with her husband, a doctor for the Veteran's Administration, and participated in the civil rights struggle.

Razovsky is one of a select group of idealistic middle-class Jewish women coming of age during the Progressive Era (1900-1920) who devoted their lives to serving the Jewish community and securing universal human rights. ♦

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Six million Polish citizens perished during World War II—three million Catholic Poles and three million Jews. The non-Jewish death toll was over ten percent of the population of Poland; the Jewish death toll was over 90 percent of Poland's Jewish population.

Yehuda Bauer, a renowned Israeli Holocaust historian who is conscientious in respectfully analyzing the historic disasters suffered by a variety of peoples, explicitly characterizes the Polish experience in World War II as a species of genocide. The Nazis intended to reduce the Poles to a nation of

semi-literate peasants and manual laborers serving the Third Reich. Polish intellectuals and professionals were imprisoned and murdered in great numbers to deprive the Poles of independent-minded leadership.

One of Wajda's characters is a university professor summoned with the rest of the faculty to hear a tirade by a Nazi official who then arrests and herds them *en masse* into trucks to be carted off to a concentration camp, where he dies. But non-Jewish Poles as a "race," as the Nazis regarded them, were meant to be enslaved rather than exterminated—the latter obviously being the fate intended for the Jews. ♦