

Maciej Pietrzak

ORCID: 0000-0001-7301-425X

Instytut Filmu, Mediów i Sztuk Audiowizualnych
Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu

“Daring and Heart-Wrenching Jewish Film” — Reception of Aleksander Ford’s *Border Street* in Israel

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Abstract

The main subject of the paper is the distribution and critical reception of the film *Border Street* (dir. A. Ford, 1948) in Israel at the end of the 1940s. Conducting a review of archival diplomatic reports and texts published in the Israeli press of the time, the author reconstructs the strategic rationale behind the film’s export to the Jewish state and analyzes its reception in local media. The conducted analysis demonstrates the significant popularity of the film in Israel and the considerable role *Border Street* played in the context of broader cultural and diplomatic relations between the two nations.

Keywords

Film reception, Polish cinema, Israeli-Polish relations

Introduction

The convoluted production process and political difficulties that encompassed Aleksander Ford’s *Border Street* (*Ulica Graniczna*) have been thoroughly examined by film scholars¹. The film’s production, initiated in 1946, aroused

- 1 The political fate of the film has been explored—among others—in the following works: M. Haltof, *Polish Film and the Holocaust: Politics and Memory*, New York and Oxford 2012, pp. 53–73, P. Litka, *Polacy i Żydzi w “Ulicy Granicznej”* [*Poles and Jews in “Border Street”*], *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, 2000, no. 29/30, pp. 60–74; A. Madej, *Kino, władza, publiczność. Kinematografia polska w latach 1944-1949* [*Cinema,*

significant suspicion among the ruling circles, prompting them to press for numerous modifications in its content to attenuate its perceived message, culminating in the delay of its premiere. Completed in early 1948, the film did not make its debut in Poland until the summer of the following year.

Border Street, which depicts the fate of Jewish and Polish inhabitants in one of Warsaw's tenements against the somber backdrop of the German occupation and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, sparked controversy among the decision-makers. They perceived that the film underscored anti-Semitic attitudes among Poles excessively² and did not sufficiently comply with the Marxist paradigm of progressive struggle³. Consequently, even such an influential figure in Polish cinema like Ford was required to make noticeable compromises. Furthermore, the media reception of the film was strictly controlled to prevent unsanctioned interpretations from shaping its public perception. Hence, contemporary press narratives predominantly accentuated its universal appeal, treating the film principally as a story of the combined battle of Poles and Jews against adversity. Media discussion sidestepped the more inconvenient facets of the film's narrative, most notably the portrayal of Polish prejudices against the Jewish minority⁴.

Within this context, the international career of the film garners particular intrigue. It debuted at the Venice Film Festival in 1948, earning an unexpected accolade in the form of the Golden Medal, a prize bestowed by the Italian government. This foreign acclaim subsequently equipped the film to serve as an effective instrument for shaping a positive image of communist Poland. A prime illustration of this tendency is seen in the film's reception in Israel, occurring just a year after the Jewish state's establishment. The film's release was characterized by a palpable sense of anticipation, fueled by expectations of its potential impact within segments of Israeli society that maintained solid cultural connections to Poland. These expectations were not unfounded, as evidenced by two distinctive sets of sources utilized in this study. The first set comprises diplomatic reports from Polish Consulates in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. The second set includes narratives gleaned from contemporary Israeli press publications. Together, these sources offer an intriguing insight into the film's introduction on Israeli screens and ensuing reception within the society of the young state.

Authority, Audience: Polish Cinema in the Years 1944-1949], Bielsko-Biała 2002, pp. 181–198; R. Włodek, "Ulica Graniczna". *Film pod specjalnym nadzorem* ["*Border Street*". *A Film Under Special Supervision*], *Pleograf*, 2022, no. 2.

2 R. Włodek, "Ulica Graniczna". *Film pod specjalnym nadzorem*.

3 A. Madej, *Kino, władza, publiczność*, p. 190.

4 M. Haltof, *Polish Film and the Holocaust*, pp. 59–60.

Film’s Premiere and Circulation

The premiere of *Border Street* (*HaRechov Al HaGvul*) in Israel was an important milestone for the Polish diplomatic mission, as documented in extensive archival records. From the beginning of 1949, the Polish consulates in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem reported preparations for film screenings in Israel. *Border Street*, along with Wanda Jakubowska’s *The Last Stage* (*Ostatni etap, HaShalav HaAcharon*) and *Forbidden Songs* (*Zakazane piosenki, Tzlilei HaMeri*) by Leonard Buczkowski, were pivotal elements of the propaganda initiatives executed by Polish diplomats. In February, press attaché Marek Thee⁵ reported to Warsaw that attempts to organize grand premieres of the films are being delayed due to their distributor – Marian Kantorowicz, the official representative of Film Polski⁶ in Israel. The attaché emphasized that despite obstacles he was keen on “maximizing the political capitalization of films close to the heart of the Jewish viewer.”⁷ At the same time, the consul general in Jerusalem, Olgierd Górka, assured in his report that he was strongly counting on the effect that the screening of *Border Street* would cause. The Consul wrote, “I do not doubt that the showing of this film will become a powerful asset for mutual cultural relations and sympathies.”⁸ The initial difficulties were resolved in early March when two splendid events were scheduled—a premiere in Tel Aviv on March 11 and a second screening on March 20 in Jerusalem⁹.

A crucial aspect of the film’s promotion was a newsletter prepared by the diplomatic services. It hailed Ford’s film as a notable accomplishment of Polish cinema, highlighting the award it garnered at the Venice Film Festival in 1948¹⁰. The text emphasized the deliberate decision by the Polish

- 5 At that time, there was no Polish cultural attaché in Israel; the press attaché performed the duties.
- 6 Founded in 1945, Film Polski was a governmental organization dedicated to the production and dissemination of Polish cinema.
- 7 Archive of The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw (Archiwum Ministerstwa Spraw Zagranicznych, hereinafter AMSZ), Samodzielny Wydział Wschodni (hereinafter SWW), 11/15/291, Sprawozdanie Attachatu Prasowego przy Konsulacie Generalnym Polskim w Tel Awiwie za rok 1948 [Report of the Press Attaché at the Consulate General of Poland in Tel Aviv for the year 1948], 8.02.1949, p. 12.
- 8 AMSZ, SWW, 11/15/275, Raport Konsulatu Generalnego RP w Jerozolimie [Report of the Consulate General of the Republic of Poland in Jerusalem], 7.02.1949, p. 9.
- 9 AMSZ, SWW, 11/15/291, Sprawozdanie Attachatu Prasowego przy Konsulacie Generalnym Polskim w Tel Awiwie za okres luty-marzec 1949 [Report from the Press Attaché at the Consulate General of Poland in Tel Aviv for the Period February-March 1949], 9.03.1949, p. 5.
- 10 AMSZ, SWW, 11/17/321, Biuletyn na temat filmu “Ulica Graniczna” [Newsletter on the Film “Border Street”], 6.03.1949.

authorities to host the film's world premiere in Tel Aviv as a gesture of amicable relations with the Jewish people. The newsletter also clearly exhibits an attempt to accentuate topics "close to the heart of the Jewish viewer," as the content of the film's description clearly indicates:

This profound film transports us to the tragic period in the life of Polish Jewry, a time of annihilation during the Second World War. The film's content is shocking, as the events in the lives of Polish Jews were indeed devastating. Jews were subjected to unprecedented persecution, suffering, and extermination. Simultaneously, the film presents the noble traits of Polish Jews, the grandeur of their spirit, and their courage, which reached its zenith during the uprising in the ghetto.¹¹

Further in the newsletter, the "courageous stance" of Polish filmmakers in portraying the collaborationist and anti-Semitic attitudes of Polish society was examined. This narrative was undoubtedly tailored for an Israeli audience and deviated from the media narrative accompanying the film in Poland. As Roman Włodek meticulously substantiated, the antisemitic overtones of the film were consistently criticized and minimized at virtually every stage of production and distribution by both authorities and censors¹². In this context, the pronounced emphasis on these issues within the newsletter is notably significant. *Border Street* was depicted as a work that does not shy away from complex topics, presenting a range of character portraits—from martyrs and fighters to collaborators. Notably, it was underlined that the film does not gloss over the issue of antisemitism and the negative attitudes of Poles. While it does display antisemitic biases, it emphasizes that these hostile tendencies—personified in the film by the characters of the Kuśmierak and Wojtan families¹³—were tempered by the traumatic experiences of war and occupation¹⁴. The newsletter's text was featured in the Israeli press sympathetic to the socialist bloc. With minor changes,

- 11 Ibid. [All Polish-language and Hebrew-language sources cited in the article were translated into English by the author.]
- 12 R. Włodek, "Ulica Graniczna". *Film pod specjalnym nadzorem*.
- 13 This includes the portrayal of pre-war nationalist prejudice against Jews, exemplified primarily by the character of Officer Wojtan, who eventually renounces his former beliefs by owing his life to the old tailor Liberman. Another example is the collaborationist and treacherous activities of the Volksdeutsch Kuśmierak, who denounced his Jewish neighbors to the Germans in order to get their apartment.
- 14 AMSZ, SWW, 11/17/321, Biuletyn na temat filmu "Ulica Graniczna".

it was published in the communist newspaper *Kol HaAm*,¹⁵ as well as in the leftist title *Al HaMishmar*.¹⁶



Figure 1. *Border Street* poster from the collection of the National Library of Israel

The claim in the newsletter that the Israeli screening of the film would be its world premiere was not wholly accurate. Excluding an earlier viewing at the Venice Film Festival, the film was also shown on February 28 in Czechoslovakia at Prague’s Alfa cinema¹⁷. However, this fact did not prevent Polish diplomats in Israel from asserting that the March 11, 1949 screening in Tel Aviv was the global premiere of *Border Street*. Indeed, it is undeniable that this was one of the earliest official screenings of the film. The initial projection in Paris occurred eleven days later, on March 22. Furthermore, as previously noted, the official Polish premiere was politically deferred until June 23.¹⁸ The importance of the Tel Aviv premiere was substantial, as evidenced by its high diplomatic profile. Consular reports serve as a testament to the event’s significance:

On March 11, 1949, the film “Border Street” premiere was held at Tel Aviv’s largest cinema, Migdalor. Members of the government, diplomatic and consular corps, and representatives of the press,

- 15 *Mered Geto Varsha BeSeret Polani SheHutzag Bechora Olamit BeTel Aviv* [The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in a Polish Film Whose Global Premiere Was Presented in Tel Aviv], *Kol HaAm*, 13.03.1949, p. 4.
- 16 *Seret Polani Al HaReka Shel Geto Varsha* [A Polish Film Set in the Warsaw Ghetto], *Al HaMishmar*, 10.03.1949, p. 2.
- 17 R. Włodek, “Ulica Graniczna”. *Film pod specjalnym nadzorem*.
- 18 *Ibid.*

academia, culture, and arts were among the 1,200 guests invited. The feedback from the local media, as well as the audience impressions, were overwhelmingly positive.¹⁹

The screening that transpired a few days later at the Orion cinema in Jerusalem was smaller. As reported in a telegram by Consul Górka to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs the day after the screening, the event gathered around 800 attendees. These included representatives from state and local authorities, the Chief Rabbinate, the army, and the Hebrew University²⁰.

Both events were depicted in diplomatic reports as resonating strongly with audiences, who, according to diplomats, were captivated by the film. The correspondence recounting the premiere of the film in Tel Aviv, dispatched to Warsaw by consul Rafał Łoc, provides a particularly vibrant account:

Although entry to the premiere was by invitation only from the Consulate, crowds of people jostled in front of the cinema entrance, trying to gain the right to enter. Among those present, a significant percentage were soldiers. It is worth noting that with “Border Street”, Film Polski launches its first post-war season in Israel, and the Israeli audience – mainly of Polish origin – has long craved Polish cinema. They are now renewing their acquaintance with old friends – *Ćwiklińska*, *Godik*, *Walter*, *Pichelski*, and getting to know the new generation of artists featured in “Border Street”, such as *Broniewska*, *Złotnicki*, *Fijewski*, and others. The audience warmly received “Border Street”, the action which takes place during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, with great emotion, often accompanied by audible sobbing. At times, the audience’s enthusiasm found expression in fervent applause, especially during scenes depicting the Ghetto Uprising. In general, there was concentration; people remained almost motionless, holding their breath as they followed the action. They did not stand up immediately when the lights flickered on – the emotion they were probably experiencing was too strong. People left the hall not as if they had attended a film screening but as if they had attended a religious service. The film had a profound impact.²¹

19 AMSZ, SWW, 11/14/268, Kwartalne sprawozdanie administracyjne [Quarterly Administrative Report], 8.04.1949, p. 8.

20 AMSZ, SWW, 11/17/321, Telegram konsula Olgierda Górki do MSZ [Telegram from Consul Olgierd Górka to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs], 21.03.1949.

21 AMSZ, SWW, 11/14/274, Raport analityczno-syntetyczny Konsulatu Generalnego RP w Tel Awiwie [Analytical-Synthetic Report of the Consulate General of the Republic of Poland in Tel Aviv], 3.04.1949, p. 27.

It must be emphasized that the enthusiastic account of the consul, akin to other similar diplomatic reports, cannot be accepted as a fully credible source. It was in the interest of the diplomat for the authorities in Warsaw to appreciate the scope and success of the event he coordinated. Consequently, there might have been some exaggeration in describing the reactions that the film elicited among the audience.

The fact that some of the positive reactions were genuine is evidenced, among other things, by the enthusiastic letter that the consul received just a few days after the screening. The letter was written by Margot Klausner, a respected writer and filmmaker renowned for her substantial contributions to the Israeli film industry, including establishing one of the country’s first film studios. Her passionate response to *Border Street*—while certainly also dictated by personal interest and hopes for interstate cooperation—underscores the film’s profound impact on viewers:

Dear Mr. Łoc, I absolutely need to express my deepest admiration for the film “Border Street” we watched on Friday. For the first time, I got a profound impression that this film has created a new style – an artistic style of our era. [...] It seems to me that through this film, your country has added a masterpiece to the “world library” of films and I hope the bonds between Poland and our young industry will be vital and reciprocal.²²

The consulate in Jerusalem also sent enthusiastic messages to the ministry. Consul Górká cited heard opinions that *Border Street* is “one of the best and strongest films” that have been seen in Israel²³. Furthermore, he underscored the diplomatic resonance of the film’s warm reception, asserting its instrumental role in bolstering relations between the consulate and local administrative bodies:

I encounter manifestations such as receiving letters stating how much this film has strengthened the cordial atmosphere between Poland and the local society. Moreover, a particular stage of cooling concerning our Consulate in Jerusalem on the part of Jewish authorities, related to my absence at the opening of Israel’s first parliament, has now passed without an echo. Again, I have the best possible

22 Ibid., p. 26.

23 AMSZ, SWW, 11/15/275, Raport Konsulatu Generalnego RP w Jerozolimie [Report of the Consulate General of the Republic of Poland in Jerusalem], 24.03.1949, p. 5.

relations and all the facilities everywhere, and I do not encounter any annoyances or difficulties.²⁴

The widespread media attention significantly highlights the propaganda success surrounding both events. Newspapers across the entire political gamut, from communist to Zionist-revisionist right, published announcements before the events and favorable reports after the screenings held at the Migdalor and Orion cinemas²⁵. Succinct notes remarked on how *Border Street* aroused “great interest”²⁶ and how “the large audience closely followed the film and its images, which reviled the terrible tragedy of Polish Jews.”²⁷ The film’s success story in Israel did not go unnoticed in the Polish press either, especially within local outlets, where it was presented as evidence of international recognition of post-war Polish cinema²⁸.

The film entered the regular cinema circuit in mid-March and sustained considerable audience interest for the initial weeks. By May, the press attaché reported that *Border Street* “has gained momentum and is being shown with sold-out ticket offices for the sixth week (so far, the film has been watched by over 70,000 viewers).”²⁹ Such attendance levels indicated remarkable accomplishment in a burgeoning state with a population nearing one million. However, this fact ignited renewed tensions with the film’s distributor, M. Kantorowicz, who was criticized by the consulate for

24 Ibid.

25 Information appeared, among others, in *Kol HaAm*, *Al HaMishmar*, *HaAretz*, *HaBoker*, and *Herut*: [n.a.], *Likrat HaTzogat Bchora Olamit BeTel Aviv Shel Seret Polani Al Mered Geto Varsha* [Anticipating the Global Premiere in Tel Aviv of a Polish Film on the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising], *Kol HaAm*, 7.03.1949, p. 4; [n.a.], *HaSeret “HaRechov Al HaGvul” Hutzag BiYerushalayim* [The Film “Border Street” Showcased in Jerusalem], *Al HaMishmar*, 21.03.1949, p. 1; [n.a.], *Hatzogat “Rechov HaGvul”* [“Border Street” Screening], *HaAretz*, 21.03.1949, p. 3; [n.a.], *“HaRechov Al HaGvul”* [“Border Street”], *“Herut”*, 7.03.1949, p. 4; [n.a.], *Hatzlacha Raba LaSeret “HaRechov Al HaGvul”* [Great Success of the Film “Border Street”], *Al HaMishmar*, 13.03.1949, p. 4.

26 [n.a.], *HaSeret “HaRachov Al HaGvul” Hutzag BiYerushalayim*.

27 [n.a.], *Hatzlacha Raba LaSeret “HaRechov Al HaGvul”*.

28 The events were reported in Poland by outlets such as *Echo Krakowskie*, *Dziennik Łódzki*, *Życie Warszawy*, and *Dziennik Bałtycki*: [n.a.], *“Ulica Graniczna” wzbudza zachwyt na wszystkich premierach światowych* [“Border Street” Stirs Admiration at All World Premieres], *Echo Krakowskie*, 17.03.1949, p. 2; [n.a.], *“Ulica Graniczna” w Paryżu i Tel-Awivie* [“Border Street” in Paris and Tel Aviv], *Dziennik Łódzki*, 17.03.1949, p. 2; *“Ulica Graniczna” w Tel Awiwie* [“Border Street” in Tel Aviv], *Życie Warszawy*, 17.03.1949, p. 2; [n.a.], *“Ulica Graniczna” w Tel Awiwie* [“Border Street” in Tel Aviv], *Dziennik Bałtycki*, 19.03.1949, p. 2.

29 AMSZ, SWW, 11/15/290, Sprawozdanie Attachatu Prasowego Przy Konsulacie Generalnym Polskim w Tel Awiwie [Report of the Press Attaché at the Consulate General of Poland in Tel Aviv], 09.05.1949, p. 6.

not screening the film widely enough³⁰. In the months that followed, the film was shown in major cities across the country. The film’s widespread popularity became evident in several ways—among them, a plea published in the press in June 1949, calling for the film’s distribution to extend to smaller towns and villages³¹. An analysis of cinema programs indicates that the film maintained an enduring presence on screens; for instance, it was still being shown in Haifa as late as April 1950³².

In November 1949, Marek Thee, who had by then ascended to the role of consul general, presented a summary of the cultural initiatives the consulate undertook in Tel Aviv. According to him, the premiere of *Border Street* was more than just another cinematic event; it marked a promising and momentous launch for Polish film production in the newly established Jewish state³³. The film’s success was not an isolated incident but indicative of significant interest in Polish cinema within Israel. The subsequent premieres evidenced this enduring curiosity. Over the following two decades, numerous Polish films found their way to the Israeli silver screens³⁴, substantiating the cultural bridges that were being constructed. However, these ties would later be halted for an extended period when Poland, in alignment with other nations in the socialist bloc, discontinued diplomatic and cultural relations with Israel in the aftermath of the Six-Day War in 1967.

Critical Reception of the Film

Undeniably, the key driver behind the film’s success in Israel was its central theme. The reception of *Border Street* in Israel must be contextualized within the immediate post-war era—a time marked by raw memories of the Jewish genocide and a deeply-rooted collective desire for its cinematic depiction. As one of the first films to depict the Shoah and to portray the Jewish resistance during that time, it was naturally poised to captivate

30 Ibid.

31 [n.a.], *Yutzag “HaRechov Al HaGvul” Gam BaKfar?* [Will “Border Street” also be shown in the village?], *Al HaMishmar*, 6.06.1949, p. 2.

32 [n.a.], *Kolnoa: Heifa [Cinema: Haifa]*, *HaTsofeh*, 27.04.1950, p. 3.

33 AMSZ, SWW, 11/15/291, *Sprawozdanie Attachatu Prasowego Przy Konsulacie Generalnym Polskim w Tel Awiwie w II i III kwartale 1949* [Report from the Press Attaché at the Consulate General of Poland in Tel Aviv for the II and III Quarters of 1949], 21.II, 1949, p. 3.

34 An analysis of the Council for Appraisal of Films and Plays documents from the collection of the Israeli State Archives in Jerusalem indicates that from 1949 to 1967, more than twenty full-length Polish films were granted distribution permissions in Israel.

Jewish audiences. Intriguingly, interest in the film's inception was visible among the Yishuv³⁵ as early as 1946, a mere three months after Ford began drafting the script. In September of that year, *The Palestine Post* published a brief report on the early stages of production, emphasizing the film's thematic focus on the brave fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising³⁶. The early media attention given to the film was an indication of the profound impact it would later make in Israel. As one of the initial cinematic narratives about the Shoah, in 1949 *Border Street* held artistic value and vivid cultural resonance, as demonstrated by its effect on the media landscape of the time.

A particularly intriguing example of the early anticipation for Ford's film in Israel can be found in an exhaustive article written by Rachel Auerbach, published in the daily newspaper *Al HaMishmar* in January 1949³⁷. Auerbach, a distinguished Jewish author and scholar, devoted much of her work to documenting the Warsaw Ghetto experience, greatly enriching our understanding of this tragic period. In the article, Auerbach—who moved from Poland to Israel the following year—introduces Israeli readers to the film's central themes and ideas while recounting her role in its production. Although she was credited merely as a consultant in the introductory credits of the film, Auerbach assumed a more pivotal role on the set. She was instrumental, particularly in sculpting the Jewish scenes and characters³⁸, and maintained a profound emotional connection to this project³⁹. In her text, she provides a concise summary of the film's plot and delves into details of its production process, emphasizing the contribution of the Czechoslovak filmmakers and highlighting the film's ambitious scale and complexity of

- 35 The term Yishuv refers to the Jewish community living in Palestine under Ottoman and then British rule, from the late 19th century to the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948.
- 36 No title, *The Palestine Post*, 1.09.1946, p. 3.
- 37 R. Auerbach, "Rehov HaGvul" ["Border Street"], *Al HaMishmar*, 21.01.1949, p. 5.
- 38 K. Szymaniak, *Rachela Auerbach (1899-1976) – szkic biograficzny* [*Rachel Auerbach (1899-1976) – A Biographical Sketch*], [in:] *Pisma z getta warszawskiego* [*Writings from the Warsaw Ghetto*], Warszawa 2016, p. 267.
- 39 This connection is evidenced, for example, in an article Auerbach published nearly a decade after the film's release, wherein she described the reactions of Jewish audiences at screenings of the film as follows: *The audience did the rest... They were the ones who accepted the film as a Jewish film wherever it was screened. They, the Jewish audience across all countries – supplemented and completed the plotline in their imagination and hearts – everything that we couldn't manage to incorporate into the film. They, the Jewish audience, felt and understood the enormous emotional charge hidden between the lines of the spoken text and the images.* R. Auerbach, "Rehov Al HaGvul" – *Hirburim, Mehaot, Hatz'a'ot* ["Border Street" – *Reflections, Protests, Suggestions*], *Davar*, 31.01.1958, p. 3.

the endeavour. Auerbach, who personally witnessed the horrors of the Warsaw Ghetto, noted: "The film is about the collective sanctification of the name [Kiddush HaShem] and the joint struggle of Jews and Poles on the border between the ghetto and the Aryan part of Warsaw."⁴⁰

קולנוע אדיסון – ירושלים

החל ממוצ"ש 2.7 ובמשך השבוע
מחזה הגבורה של לוחמי ווארשה

הרחוב על הגבול

אפופית הגבורה על רקע מרד יהודי בירת פולין



מכירת כרטיסים החלה בקופת קולנוע "אדיסון" ובחרי
נות בן-נאים רח' הרצל. קופת קולנוע "אדיסון" לא
תפתח במוצ"ש לפני שעה 8.05 בערב.

Figure 2. Press advertisement for the film screening at Jerusalem's Edison Cinema from the front page of the daily *Ma'ariv*, June 30, 1949

40 R. Auerbach, "Rehov HaGvul".

The aforementioned short press reports related to the initial screenings of the film in Israel already provided succinct critiques of the film. For instance, the *Herut* published a brief note, declaring: “This great film transports us to the tragic era of Polish Jewry, to the period of destruction during the Second World War. The film is shocking in its content.”⁴¹ However, the film’s representation in the Israeli media was predominantly shaped by reviews that appeared concurrently with and significantly before the film’s release in Tel Aviv. The earliest review appeared in August 1948 in the pages of *HaAretz*, where correspondent Chaim Baltzan documented his reactions from a closed screening of the film, organized in Warsaw to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the Ghetto Uprising⁴². Other critiques emerged in various periodicals during the first few months of the film’s exhibition on Israeli screens.

Baltzan’s review, which initiated the press discussion, is replete with praise for Ford’s film. He extols it enthusiastically, stating: “This film, whose language is Polish with only a few words heard in Yiddish, is a daring and heart-wrenching Jewish film.”⁴³ According to Baltzan, an essential aspect of the film is its open depiction of the anti-Semitic attitudes prevalent among sections of Polish society. He specifically notes:

The film does not whitewash the crimes of those Poles who rejoiced [at the fate] of their Jewish neighbors, and especially those who tried to derive maximum personal benefit from the mass tragedy of others. Above all, the film does not try to cover up the most disturbing aspect – indifference or simple nodding by the majority.⁴⁴

The issue of Polish anti-Semitism featured prominently in most press texts dedicated to *Border Street*. A columnist of the daily newspaper *Davar* openly praised the decision-makers who allowed for such depictions, stating, “[...] it should be noted that the Polish government showed courage in also highlighting negative types of Poles who collaborated with the Nazis. This is objectivity and courage, which are very rare at our times.”⁴⁵ The representation of anti-Semitism in Ford’s film did not provoke substantial criticism from Israeli reviewers, and overall, the reception of this aspect of the film

41 [n.a.], “*HaRehov Al HaGvul*”.

42 C. Baltzan, *Gvurat HaGeta’ot Uzva’ot Oswiecim – Al Bad HaKolnoa* [*The Bravery of the Ghettos and the Horrors of Auschwitz - On the Cinema Screen*], „*HaAretz*”, 12.08.1948, p. 2.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Filmal (nickname), “*HaRehov Al HaGvul*” [*“Border Street”*], *Davar*, 16.03.1949, p. 3.

was marked by approval. Furthermore, within the columns of “Herut,” the director was commended for his balanced portrayal of the Polish majority:

The creator of “Border Street” understood that the tragedy would not reach its full intensity if the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto were portrayed merely as a group of a few hundred thousand people surrounded by a sea of blind hatred from the Polish public. He also understood that there would be no genuine drama if the Christian’s attitude towards the Jews was depicted only as emotional participation in sorrow and compassion. Therefore, he incorporated into the film representatives of the Polish public who were wise enough to see the Jews as human beings defending their dignity and the dignity of their people.⁴⁶

The extensive commentary on the depiction of anti-Semitic attitudes in *Border Street* starkly diverges from the discourse surrounding the film in the Polish press, where—as previously mentioned—all texts were subjected to stringent censorship, and the issue of antisemitism was systematically minimized. Notably, the sole Polish review addressing this subject matter surfaced in a reprint within the Israeli media⁴⁷.

Evaluations of the actor’s performance constituted a significant aspect of the critical commentary. Although the bulk of these assessments were favorable, appreciating the prowess demonstrated by the actors, a palpable note of criticism concerning specific performances was apparent. Some reviewers highlighted a predilection for excessive dramatization in the film, citing an inconsistency where “excellent performances coexist with those that seem forced.”⁴⁸ Noteworthy, Władysław Godik, the only Jewish actor in the film’s cast, received exceptionally positive reviews for portraying the old tailor Liberman⁴⁹. Godik was lauded for his enactment characterized

46 M. Moshe, “Rehov HaGvul” BeKolnoa Migdalor [“Border Street” in the Migdalor Cinema], *Herut*, 12.07.1949, p. 2.

47 In June 1949, *Al HaMishmar* published a reprinted review by Leon Bukowiecki, which initially appeared in the Warsaw weekly *Kuźnica* in April: L. Bukowiecki, *Prawda nie ma granic* [Truth Has No Boundaries], *Kuźnica. Tygodnik Społeczno-Literacki*, 1949, no. 14, pp. 3–4; L. Bukowiecki, *HaEmet Ein La Shiur* [Truth Has No Measure], *Al HaMishmar*, 17.06.1949, p. 5.

48 I. Tarmo, “Rehov-HaGvul”. Im Hatzagat HaBechora HaOlamit Shel HaSeret HaPolani BeTel Aviv [“Border Street”. The Global Premiere of the Polish Film in Tel Aviv], *Al HaMishmar*, 16.03.1949, p. 2.

49 It merits acknowledgment that Władysław Godik’s son, Giora, who emigrated from Poland to Israel in 1948, realized remarkable accomplishments there as a theater producer and impresario during the 1950s and 1960s.

by “talent and warmth to the extent of complete identification with the character.”⁵⁰ His contribution was further esteemed as a testament to “the best traditions of acting craftsmanship.”⁵¹

The character of Nathan, convincingly brought to life by actor Stefan Śródka, received considerable commendation. Reviewers depicted Nathan as a “conscious, brave, and valiant Jewish worker, who knows his worth and is loyal not only to Poland and the working class but also to the Jewish people.”⁵² As the narrative unfolds, Nathan emerges as one of the initiators and warriors in the Jewish military organization, leading the Ghetto Uprising. The emphasis on this character is hardly unexpected, given that his portrayal as a Jewish combatant aligns remarkably well with the Zionist idea of the “new Jew.” One critic unequivocally positioned Nathan within a continuum of Jewish heroes, culminating with the Zionist freedom fighters:

He defends himself, fights, works, and embodies a figure (indeed, we find her in every generation repeating against the backdrop of persecution in exile) who heralds a sign to those heroes who, under different historical conditions, would fight for the independence and integrity of the state of Israel.⁵³

However, this ideological interpretation did not garner universal approval. A daily *Davar* reviewer explicitly voiced his disappointment at the absence of an Israeli film dedicated to the uprising, articulating a sense that Ford’s film fell short in conveying a distinctly Zionist message:

The film would undoubtedly have had a different face if it had been made on behalf of the State of Israel, and it is a shame that it does not deal with that. Our work should not be done by others. The film, which deals with the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, does not emphasize the most important thing – the living spirit of heroism, the training of pioneers, and the connection with the Land of Israel.⁵⁴

The film’s technical elements drew a mix of praise and critique. Notably appreciated was the striking set design, which powerfully evoked the harsh realities of ghetto life with “shockingly realistic”⁵⁵ detail. However, some

50 C. Baltzan, “*Gvurat HaGeta’ot Uzva’ot Oswiecim*”.

51 M. Moshe, “*Rechov HaGvul*” *BeKolnoa Migdalar*.

52 C. Baltzan, “*Gvurat HaGeta’ot Uzva’ot Oswiecim*”.

53 M. Moshe, “*Rechov HaGvul*” *BeKolnoa Migdalar*.

54 Filmal, “*HaRechov Al HaGvul*”.

55 [n.a.], *Me’ever Lehol Gvul [Beyond Every Border]*, *HaTsofeh*, 29.05.1949, p. 3.

reviewers argued that certain technical limitations compromised the film’s authenticity. They pointed out an overemphasis on theatricality, which, particularly when compared to contemporary Western cinema, made the film feel dated. Drawing a comparison between Ford’s film and Rossellini’s *Rome, Open City*, as well as the German picture *Long Is the Road*—both concurrently screened in Tel Aviv—one critic noted:

What convincingly moves and shocks the viewer is largely absent in this Polish film. The exterior shots are scant and feel insubstantial compared to the interior scenes. The harsh, full light that illuminates the canal through which the children escape disrupts and shatters the illusion.⁵⁶

Despite the few dissenting voices, the general opinion on the film’s artistic value was unequivocally positive. Numerous texts contained impassioned acclaim, lauding the film as a “significant artistic and educational achievement which profoundly influenced the audience’s flocking to the cinema.”⁵⁷ Some reviewers adopted quite grandiloquent tones, including Israel Tarmo, who wrote in *Al HaMishmar*:

The swan song of the ancient Polish Jewish community is sung in this work, where courage, true love, profound observation, a sense of proportion, tact, immense expressive power, and mastery of the cinematic art elevate it to the league of an epic, standing as a monument.⁵⁸

Several reviews acknowledged the influential role of Aleksander Ford, recalling his substantial contributions to Jewish cinema in pre-war Poland. His film *Sabra*, filmed in Palestine in the 1930s, was particularly noted for its standing as a cornerstone of the future Israeli film industry. It was Ford’s extensive experience in the field that critics attributed to the artistic success of *Border Street*. As Michael Moshe put it:

Unlike many producers in America and Europe, the film’s director, Aleksander Ford (who also contributed to the screenplay), was not interested at all in achieving a cheap effect. This man understood that a fleeting impression, even a shocking one, is not enough and that a film does not deserve the title of “artistic” unless it elevates specific “existing values”, i.e., values deeply ingrained in the viewer’s

56 [n.a.], “*HaRehov Al HaGvul*” [“*Border Street*”], *HaAretz*, 13.04.1949, p. 6.

57 [n.a.], *Me’ever Lehol Gvul*.

58 I. Tarmo, “*Rehov-HaGvul*”.

imagination – things that will stir thoughts in his heart even after the lights go up in the auditorium, the day after the screening. The director, in my opinion, has fully achieved his goal. “Border Street” is a film that does not just impact the viewer’s emotions but also makes him think. This film lacks any of the expensive American sensation or the cheap Soviet propaganda.⁵⁹

Several texts culminated in appeals, highlighting Aleksander Ford’s high esteem among Israeli audiences and advocating for his increased involvement in Israeli film production. These suggestions stemmed from admiration for Ford’s directorial knowledge and his recognition in the industry. One such appeal came from a critic who emphasized the potential benefits of inviting Ford to Israel: “I would like to suggest to our government and the authorized institutions that they invite the film’s director, Aleksander Ford, for a visit. Perhaps he could participate in producing a film that would depict the events of our war in Israel.”⁶⁰ Echoing this sentiment, another commentator argued that Ford’s history as a pioneer of Israeli cinema makes him an ideal candidate for future collaborations, suggesting: “Following this achievement, it would have been fitting for Aleksander Ford to be given the opportunity to lend his talents in Israel, within the broader context of cultural exchanges between Poland and Israel.”⁶¹

During the late 1940s, the nascent Israeli film industry saw Aleksander Ford as an international filmmaker who could potentially invigorate the burgeoning local cinematic scene. Ford’s acclaim and adeptness at crafting compelling narratives were seen as valuable assets that could elevate the quality of Israeli cinema, which was in its infancy and had yet to produce a full-length feature film. However, these hopeful anticipations would not come to fruition for many years, as Ford never undertook such cooperation. Even two decades later, when Ford left Poland due to the antisemitic campaign of the March 1968 and briefly moved to Israel, these expectations remained unfulfilled. While his presence certainly sparked a certain level of anticipation, it did not result in any significant film projects⁶².

59 M. Moshe, “*Rehov HaGvul*” *BeKolnoa Migdalor*.

60 I. Tarmo, “*Rehov-HaGvul*”.

61 Filmaj, “*HaRehov Al HaGvul*”.

62 Ford’s Israeli episode has not been thoroughly researched to date. However, a partial account of this period can be found in a book by Michał Danielewicz: M. Danielewicz, *Ford. Reżyser [Ford. The Director]*, Warszawa 2019.

Conclusion

Analyzing the eventful journey of *Border Street* within the sociopolitical context of the early years of communist Poland, Alina Madej poignantly highlighted that the long-delayed Polish premiere of the film coincided with two consequential historical processes: the rapid disintegration of independent Jewish community life and the widespread emigration of Jews from Poland. According to Madej, by the time the film eventually found its way to the silver screens in Poland in June 1949, its envisioned “model viewer” had largely vanished. These model viewers were individuals who could potentially interpret and appreciate the film from the vantage point of their own tragic, firsthand experiences during the Shoah⁶³. Amid these circumstances, despite the palpable apprehensions harbored by the authorities—who were concerned about igniting the simmering embers of antisemitic resentment among Polish audiences⁶⁴—the film managed to attract notable viewership in its domestic market⁶⁵. This success, however, prompts an important consideration: among the audiences who frequented the Polish theaters, Jewish survivors constituted only a negligible fraction. In light of these dynamics, it would be reasonable to propose that the film’s exhibition in Israel, in many ways, compensated for this absence of the intended audience. During this period, a considerable segment of the Israeli population comprised immigrants who had left Poland in the years leading up to and following the war. In Israel, the film found a profound resonance which resounds in diplomatic correspondences and newspaper articles reviewed during this study.

63 A. Madej, *Kino, władza, publiczność*, pp. 184–185.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 190.

65 Krzysztof Kucharski estimates that over the years, the film has been seen by more than eight million viewers. Edward Zajiček states that in just the first few years of screening, the film was viewed by over six million people: K. Kucharski, *Kino plus. Film i dystrybucja kinowa w Polsce w latach 1990–2000* [*Cinema Plus. Film and Cinema Distribution in Poland in the Years 1990–2000*], Toruń 2002, p. 388; E. Zajiček, *Poza ekranem. Kinematografia polska w latach 1896–2005* [*Beyond the Screen: Polish Cinematography in the Years 1896–2005*], Warszawa 2009, p. 177.

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