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POLISH SELF-SCRUTINY IN *HOLY WEEK**

The action of Wajda's film *Holy Week* of 1995, which depicts the Polish response to the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943, takes places during the days leading up to Easter in that fateful period. For Christians, this is supposed to be a period of internal self-scrutiny and reflection. In Christianity, Jean Bethke Elshtain observes, Augustine "set in motion the Western tradition of intense self-scrutiny and critical reflection."¹ Self-scrutiny is related to Judeo-Christian awareness of the limitations of the human condition. It is the most difficult aspect of moral memory, and thus is not always conducted with full probity, but it is crucial for the fullest version of such memory, a vital concern of so much of Wajda's work and which certainly comes to the fore in *Holy Week*.

A crucial context to self scrutiny in Polish society were the years under the communist regime. When the Jedwabne controversy broke out in the year 2000, Paweł Machcewicz placed the debate in that underlying context: "The return of historical controversies reaching back to the Second World War are ... in a sense an element of the reckoning with communism, which for decades blocked authentic discussion of sensitive issues ..." ² Various sensitive issues, however, such as Polish Jewish relations during WWII had been discussed in Polish society, but initially in

* This article is largely based reprinted extracts from chapter 4 of my book *Cinematic Echoes of Covenants Past and Present: National Identity in the Historical Films of Steven Spielberg and Andrzej Wajda*, which is currently in print at Peter Lang publishers.

¹ J.B. Elshtain, "Who Are We?," Institute of American Values, Working Paper 2001, no. 75, <http://americanvalues.org/catalog/pdfs/wp-75.pdf>.

² P. Machcewicz, *Spory o historię, 2000–2011*, Kraków 2012, p. 97.

a much narrower circles. It was the work of Wajda, among others, that attempted to bring them to a wider audience after the fall of communism, which was not very receptive at that time of transition. And issues such as those raised in *Holy Week* were complex, and require some notion of the broader historical context in which they arose for proper understanding.

With such a large percentage of Europe's Jews residing in Poland, i.e. in a country which in World War II came to be completely under Nazi control — even in the part that had initially been taken over by the Soviets, since they were subsequently replaced by the Germans when their former allies were driven back for several years — half of the victims of the Holocaust were Polish citizens. Moreover, the remaining population played the role of witnesses. As Michael Steinlauf observes, “a handful of Poles saved Jews, some Poles blackmailed, denounced, even murdered Jews, but what characterized Polish experience as a whole was witnessing [the Holocaust].”³ No matter how we place the proportions of these actions, witnessing in itself was a moral challenge, and that was what Wajda primarily sought to explore in his second Holocaust film after the Cold War had ended, the first one being *Korczak*. Once again the Warsaw Ghetto was the center of his attention, but this time the setting was outside of the ghetto, at the tragic moment of its destruction during the uprising in 1943.

What is no longer common knowledge outside of Poland, even in parts of Europe, is that as many non-Jewish Polish citizens died during the course of the war as did Jews — mostly at the hands of the Germans, a smaller portion at the hands of the Soviets. Since the respective size of the populations greatly differed, this hardly made the situation of both populations comparable. Within those statistics approximately nine tenths of the Jews died versus somewhat more than one tenth of other Poles⁴; nonetheless the fact needs to be borne in mind to better understand the conditions of the occupation. As Steinlauf puts it, “nowhere else in Europe did the murder of Jews unfold amid such slaughter of the coterritorial people.”⁵ Considering the inhuman conditions of that occupation, the demoralization of a relatively significant portion of the population is hardly surprising, which does not absolve Christian Poles from soul searching, as difficult and unpopular an activity as it is, which is what Wajda undertook in his *Holy Week*.⁶

³ M. Steinlauf, “Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust,” [in:] *Humanity at the Limit: The Impact of the Holocaust Experience on Jews and Christians*, Bloomington, IN 2000, p. 307.

⁴ For a succinct, even-handed discussion of the various genocidal policies and actions of the Nazis, from the almost total extermination of the Jews in the Holocaust to the partial genocide of Slavs, etc., with a nod toward the violence of the Soviets in their occupation, see R. Evans, *The Third Reich in Memory and History*, London 2015, pp. 365–381.

⁵ M. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust*, Syracuse, NY 1997, p. 28.

⁶ For a discussion of the attitudes of Poles toward the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the primary subject of Wajda's film, based on the available historical evidence, see G. Paulsson, *Secret City: The Hidden Jews of Warsaw 1940–45*, New Haven 2002, pp. 155–160.

The film is based on a novella of the same title by Jerzy Andrzejewski, widely known as the author of the novel *Ashes and Diamonds* that Wajda famously adapted in 1958. The novella is an expanded version of an unpublished short story he wrote in 1943, while the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was actually taking place, and which forms the subject matter of both works. There are autobiographical elements within the work; the writer himself had had a relationship with a Polish Jewish woman before he married, similar to the protagonist of *Holy Week*.⁷ In the expanded version of a couple of years later Andrzejewski takes a broad gamut of stances of the ethnic Polish populace toward the Jews and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising under close scrutiny. The novella was published as part of a larger collection in 1945, when the new Soviet regime had not fully consolidated its position and still offered a modicum of free expression, although some critics already detect elements of self-censorship in Andrzejewski's work.⁸ Nevertheless, the work is both a literary product and a historical record of a complicated period.

Wajda was interested in a film version of *Holy Week* from quite early on. Worth noting is that his first film, *Generation* (1954), also deals with the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Less than a decade after the adaptation of *Ashes and Diamonds* was released in 1958, he was commissioning a screenplay based on the novella. In the mid-1960s he was ready to work on the film with a screenplay completed by Andrzejewski himself in collaboration with Andrzej Żuławski, naturally taking into account changes to the story that the censors would accept. But history intervened through the Six-Day War, which put the Soviet Bloc in an antagonistic position to Israel, and the topic unexpectedly became too hot to appear in any version. The anti-Semitic campaign of the Polish communists in 1968 only sealed the fate of the project which Wajda had hoped to release in that year to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

Shortly after the release of *Korczak* in 1990 Wajda was already working on another version of the screenplay. Nevertheless he only returned in earnest several years later, claiming among other things, that not only was *Holy Week* one of the most penetrating literary analyses of Polish attitudes toward Jewish suffering during the war, but, just as importantly according to Wajda, "nothing that Andrzejewski wrote at the time is dated."⁹

To understand why Wajda felt that way it is helpful to recall an earlier debate concerning the issue. Tadeusz Lubelski, an expert on the filmmaker, noted how attentive Wajda seemed at a debate that took place at the promotion of the book *Biedni*

⁷ The most detailed discussion of Andrzejewski's work together with Wajda's effort to produce a film in the 1960s is found in J. Preizner, *Kamienie na macewie. Holokaust w polskim kinie*, Kraków 2012, pp. 443–463; and M. Haltof, *Polish Film and the Holocaust*, New York-Oxford, UK 2012, pp. 201–203.

⁸ A. Sandauer, *O sytuacji pisarza polskiego pochodzenia żydowskiego*, Warszawa 1982, pp. 41–43.

⁹ Quoted in J. Preizner, op. cit., p. 463.

Polacy patrzą na getto (*The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto*) in 1994.¹⁰ The book was a collection of essays written by Jan Błoński, a professor of Polish literature at the Jagiellonian University whose essay of 1987 that gave the title to the volume initiated the ongoing debate.

In that original essay Błoński looks at the history of Polish-Jewish relations, pointing out that while Jews shared the Polish homeland for centuries, metaphorically speaking they had been forced to live in the cellar. The following pointed lines of the essay leave no doubt of the author's assessment of the attitude of Poles during the Holocaust:

Eventually when we lost our homes, and when, within that home, the invaders set to murdering Jews, did we show solidarity toward them? How many of us decided it was none of our business? There were also those (and I leave out of the account common criminals [i.e. the blackmailers, etc.]) who were secretly pleased that Hitler had solved for us "the Jewish problem." We could not even welcome and honor the survivors, even if they were embittered, disoriented and perhaps sometimes tiresome.¹¹

When initially published in 1987, the article evoked a heated discussion. Despite being published in a Catholic weekly — *Tygodnik Powszechny* — where Karol Wojtyła had frequently published articles before he became pope, most of the reactions were negative. As Steinlauf notes: "What was rejected above all was the notion that Poles needed forgiveness from Jews."¹² Although the tenor of the discussion was somewhat less heated by the time Błoński's essay was republished in independent Poland, Wajda could detect much of the same unwillingness to seriously scrutinize Polish wartime attitudes.

And the filmmaker recognized the advantage of making *Holy Week* under the new circumstances in the country. In an interview he gave during the course of filming the picture, Wajda voiced the hope: "This freedom, in which we now live, provides the opportunity that this painful topic will not undergo manipulation."¹³ The film was produced by Heritage Films, the Polish company that collaborated with Spielberg at the Polish end of the production of *Schindler's List*, and would later be involved in Polanski's *The Pianist*.

Wajda's film is quite faithful to Andrzejewski's novella, considerably more so than the screenplay of the 1960s. In the early 1990s when he was finishing his final screenplay, however, more was being published about the ghetto uprising.¹⁴ For instance, in her memoir published in 1993, the Polish Jew Maria Lewi-Kurowska writes:

¹⁰ T. Lubelski, *Wajda*, Wrocław 2006, pp. 244–245.

¹¹ Quoted in M. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*, p. 115.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ J. Preizner, op. cit., p. 464.

¹⁴ Worth noting is that this period also witnessed the re-publication of Andrzejewski's *Holy Week* in 1993.

I spent whole days under the ghetto walls on the Aryan side. I took no notice of the fact that I could have been recognized. ... Amid the crowds observing what was going on I could recognize unfailingly the ones who were like me — Jews in hiding. They were disguised as far as possible — like myself. But ... the faces! The expression in the eyes! They were not watching a show, they were — like me — people whose hearts were breaking.¹⁵

This corroborates the seemingly irrational behavior of the Jewish protagonist of *Holy Week* in a scene early on in the film.

Like the novella, the film takes place during the first days of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in April 1943 which coincided with the Holy Week leading up to Easter for the Catholic Poles on the Aryan side, i.e. outside of the ghetto. The story actually ends on Good Friday, which gives it the symbolic significance of a Passion Play. There is a rich symbolic level that also ties the narrative to the Apocalypse. This seems to be the point of the goggled German soldiers riding around on motorcycles at significant moments of the film, such as when the Catholic protagonist of *Holy Week* meets his death. What is noteworthy, these ominous riders do not perpetrate any violence, lending credence to the interpretation that symbolically “the image is a direct reference to John’s riders of the apocalypse.”¹⁶

In the opinion of Katarzyna Mąka-Małatyńska the apocalyptic symbolism inscribes the Holocaust within the social and artistic discourse in Poland.¹⁷ There is a moral level to this symbolic process. In seeing the Jew, or the “other,” Wajda calls for the largely Catholic ethnic Poles to examine their consciences regarding their attitudes toward their Jewish neighbours during their hour of need. Moreover, as Paul Coates observes:

Only after 1989 does Wajda feel able to explicitly address the interrelationship of Polish religiosity and nationalism: in *Holy Week* the measure of religion’s worth is the humanist one of its ability to promote love of one’s neighbor: the most insistently different, little-known, feared and envied neighbor of the interwar years — the Jew.¹⁸

This higher level symbolism, together with its moral imperative, correlates with the more down-to-earth project of including Polish Jews within Polish culture. Paradoxically, “the most insistently different” neighbour is an assimilated Jewish protagonist who is in many ways as much Polish as Jewish. Only the war has brought out the difference between her and other Poles, symbolized by the ghetto wall, which was both the visible one erected by the Nazis and an invisible psychological one. The literal ghetto walls “cut off all view of the tragedy inside”, whereas at the symbolic level they represent “the divide between Pole and Jew, both over the centuries and the

¹⁵ Quoted in B. Engelking and J. Leociak, *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City*, trans. E. Harris, New Haven-London 2009, p. 794.

¹⁶ K. Mąka-Małatyńska, *Widok z tej strony. Przedstawienie Holocaustu w polskim filmie*, Poznań 2012, p. 226.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 227.

¹⁸ P. Coates, *The Red and the White: The Cinema of People’s Poland*, London 2005, p. 180.

present instance.”¹⁹ And if the issue in *Korczak* had been to provide a hero who was both Polish and Jewish, in *Holy Week* it is more clearly the Poles who are at fault in failing to bring to fruition the desired union: where the Jews are themselves at home in Poland and no longer in “the cellar.”

After an intertitle based on Hans Frank’s edict banning the presence of Jews outside of the ghettos and mandating the death penalty for Poles that help the Jews, the film starts by presenting Irena Lilien and her father. They scramble into the woods upon hearing a group of people marching along the forest road, goaded on by a German soldier. When the father recognizes that the poor souls being herded down the path are Jews, he decides to join them, against the desperate efforts of his daughter to stop him in his fatal choice.

Next, after an unknown period of time, the viewer sees Irena in the hands of Polish extortionists, who recognize her as Jewish. After she delivers an undisclosed ransom, distraught, Irena makes her way to the ghetto. It is Monday 19 April 1943, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising has started, and she stands as if mesmerized among the crowd that has gathered to stare. Jan Małeck, a Polish engineer who had been on intimate terms with Irena at one time, also happens to be in the crowd and notices her. Once he becomes aware of her situation he takes her home.

Jan has an apartment on the outskirts of Warsaw, where he lives with his wife. When Irena arrives, the apartment building seems to belong to a different world, totally separate from the ghetto. Only the sounds from the conflagration allow Irena and the residents to know how close they actually are to the uprising. One night the Germans are hunting some armed person, quite possibly an escapee from the ghetto, or perhaps a member of the Home Army that has tried unsuccessfully to make a diversion for the insurgents.²⁰ Irena is taken to the roof to avoid a search in the apartment building, where she sees a sky lit up from the burning ghetto.

The apartment building where the majority of the action takes place after Irena’s arrival constitutes a cross-section of Warsaw urban society. Upstairs from the Małeckis there lives a widowed officer’s wife together with her teenage son, Władek, and a somewhat younger daughter. On the ground floor is Mr. Zamoyski, the landlord, who seems to be an assimilated Jew, together with his servant. In the basement apartment lives a lower class couple, in which the older wife supports her low-life husband. Each has their lesser or greater part in the drama: either in the history lesson Wajda provides, or the morality play that unfolds in the narrative.

¹⁹ O. Swan, “Afterward: Andrzej Wajda’s *Holy Week*,” [in:] J. Andrzejewski, *Holy Week: A Novel of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*, trans. O. Swan, Athens 2007, p. 132.

²⁰ There were a number of diversions created by the Home Army and a couple of other clandestine Polish military groups, but aside from moral support these hardly made a difference (Cf. B. Engelking and J. Leociak, op. cit., p. 792).



9. Wojciech Malajkat as Jan Malecki and Beata Fudalej as Irena Lilien — frame from the movie *Wielki Tydzień*, dir. Andrzej Wajda, 1995, photo Renata Pajchel, © Heritage, FilMOTEKA Narodowa

The filmmaker incorporates an incident regarding Poles who entered the ghetto and fought alongside the Jewish insurgents.²¹ From the apartment, this includes Władek, and the boys that enter the ghetto are led by Jan's brother, Julek. Although purely hypothetical regarding the group's participation in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the *Szare Szeregi* (Grey Ranks) was a genuine instance of heroism among the youngest generation of Poles actively resisting the German occupation, which the filmmaker seems to have wished to commemorate.

The morality play comes to a tragic end for Irena through the enactment of one of the saddest truths of the Polish reaction to the Holocaust. In her analysis of *Holy Week* Joanna Preizner draws attention to the fact that, historically, assimilated Jews hiding on the Aryan side had to worry a great deal about Poles who could recognize them even when the Nazis could not.²² The viewer learns that Irena was spotted by a neighbour at a former hiding place, which had been provided by one of her father's co-workers from the university where he had taught — Polish universities, it should

²¹ The diversions mentioned in the note above were primarily outside the ghetto walls. However, Swan notes that German commander SS Stroop listed a number of non-Jews, or "bandits" in his words, among the ghetto dead (O. Swan, op. cit., p. 148, n. 11).

²² J. Preizner, op. cit., p. 473.

be added, were closed by the Nazis who considered them redundant for a Slavic population deemed only fit for labour. Thus Irena had to leave without even informing her protector, who was absent at the time. Early on her situation at Jan's becomes precarious because the downstairs neighbours also spot her.

Despite the somber tone of the film, occasional irony creeps in. Before a girl from the building falls to the ground close to the end of the film, initiating the dramatic finale, young children in a sandbox down below watching her play dangerously on the railing of the stairwell balcony say she looks like an angel. It soon becomes obvious she cannot fly. The Jewish protagonist is named Irena, which has its Latin root as the word *irenica*, meaning peaceful, but soon she brings discord.

This discord is not just a matter of the danger she represents to her hosts. As Marek Haltof observes, "she is not a sympathetic character, not a typical Holocaust victim. Unlike most of the figures in Holocaust narratives, Irena refuses to remain silent and obedient, out of German sight, and she 'ungratefully' questions the attitude of her Polish hosts."²³ She has also been described as unfeeling toward the suffering of her Polish hosts, especially of Jan's wife, who has lost a number of members of her family.²⁴ This is somewhat simplistic an assessment of the character. When Anna tells her of her losses, Irena uses this disclosure as an occasion to ask about her attitudes toward senseless death, in other words she treats her as a partner in suffering and dialogue. Moreover, her looking out from the apartment at the fallen child, a dangerous thing to do, likely demonstrates concern. Her tough exterior hides the suffering she experiences. Close-ups in her room in the darkness of night, with her eyes turned toward the sounds of the ghetto, expose her vulnerability and heartbreak.

The annihilation of the ghetto is presented as a maelstrom. The images of the ghetto early on show its denizens leaping out of the windows of burning buildings. But Wajda is less interested in showing horrific scenes of the atrocity than in exploring the moral dilemmas of the Polish witnesses of the Holocaust. Some of these are understandable. Jan wants to help Irena but is concerned about the safety of his wife, who is expecting a child. His moral anxiety is quite justified. A viewer might feel more sympathy for Jan in this respect, than for his wife who seems unrealistic in having no qualms about offering help despite the possibility of supreme sacrifice that attends it — in occupied Poland the price for helping Jews was death. Indeed, Jan pays the highest price for his help for Irena. Nevertheless, the positive attitude represented by Anna was actually a prominent feature among those who did help Jews. As sociologist Nechama Tec notes, "To dwell on the shortcomings [of the situation] might have detracted from the emotional investment and the many sacrifices that were a significant

²³ M. Haltof, op. cit., p. 204.

²⁴ Ewa Mazierska uses this insensitive feature of the portrayal of Irena to accuse Wajda being more in sympathy with the Poles than the Jews in his treatment of wartime Polish Jewish relations ("Non-Jewish Jews, Good Poles and Historical Truth in the Films of Andrzej Wajda," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 20, 2000, no. 2, pp. 222–223).

part of the relationship.”²⁵ And the overwhelming majority of rescued Jews reported in Tec’s research that the Poles who saved them had extended help willingly.

Ewa Mazierska has pointed out that although anti-Semitism may not be in the sole possession of any particular group or class in Wajda’s films, “the most outrageous acts of racial hatred are committed by representatives of the working class, uneducated people, or indeed the underclass.”²⁶ An example of “educated” anti-Semitism in *Holy Week* is provided by a co-worker at Jan’s office. He is a member of a prewar Polish fascist group, who openly voices his view that Hitler has done Poles a favor by ridding them of the Jews. His is actually an example of the most rabid anti-Semitism in the film, but he is never given a chance to act on his hatred. It is the working-class Piotrowskis that “act” on anti-Semitic stereotypes. Self-proclaimed Catholics, “their Christianity is limited to unreflective churchgoing and preparing quantities of food for Christian holidays.”²⁷

Nevertheless, it is worth reflecting an essential element of their lack of sympathy for Irena. As Steinlauf observed, for a variety of historical reasons, that although mostly had little connection to what the Jews actually did, many Poles did not like Jews. But what matters is “that this dislike did *not* as a rule mean that Poles wished to see the Jews murdered.”²⁸ This stance largely describes that of the Piotrowskis. However, it was also a stance that under the right circumstances could lead to tragedy. This was one of Wajda’s declared intents in making the film, to demonstrate how far the anti-Semitic beliefs embedded in Polish popular beliefs could be taken.²⁹ Of course simpler, more elemental immoral forces were often enough at play, for instance the greed demonstrated by the extortionists early in the film, which was fatal for many Jews. For the fictional Mrs. Piotrowski her jealousy is contingent on the circumstances provoked by her husband, and has less moral weight than her need for a scapegoat for Polish misfortunes, triggered by the near tragedy of the neighbour’s girl.

The scapegoat can be a sacred figure; in Rene Girard’s interpretation even a Christ-figure.³⁰ Fit into the symbolic meta-narrative of *Holy Week* are the slightest hints of the Christ-figure in Irena. Significantly, before she descends into the sepulchral ghetto in the film’s last scene, her Christian counterpart Anna kisses a crucifix while attending a Good Friday service. Even the German soldiers that pass Irena in such a relaxed and leisurely manner while they are exiting the ghetto — after a hard day’s killing — seem symbolic, reminiscent of the Roman soldiers that cast dice at the foot of the cross.

²⁵ N. Tec, *When Light Pierced the Darkness: Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland*, New York-Oxford 1986, p. 80.

²⁶ E. Mazierska, op. cit., p. 220.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ M. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*, p. 58.

²⁹ T. Lubelski, op. cit., 244.

³⁰ Cf. R. Bryce, “Christ as Second Adam: Girardian Mimesis Redeemed,” *New Black Friars* 93 (2012), pp. 358–370.

More forcefully, however, the viewer can see in Irena the figure of the “guardian mole” from Czesław Miłosz’s poem “A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto” of 1943, which represents the bad conscience of Polish Christians who witnessed the Holocaust. The poet also witnessed the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and in his poem — which later inspired Błoński in his essay mentioned earlier — his persona views the destruction in organic metaphors of decay and is afraid of the guardian mole, who will count him, “a Jew of the New Testament,” “among the helpers of death.” When Jan brings Irena home, she speaks to him and Anna about the bad Poles she has encountered along her way. Anna counters that surely she has come across good Poles, to which her interlocutor replies in the affirmative. She nonetheless claims that the good Poles do not make up for the bad ones; she is in effect countering the easy excuses that were voiced regarding the actions of non-Jewish Poles during the Holocaust, and she continues in this vein throughout the film.

Within the context of the Polish national discourse of the time, *Holy Week* represented a critique of the Christian message familiar to Catholic Poles up until the Second World War.³¹ Implicit in a number of the anti-Semitic prejudices that Poles held was the idea of Jews as Christ-killers or those who rejected Christ — Andrzejewski’s novel even seems to implicate the positive heroine for partially holding this latter view.³² In the post-Second Vatican Council teaching, this latter view is rejected. In *Holy Week* Irena dies through the sin of indifference and the anti-Semitism of Poles who held the old view, against which the actions of the good Poles are ineffective.

To some extent, this indifference is symbolically punished in the curse that Irena casts upon the Poles represented by Mrs. Piotrowski, who cavalierly sends her to her certain death, that they should die miserably. The Jews are dying now at the time of their uprising, but the Poles will have their turn. Thus in a manner she prophesies what will occur in Warsaw during the uprising in the following year, at which juncture it will be the ethnic Poles who will be isolated, the way Polish Jews are now.³³ The moral issue this sequence alludes to is how the suffering at the hands of the same perpetrators that should have united Poles and Jews actually divided them.

³¹ For an overview of the teaching and overall position of the Catholic Church in Poland on the topic of the Jews and various Jewish issues in the interwar period, see D. Pałka, *Kościół katolicki wobec Żydów w Polsce międzywojennej*, Kraków 2006.

³² M. Levine, “The Ambiguity of Moral Outrage in Jerzy Andrzejewski’s *Wielki Tydzień*,” *The Polish Review* 32, 1987, no. 4, p. 394.

³³ The juxtaposition of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943 and the Warsaw Uprising of a year later are found in Polanski’s *The Pianist*. On account of the later uprising the hero of the film, Władysław Szpilman, lost his hiding place on the Aryan side, obviously true for many of the Jews who escaped from the ghetto like the historical protagonist of the film. Many, however, were not as fortunate as Szpilman; Paulsson estimates that of the twenty-eight thousand Jews hiding in Warsaw outside the ghetto, somewhat over eleven thousand survived, with approximately 4,500 having died during the Warsaw Uprising (cf. his *Secret City*, 168, 231).

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If there might be detected an appropriation of Jewish suffering for a Christian discourse of the conscience in the film,³⁴ at another level Jewish identity is also restored to Irena. Before the war she was what could be termed a non-Jewish Jew. Wajda shows a transformation occurring wherein “the Second World War was an important factor in forging in [her] a new Jewish identity, based on solidarity with [her] suffering compatriots.”³⁵

The loss of the base for the old identity is symbolized in the scene where Anna is hanging the laundry out to dry, with a highlighted sheet reminiscent of the one in which the dying Maciek hides himself in *Ashes and Diamonds*. In *Holy Week*, instead of blood staining the sheet to create the national flag, the ashes flying from the ghetto sully its purity and further signify the tremendous loss of the Jews. Significantly, Anna, who is most sensitive to their fate, witnesses this.

At night Irena’s facial expressions demonstrate her inner response to the signs from the destruction of the ghetto, the vanishing of the civilization and its people. We witness Irena slowly recovering her identity. One of the most visible signs of this recovery comes in the form of an extraordinarily large floating ash entering the room that seems to reveal to her the Hebrew script of the people of the Word. That vision of the vanishing Civilization of the Word is internalized by Irena and becomes a part of recovery of her Jewish identity.

Most historical films have anachronistic elements that speak to contemporary issues. We might find this in Wajda’s warm portrayal of Anna, the positive Catholic. As an interlocutor with Irena, she might symbolize an indirect acknowledgement of sorts of the role that Catholicism played in the recovery of the identity of the Jewish community in the years preceding the end of communism and shortly after its fall. Even before Solidarity in 1980 Weeks of Jewish Culture were organized by Catholic Intellectuals Clubs in the 1970s, which were the early forums raising the issue of Polish Jews and their culture together with the complicated Polish Jewish relations. “The moral significance of such initiatives was highly significant for the smashed — literally and metaphorically — community, that is for the Jews left behind,” claim Helena Datner and Małgorzata Melchior.³⁶ This encouraged the young Jews who attended them to establish the Jewish Flying University for further self-discovery. The momentum started then was maintained throughout the brief Solidarity period, in which the group continued to be supported by the largely Catholic movement, which they in turn contributed to. The rapport was still in place during the first years of independence

³⁴ Cf. O. Swan, op. cit., p. 131.

³⁵ E. Mazierska, op. cit., p. 217.

³⁶ H. Datner and M. Melchior, “Absence and Return: Jews in Contemporary Poland,” [in:] *From Homogeneity to Multiculturalism: Minorities Old and New in Poland*, ed. F.E.I. Hamilton and K. Iglicka, London 2000, p. 104; see also B. Szaynok, “The Attitude of the Catholic Church in Poland to Jewish Issues after the Holocaust from 1944 to 1989,” [in:] *Jewish Presence in Absence: The Aftermath of the Holocaust in Poland, 1944–2010*, ed. F. Tych and M. Adamczyk-Garbowska, Jerusalem 2014, pp. 635–668.

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after 1989. The early efforts of self-scrutiny on the part of Christian Poles eventually had a leavening effect that resulted in a fairly widespread interest in Polish Jews and their culture throughout various parts of Polish society in a variety of fashions.³⁷ Symbolic of this transition, Błoński's book was published in the mid-1990s by a Catholic publisher, while the discussion Wajda attended organized to promote it was at one of the new public forums for presenting Jewish culture in Kraków.

A corollary of the Polish romantic tradition that sees Poland in a covenantal fashion as the Christ among nations is that of holding the Passion as particularly significant within that narrative of sacrifice.³⁸ The genuine sacrifices suffered in the Second World War offered Poles a further validation of that self-understanding. Wajda's vision of the national catastrophe coupled with self-scrutiny of the Poles toward their Jewish brethren as presented in *Holy Week* enriches such understanding by taking into account the Holocaust occurring on Polish soil while incorporating a symbolic Polish Jew whose renewed Jewishness within that narrative is stressed. Thus Wajda continues what can be called the extension of covenant he initiated in *Korczak*, adding the crucial moral element of national self-scrutiny without which his symbolic offer to Polish Jews could be deemed superficial.

POLSKA SAMOOBSERWACJA W WIELKIM TYGODNIU

Streszczenie

Wielki Tydzień Andrzeja Wajdy z 1995 r., oparty na opowiadaniu Jerzego Andrzejewskiego o tym samym tytule, obrazuje szerokie spektrum polskich reakcji na zniszczenie warszawskiego getta w 1943 r. Co istotne, akcja rozgrywa się w dniach poprzedzających Wielkanoc, które dla chrześcijan są czasem wewnętrznej analizy i refleksji. Taka samokontrola związana jest z zakorzenioną w tradycji judeochrześcijańskiej świadomością dotyczącą ludzkich ograniczeń, wyraźnie zarysowanych w filmie. Znaczącym kontekstem tej autoanalizy polskiego społeczeństwa stał się nie tak odległy od premiery czas panowania komunistycznego reżimu, podczas którego przez dziesięciolecie niemożliwa była autentyczna dyskusja poruszająca drażliwe kwestie. Mimo iż w debacie publicznej starano się rozmawiać na trudne tematy, takie jak relacje polsko-żydowskie podczas drugiej wojny światowej, z początku miało to miejsce jedynie w wąskich kręgach. Korzystając ze zniesienia cenzury, Wajda próbował przedstawić tę delikatną problematykę szerszej publiczności. Nie była ona jednak do końca otwarta z powodu dopiero co upadłego komunizmu i związanymi z tym bolesnymi przemianami społecznymi. Kwestie poruszone w *Wielkim Tygodniu* są szczególnie złożone, wymagają pewnej wiedzy o kontekście historycznym, w jakim są umiejscowione. Do właściwego zrozumienia filmu potrzebna jest świadomość politycznych realiów, w jakich powstawał.

³⁷ M. Adamczyk-Garbowska and M. Ruta, "From Jewish Culture to Culture about Jews," [in:] *Jewish Presence in Absence: The Aftermath of the Holocaust in Poland, 1944–2010*, p. 830–846.

³⁸ Cf. E. Domańska, "(Re)creative Myths and Constructed History: The Case of Poland," [in:] *Myth and Memory in the Construction of Community: Historical Patterns in Europe and Beyond*, ed. B. Stráth, Bruxelles 2000, p. 257.

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