THE CASUALTY OF JEWISH-POLISH POLEMICS: 
REVISITING ANDRZEJ WAJDA’S KORCZAK 
(1990)

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Emblematic of Wajda’s later career is Korczak (1990), one of the most important European pictures about the Holocaust.

Steven Spielberg¹

More interesting than the issue of Wajda’s alleged anti-Semitism is the question of Korczak’s martyrdom. East European Jews have suffered a posthumous violation for their supposed passivity in the face of the Nazi death machine. Why then should Korczak be exalted for leading his lambs to the slaughter? It is, I believe, because the fate of the Orphan’s Home hypostatizes the extremity of the Jewish situation — the innocence of the victims, their utter abandonment, their merciless fate. In the face of annihilation, Janusz Korczak’ tenderness is a terrifying reproach. He is the father who did not exist.

J. Hoberman²

¹ S. Spielberg, “Mr. Steven Spielberg’s Support Letter for Poland’s Andrzej Wajda,” Dialogue & Universalism 2000, no. 9–10, p. 15.

Andrzej Wajda produced a number of films dealing with the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish relationships. His often proclaimed ambition had been to reconcile Poles and Jews. The scriptwriter of Korczak, Agnieszka Holland, explained that this was Wajda’s “obsession, the guilt.” Given the above, it should come as no surprise that he chose the story of Korczak as his first film after the 1989 return of democracy in Poland.

“Everything I made after Danton, I consider films of wasted opportunities,” claimed Wajda, explaining the mixed public and critical reactions to some of his films made between 1983 and 1995. Korczak (1990), this “casualty of Jewish-Polish polemics” — as Lawrence Baron accurately describes the film, is a perfect example. It portrays a figure of great importance for both Polish and Jewish cultures — Dr. Janusz Korczak (Henryk Goldszmit, 1878–1942), a famous writer, a well-known pediatrician, and a devoted pedagogue who in his writings and in practice always stressed the dignity of childhood. On August 6, 1942, he marched in the Warsaw Ghetto to the Umschlagplatz with two hundred of “his orphans” from a Jewish orphanage. They all died in the gas chamber of Treblinka.

1.

Janusz Korczak’s biography belongs to one of the oldest and the most prestigious projects in postwar Polish cinema. Alina Madej quotes an annual report from 1946 submitted by Film Polski to the Ministry of Information and Propaganda stating that they considered 170 projects, rejecting 81, and asked for further work on 20

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6 T. Lubelski, “Wajda: albo Pana Tadeusza albo Panę Nikt,” Kino 1995, no. 2, p. 9. At the beginning of the 1990s, when Wajda could freely portray Korczak’s biography on the screen, Polish audiences and critics alike seemed to have grown tired of history, politics, and national martyrdom. As a result, Wajda’s film, an attempt to recover long-suppressed levels of national memory, failed at the box-office. Its premiere coincided with a deep economic crisis within the Polish film industry: rapid decrease of the number of cinema theaters and the dominance of heavily promoted and well-distributed American films.


8 For details concerning Korczak’s biography in English, see B.J. Lifton, The King of Children: The Life and Death of Janusz Korczak, Elk Grove Village 2005.
of them. Many scripts were subjected to harsh criticism on political grounds and never-ending rewrites, leaving them subsequently postponed for many decades. Among these scripts are some of the most prestigious projects in Polish postwar cinema — Władysław Szpilman’s story of survival and Korczak’s biography. Both were proposed in 1945 and both were rejected because of the passivity of the main characters, their apolitical stand, and their Jewishness.

Ludwik Starski submitted his first proposal about Korczak on September 14, 1945. When he was working on the script, Korczak’s saintly stature had been steadily growing among both Poles and Jews. The martyrological legend of Korczak, however, started during the war, in the Warsaw Ghetto. Władysław Szlengel, a Jewish poet writing in Polish in the ghetto, created a poem devoted to Korczak — *A Page from the Diary of the Aktion* (Kartka z dziennika Akcji) — where he compared the death of Korczak to the heroic Polish defense of the Westerplatte outpost in September of 1939:

> What do you hear, neighbors from beyond the wall,  
> Who look on at our deaths through the bars?  
> Janusz Korczak died so that we  
> Could also have our Westerplatte.

Poems about Korczak were also published by Stefania Ney (About Janusz Korczak), Witold Zechenter (How Janusz Korczak Took His Children to the Country), and Antoni Słonimski (A Song about Janusz Korczak). Korczak also featured prominently in several accounts of wartime survival, for example in Władysław Szpilman’s memoirs where he describes seeing Korczak and his children being deported to Treblinka.


12 Quoted from I. Maciejewska, op. cit., p. 161. The Polish titles of the poems are as follows: S. Ney’s *O Januszu Korczaku*, W. Zechenter’s *Jak Janusz Korczak zawiózł dzieci na wieś*, and A. Słonimski’s *Pieśń o Januszu Korczaku*.

13 W. Szpilman, The Pianist: The Extraordinary Story of One Man’s Survival in Warsaw 1939–45, New York 1999, pp. 95–96. Szpilman writes: “The evacuation of the Jewish orphanage run by Janusz Korczak had been ordered for that morning. The children were to have been taken away alone. He had the chance to save himself, and it was only with difficulty that he persuaded the Germans to take

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For political reasons, Starski’s project had to wait. In 1959, a West German producer born in Łódź, Artur Brauner, commissioned Starski to write a new version of the script for a possible co-production between Poland and West-Germany, with Aleksander Ford in mind as a director. The script was postponed due to other commitments by Ford — he was working on *The Teutonic Knights* (*Krzyżacy*), released in 1960. In 1965, a new contract was signed with Brauner. Soon after, the originator of the script, Starski, was replaced by Aleksander (Alexander) Ramati. According to Edward Zajiček, the preparatory work accelerated in 1967, and the Polish side was pressing to finalize the project. In March 1968, Film Polski decided to terminate the contract under the pretext that Brauner missed deadlines. The decision, obviously politically motivated, was protested by Brauner who successfully sued Film Polski.\(^1\)

According to Paul Coates, the script by Ramati, which is preserved at the National Film Archive in Warsaw, “emphasizes Jewish resistance in the manner favored by the state of Israel but not by the Polish régime.” Coates also describes the script as “highly melodramatic, making far less serious effort at historical verisimilitude than Agnieszka Holland’s script for Wajda’s film.”\(^2\) One may find the real concerns regarding the new version of the Korczak project by Ramati in the minutes of the Program Council of the Film Unit “Studio.” Given the sensitivity of the topic, the council deliberated with the invited Communist Party apparatchiks and film administrators, including the head of Polish cinema (and deputy Minister of Culture) Tadeusz Zaorski.\(^3\) The gathered officials voiced several reservations concerning the project. For Stanisław Trepczyński, the troubling fact was that the film had been designed as a co-production between Poland and West Germany. In addition, he characterized Korczak as a “dreamer” who deserted the “progressive left” him too. He had spent long years of his life with children, and now, on his last journey, he would not leave them alone. He wanted to ease things for them. He told the orphans they were going out into the country, so they ought to be cheerful. At last they would be able to exchange the horrible, suffocating city walls for meadows of flowers, streams where they could bathe, woods full of berries and mushrooms. He told them to wear their best clothes, and so they came out into the yard, two by two, nicely dressed and in a happy mood … When I met them in Gęsia Street the smiling children were singing in chorus, the little violinist was playing for them and Korczak was carrying two of the smallest infants, who were beaming too, and telling them some amusing story.” For various testimonies concerning Korczak’s march to the *Umschlagplatz* see J. Olczak-Ronikier, *Korczak. Próba biografii*, Warszawa, 2011, pp. 247–432.

\(^{1}\) E. Zajiček, op. cit., p. 198.


\(^{3}\) “Stenogram z rozszerzonego posiedzenia Rady Programowej Zespołu ‘Studio’ w dniu 6 X 1967.” National Film Archive in Warsaw, A-329/57. All quotations in this and the next two paragraphs come from this document.

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after 1905 and isolated himself from the world. In line with the dominant ideology, Trepczyński wanted to see a film accusing the “dreamer” for not seeking “proper solutions” and for not being “politically engaged.” As a pedagogue, claims Trepczyński, Korczak “was supposed to take a stand, but he withdrew and — one can even say — he managed to take his concept of passivity to the very end.” Trepczyński postulated a “bigger film with a multilayered protagonist,” not “a melodramatic story about the righteous character.” Some participants of the meeting, chiefly writer and communist activist Bohdan Czeszko, voiced concerns similar to those expressed during the earlier approval of Ford’s *Border Street*. Alluding to Ford’s wartime history outside of Poland, they emphasized that the script does not reveal thorough knowledge about the reality of the occupation in Warsaw.

Committees that evaluated projects dealing with Polish-Jewish relations routinely sidelined artistic as well as commercial dimensions of the script. Of crucial importance was always the representation of wartime Polish behavior, attitudes of Poles toward Jews, and the explicit, accusatory portrayal of the perpetrators — the Germans. For some participants of the meeting, Ramati’s script was lacking scenes showing assistance for the ghetto provided by the Polish political organizations. The head of the Cultural Department of the Communist Party, Winceny Kraśko, recommended additions and reworkings that would emphasize the Polish context and the left-wing help for the ghetto in order to counter “the campaign of disinformation and half-truths about Poles and their attitudes toward the Jews during the occupation.” Kraśko also pointed out that, taking into account the current policy of the state of Israel, the character of Korczak must be seen as worthy of condemnation, unlike another character in the script — the ideologically correct Jakub, a left-wing Jewish underground fighter. Offering a different perspective, Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz (KTT) emphasized that this has to be “a tragic film with Korczak, not the underground fighters, taking its center; that it should be a film about the last humanist, who had to surrender to the world.”

As expected, Aleksander Ford passionately defended his project by explaining the accomplishments of producer Brauner and by emphasizing the forthcoming twenty-fifth anniversary of Korczak’s death and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. He stressed that the project would counter Western propaganda and that it would also help to fight Israeli nationalism: “In my humble opinion, if one wants to strike a blow against Israeli nationalism, the easiest way to do it is through this brand of film — like the film about Korczak.” In a long conclusion that, in principle, was approving of Ramati’s script, Zaorski expressed his faith in Ford: “We are all convinced that comrade Ford will make a film, which will be in line with the principles of our cinema.”

The political situation in 1968 caused suspension not only of the Korczak project but also of other films dealing with the Holocaust. Living outside of Poland since 1969, Aleksander Ford was able to make his film about Korczak in 1973 in Germany,
The Martyr (Sie sind frei, Doktor Korczak). This Israeli–West German co-production, produced by Brauner, failed critically and at the box-office; it was broadcast on German television on March 8, 1976. This now almost forgotten film was co-scripted by Ramati, photographed by another celebrated Jewish-Polish émigré Jerzy Lipman, and featured Leo Genn in the role of Korczak. Wulf Kansteiner calls Ford’s film “overly sentimental,” one that painted “a simplistic, heroic picture of Korczak.” The same sentimental aspect was criticized by Vincent Canby in his review in “The New York Times”: “This movie is full of good intentions that get smothered by the sentimental, deliberate manners of a cinema style better suited to early sound films. The only moving portions of the film are provided by Mr. Ford’s occasional use of black-and-white still photographs of life in the Warsaw Ghetto. They haunt the mind in the way that makes the fictional pieties look almost complacent.” Joanna Preizner, however, sees the key weakness of Ford’s film elsewhere — in its portrayal of Korczak as a Christian saint. Ford’s reluctance to point out Korczak’s Jewish roots, argues Preizner (and I share this view), most probably disappointed both Jewish and Christian viewers.

Wajda considered making a film about Korczak since 1982, when American producer Larry Bachman approached him with a script by John Briley, the screenwriter of Gandhi (1982). The role of Korczak was planned for Richard Dreyfuss who expressed interest in the film and met with Wajda. In 1983, Agnieszka Holland, who then lived in France, was commissioned to produce another script with the stress on the Holocaust. That script was later bought by Regina Ziegler from West Berlin, the co-producer of Wajda’s film with the Polish Film Unit Perspektywa headed by Janusz Morgenstern.

From the beginning, Wajda decided to cast as Korczak one of his favorite actors, Wojciech Pszoniak. This was a crucial decision since the camera stays close to Korczak, making other characters insignificant, often passive, influenced and being led by the charismatic man. Despite Pszoniak’s believable performance and the verisimilitude of most scenes (several were taken directly by scriptwriter Holland

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from Korczak’s diary\textsuperscript{21}, the overdue premiere of the “Korczak project” did not fulfill audiences’ expectations. Vincent Canby articulated it well in his review: “Mr. Wajda has been quoted as saying that he wanted to make this film because ‘Jewish themes in Polish culture have been virtually banned for 20 years.’ This must explain, in part, why he has treated the subject with such high-mindedness and reverence that Korczak seems to have no life of its own.”\textsuperscript{22}

Wajda was always interested in Korczak’s martyrdom and legend, therefore he swiftly moves to the final stages of his life. The film starts immediately before the war and briefly indicates the intricacies of Polish-Jewish relations and anti-Jewish sentiments in prewar Poland. An opening scene shows the cancellation of Korczak’s radio program for children. The radio manager explains that this decision has to do with the pressure from (unspecified in the film) political forces who objected to Korczak’s Jewish background (although he presented his programs under the


8. Wojciech Pszoniak as Korczak — frame from the movie Korczak, dir. Andrzej Wajda, 1990, photo Romuald Pieńkowski, Filmoteka Narodowa

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pseudonym of the Old Doctor). In another scene, picturing Korczak’s children picnicking near a river, Korczak’s former pupils complain that the humanistic education they received from Korczak did not prepare them adequately for life; that they are defenseless against Poles (“they beat us up and smashed our windows”).

As in his other films involving Polish-Jewish relations, Wajda opts for a carefully balanced picture. Polish anti-Semites are juxtaposed with Poles who are compassionate, and also those who risk their lives to help the Jews. The comments by a Polish washerwoman working for the orphanage (“I was not hired to wash Jewish shit”) are countered by the presence of another Pole, Maria Falska (Teresa Budzisz Krzyżanowska), who used to work closely with Korczak and shelters a Jewish girl during the occupation. When Korczak is evicted into the ghetto with his children, Falska says that this is “such a shame not to be able to go there with them,” and later offers Korczak a chance to escape to the Aryan side. During the scene depicting Korczak’s relocation to the ghetto, an older Polish couple working for the orphanage is beaten by the Germans for trying to move to the ghetto with Korczak. Later on, a Polish city tram conductor is executed by the Germans for giving bread to the Jews.

The war is announced by a few street scenes intercut with the much-cited Polish documentary footage showing the burning King’s Castle in Warsaw in September of 1939. A cut to an image of marching Polish prisoners of war announces the stage of resignation and despair. “Everyone has betrayed us,” remarks Korczak. “This is the uniform of a betrayed soldier,” he adds and he refuses to take off his own Polish uniform (he was a major in the Polish army). The film cuts from the marching POWs to scenes introducing the terror of the occupation: the creation of the Warsaw Ghetto on September 13, 1940.

4.

Wajda insists on an almost “documentary” quality for his film, chiefly by choosing black-and-white photography and by inserting newsreels and archival footage, both Polish and German. His docudrama is filled with “realistic” images of the ghetto. Wajda intercuts Nazi propagandist documentary material from the ghetto that is frequently indistinguishable from Robby Müller’s greyish photography. As if taking part in a discussion concerning the ambiguity and appropriateness of images to describe the Holocaust, Wajda questions whether such material should ever be filmed. In a short scene, he shows images of the German newsreel camera operators at work, attempting to frame the disarray around them, searching for “photogenic” images, and not visibly bothered by the misery and death.

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According to several reviewers, the reliance on black-and-white images of the ghetto enhanced the verisimilitude of the film. Michał Głowiniński describes the color of the ghetto as he returns to his childhood experiences in the Warsaw Ghetto in his book, *The Black Seasons*: “Before my eyes remains this monochromatism of the ghetto, perhaps best described by the word ‘discoloredness’ … In my memories, the color of the ghetto is the color of the paper that covered the corpses lying in the street before they were taken away.”

He writes that he re-discovered that aspect of the ghetto in Wajda’s film: “the grayness with no boundaries, no differentiation. Watching the film, I could not believe my eyes. I was seeing that discolored color — in the very form in which it had imprinted itself in my memory decades earlier.”

Wajda’s *Korczak* introduces images of ghetto life that one may find already in Aleksander Ford’s *Border Street* (*Ulica Graniczna*, 1949): hunger, brutality, overcrowding, and death in the streets. Wajda, however, is not afraid to go further and to show controversial, yet historically accurate, images of the ghetto later also found in *The Pianist* (2002) that offended many (particularly French) critics: brutal actions of the Jewish ghetto police, the presence of black marketers and racketeers, the division between rich and poor, the functioning of the ghetto’s Jewish Council (*Judenrat*). He also portrays the tragedy of Adam Czerniaków (Aleksander Bardini), the chairman of the *Judenrat* who committed suicide on July 23, 1942. Korczak approaches Czerniaków and others in the hope of finding help for his orphanage (“I will see the devil himself to save my children”). One of the black marketers and a former pupil of Korczak, Szulc (Zbigniew Zamachowski), collects money for the orphanage and thanks to his high-ranked connections also later tries to save Korczak from deportation. As if to portray things to come — the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising — the film also features a group of young Jewish ghetto fighters, members of the Jewish Combat Organization, attempting to assassinate some black marketers.

Throughout the film, Wajda portrays Korczak as both a Polish and Jewish hero. Betty Jean Lifton writes in her biography of Korczak: “Israel and Poland both claim Korczak as their own. The Poles consider Korczak a martyr who, had he been born a Catholic, would have been canonized by now. The Israelis revere Korczak as one of the Thirty-six Just Men whose pure souls, according to ancient Jewish tradition, make possible the world’s salvation.”

Korczak is described in the film by one of his senior pupils as “the world’s greatest Pole … and the greatest Jew, too.” Also emphasized is his devotion to children, regardless of their race and nationality. In one of the film’s strongest scenes, taking place in a Roentgen laboratory, Korczak

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25 Ibid., p. 7.

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demonstrates to his medical students a child’s heart reacting to a stressful situation. His fight for children’s rights is also shown in a scene in which he is asked, “What will you do after the war?” His response is quick: “I’ll look after German orphans.”

On August 6, 1942, the ghetto orphanages, including Korczak’s Orphans’ Home, were transported to Treblinka. Although there is no indication in Korczak’s diary that he knew what was coming, one could assume that he was aware what fate might await his children due to his extensive personal contacts and his witnessing of the beginning of the liquidation of the ghetto (which started on July 22, 1942). Unable to save his orphans, Korczak fought for what he called the dignity of death (godna śmierć). Historian Ruta Sakowska nonetheless concluded after her extensive research that on the day of the deportation Korczak and his co-workers were unaware that Treblinka was an extermination camp, not a labor camp.

The last sequence of Wajda’s film shows the deportation of the Jewish orphans and their instructors to Treblinka. Led by Korczak and the senior teacher Stefania Wilczyńska (1886–1942, played by Ewa Dałkowska), who refuse to abandon their children, the orphans carry a flag with the Star of David on one side and a four-leaf clover (the orphanage emblem) on the other as they march toward the ghetto’s Umschlagplatz to meet their doom. Absent from most of the film, Wojciech Kilar’s elegiac musical score bursts to the screen. In a poetic, symbolic, and emotional final scene, shown in slow motion, the children disembark from the mysteriously disconnected railway wagon and fade into a peaceful rural landscape carrying the orphanage banner. When the image whitens, a sentence appears leaving no doubt about their actual fate: “Korczak died with his children in the gas chambers of Treblinka in August 1942.” With his death the legend was born.

6.

Korczak had been well-received in Germany and in Israel (among other countries), but its showing stirred many controversies in France. Wajda and his scriptwriter, Agnieszka Holland, were accused by some French critics and filmmakers, including Claude Lanzmann, of being anti-Semites and of misrepresenting the Holocaust, and were castigated for their choice of a Polonized Jew as a hero. Lanzmann, known for attacking films that were not in line with his version of the Holocaust representation,

27 The film’s narrative suggests, most probably for the sake of creating suspense, that the death of Czerniaków and the deportation of Korczak’s orphanage happened on the same day.


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left the special screening organized by the wife of the French Prime Minister, after purportedly telling the hostess, “You do not know how evil this is.”

“Lanzmann who did Shoah and thinks that he is the owner of Shoah,” as scriptwriter Agnieszka Holland put it angrily, together with journalist Danièle Heymann launched a campaign against the film that influenced its reception abroad. Wajda commented on the pages of his official website: “The official screening at Cannes during the 1990 festival, followed by the standing ovation in the Festival Palace was, regrettably, the last success of Dr. Korczak. By the next morning, the review in Le Monde had transformed me into an anti-Semite, and not one of the major film distributors would agree to circulate the film outside Poland.”

According to several Polish sources, the French accusations of anti-Semitism directed against Wajda and his film served to cover up the French wartime past and their present anti-Semitic excesses, like the desecration of the Jewish cemetery in Carpentras, which happened during the release of Korczak. Perhaps this concern was addressed most explicitly by the strongest defender of Wajda, Agnieszka Holland, herself half-Jewish: “The problem in France is this terrible denial, after the war, of the guilt they had during the war, being the collaborationist nation, the organized French state sending the Jews to the concentration camps by French police and gendarmes. It’s a terrible experience. This denial grows in very irrational ways. French Jews deny it also because they feel very connected to France … The Jews there want to forget what happened there in World War II; they don’t want to admit it emotionally, even though they admit it rationally, the historical facts. They transferred in some way the aggression and frustration to the Poles, who have their own register of the guilt. But it’s not the French problem, this Polish anti-Semitism, it’s between Poles and Jews.”

Wajda expressed his concern in a similar manner: “It was painful to read this, but I was aware that France preferred to lecture Poles on anti-Semitism rather than

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30 Quoted from M. Stevenson, op. cit., p. 88.
31 G.P. Crnković, op. cit., p. 7.
32 Andrzej Wajda’s official website: www.wajda.pl/en/filmy/film29.html (accessed May 8, 2017). His website also contains an excerpt from the review by Danièle Heymann published in Le Monde (Paris, 13 May, 1990): “It is filmed in black-and-white, with a few hidden inserts from old film news to lend verisimilitude. One could almost believe it. But there is no need for all this; despite the overwhelming dexterity pervading the film, a real hero of such charismatic intensity inescapably draws us into the overall illusion of truth … And what do we see? Germans (brutal, they must be brutal) and Jews, in collaboration. Poles — none. The Warsaw Ghetto? A matter between the Germans and the Jews. This is what a Pole is telling us. The embarrassment, which accompanies us from the start of the showing changes into distaste. Until the epilogue, which almost makes us faint. The deportation orders are signed. The liquidation of the ghetto is underway. Under the Star of David, the children and Dr. Korczak enter the sealed carriage singing. And then the doors swing open — a coda to a sleepy, disgusting dream on the edge of revisionism — and we see how the little victims, energetic and joyful, emerge in slow-motion from the train of death. Treblinka as the salvation of murdered Jewish children. No. Not at the moment of profanation of the Jewish graves in Carpentras. Not ever.”
33 G.P. Crnković, op. cit., p. 6.
deal with cases of French anti-Semitism. The French have long sought ways to avoid facing up to the fact that it was the French authorities and the French police that dispatched Jews to Auschwitz [and not the Nazi authorities and Nazi police as was the case in Poland].”  

Interestingly, several scenes in the film that were attacked by critics as inappropriate, one may also find in Korczak’s diary.

7.

After pointing out some weaknesses of Holland’s script (such as the “declamatory illustrativeness” of Korczak’s Ghetto Diary, sentimental subplots, and problematic acting), Paul Coates writes: “Scrupulosity so stifles the film that the imaginative leap into the powerful, poignant ending may have been too surprising for the audience to handle.”

The last scene in particular, the fairytale-like poetic ending, stirred controversies unanticipated by Wajda. Reviewing the film, Anna Sobolewska commented that, arguably, Wajda attempted to spare us pain: “In the last scene Wajda fulfils the viewer’s secret wish — he opens the heavy doors of cattle cars.” Several critics, however, somehow failed to see the grim statement about the death of Korczak and his children appearing over the closing shot. The same critics, conceivably, were disapproving of similar fantasy endings in, for example, films made by Czech and Slovak directors, such as Ján Kádár and Elmar Klos’s The Shop on Main Street (Obchod na korze, 1965) and Jan Hřebejk’s Divided We Fall (Musime si pomáhat, 2000). These films also “soften” the depressing reality by offering a sentimental, escapist fantasy.

Polish film journals reported that Korczak was well-received at the film festival in Jerusalem and that the dream-like conclusion was read as a metaphor for the birth of Israel soon after the Holocaust. The fantasy-like ending of Wajda’s film, however, also has its roots in the legend of Korczak. His biographer, Betty Jean Lifton, explains: “For some time after the war it was rumoured that the cattle cars that took Korczak’s orphans to Treblinka had been derailed and that he and Stefa and the children were saved. People claimed to have seen them in small villages throughout Poland.”

In her defense of Wajda’s film, published in The New York Times, Lifton writes the following: “Those critics who see only Christian imagery in the ethereal sequence at the end — Korczak and the children leaping in slow motion from the train and disappearing into the misty countryside — do Mr. Wajda a disservice. After the war, there

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35 P. Coates, op. cit., p. 178.
36 A. Sobolewska, “Do ostatniej chwili życia,” Film 1990, no. 43, p. 11.
38 B.J. Lifton, The King of Children, p. 357.
were rumors that the cattle car carrying the orphanage entourage had miraculously become disconnected. Villagers all over Poland reported spotting ‘the old doctor’ with the children. Perhaps they, like Mr. Wajda, wanted to believe that people like Korczak cannot be destroyed.”39 Similar fairytale-like element also appears in literary works about Korczak’s death. For example, in a prose poem in Yiddish, *The Last Walk of Janusz Korczak*, Aaron Zeitlin provides analogous ending about “Korczak’s arrival in Heaven. The difference is that, there, Korczak confronts a Jewish God.”40

In her thorough discussion of Wajda’s film and the “French controversy” initiated by Lanzmann and Heymann, Terri Ginsberg comments that the “last scene’s allegorical reference to Israel, marked by the flag-like banner bearing the Star of David, led Heymann to criticize Korczak for propagating Christian (in apparent contrast to Jewish) Zionism.”41 Scholars often take up the alleged “Christianization of Korczak” (evidenced by the final scene and by modeling him on Francis of Assisi, among others). After looking closely at some of the film’s scenes, such as when Korczak waters his plants, it is not difficult to agree with Ginsberg who writes that “Wajda’s Korczak is lent neoplatonic qualities of second-century Christian Gnosticism — charitable humility, spiritual inwardness, sexual abstinence, and pastoral communitarianism.”42 Indeed, the film looks like a hagiography. According to Anna Sobolewska, “the biography of a distinguished pedagogue indiscernibly moves into a saint’s biography.” Wajda is “interested not only in the biography of a great man, but also in the phenomenon of sainthood, or — to avoid religious metaphors — the phenomenon of perfection,” writes Sobolewska who justly compares Korczak to Richard Attenborough’s *Gandhi* (1982) and Roberto Rossellini’s *The Flowers of St. Francis* (aka *Francis, God’s Jester*, *Francesco, giullare di Dio*, 1950).43

The alleged “Christianization” or the “Polonization” of Korczak, or of the Holocaust for that matter, brings back similar arguments employed to discuss, for example, the “Christianization” of Edith Stein (Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross). A convert from Judaism, a member of the Carmelite order, Stein was killed at Birkenau along with other Dutch Jews. Her beatification in 1987 and canonization in 1988 only added more controversy surrounding the nature of her martyrdom: was she a Christian martyr or a Jewish martyr? The two versions of memory seem difficult to negotiate, almost incompatible. Addressing the issue of the “Christianization” of the Holocaust Peter Novick explains: “One of the things I find most striking about much of recent

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40 Quoted from J. Hoberman, op. cit., p. 55.
42 Ibid., p. 117.
43 A. Sobolewska, op. cit., p. 11.
Jewish Holocaust commemoration is how ‘un-Jewish’ — how *Christian* — it is. I am thinking of the ritual of reverently following the structured pathways of the Holocaust in the major museums, which resembles nothing so much as the Stations of the Cross on the Via Dolorosa; the fetishized objects on display like so many fragments of the True Cross or shin bones of saints; the symbolic representations of the Holocaust — notably in the climax of Elie Wiesel’s *Night* — that employ crucifixion imagery. Perhaps most significantly, there is the way suffering is sacralised and portrayed as the path to wisdom — the cult of the survivor as secular saint. There are themes that have some minor and peripheral precedent in Jewish tradition, but they resonate more powerfully with major themes in Christianity.”

While debating the “Christianization” or the “Polonization” of the Holocaust and figures such as Korczak, Western critics often equate it with Polish anti-Semitism. They seem to forget that Polish films represent Polish memory. Writing about memorialization of the Holocaust in Poland in his book, *The Texture of Memory*, James E. Young notes: “Polish Catholics will remember as Polish Catholics, even when they remember Jewish victims. As Jews recall events in the figures of their tradition, so will Poles remember in the forms of their faith. The problem is not that Poles deliberately displace Jewish memory of the Holocaust with their own, but that in a country bereft of Jews, the memorials can do little but cultivate Polish memory.”

Wajda’s vision of the Holocaust, its external perspective of a mortified Pole who looks at the annihilation of the Jewish ghetto from the Aryan side of the wall was, and likely will be, defended in Poland regardless of one’s background and nationality. Praising the film for its apt use of black-and-white images (“colorless color of the ghetto”), Michał Głowiński thanked Wajda “for that unusual and important film, which some fanatics have attacked for reasons difficult to fathom.”

**OFIARA POLEMIKI POLSKO-ŻYDOWSKIEJ. POWRÓT DO KORCZAKA (1990) ANDRZEJA WAJDY**

Summary


46 M. Głowiński, op. cit., p. 7.

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