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Panel 7-01 Cultural Responses to the Holocaust in Poland and Central Europe #2

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The Shop on Main Street: The Holocaust in Context

Whether measured by the ratio or volume, Continental European cinema was slow in focusing on the Holocaust as a film's dominant topic after World War II. The large-scale heroism of the American and Soviet World War II movies was not an intuitive topic for the Continental European filmmakers, because – with the exception of Switzerland and Sweden – their countries and peoples were either part of Nazi Germany or allied with it. When they addressed World War II, the European filmmakers' early focus was on their own societies' immersion in totalitarian systems. In a transatlantic perspective, what little of it there was, did not translate well. During the first 20 years after the end of World War II, only one film nominated for the foreign-language Oscar[1] was about the Holocaust[2] – the Italian *Kapò* (dir.: Gillo Pontecorvo, 1959),[3] and Hollywood did not choose it as a winner.[4]

Like all of Continental Europe with the exception of Switzerland and Sweden, Central Europe lived under authoritarian and totalitarian governments during World War II, but after the war, it was split in two parts, which affected how filmmakers were able to react to it afterwards. Austria and three-quarters of Germany were shaped into democracies by the Western Allies, restructured totalitarian and authoritarian governance was reimposed on the remaining Germans, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, and Hungarians with a key role played by the Soviet Union there. Positing Nazism as the Soviets' anathema was among the implicit doctrines of the mandated Socialist Realist approach to cinema, but when in 1965 *The Shop on Main Street* became the first film from Central Europe, democratic or Communist, to receive an Oscar, as well as the first film about the Holocaust to receive an Oscar,[5] it was actually in tandem with the temporary relaxation of Communist rule in Slovakia and soon all of Czechoslovakia in the 1960s.

The representation of the Holocaust in Communist Czechoslovakia from the 1950s on was mainly, and massively, channeled through the school curriculum and through official political discourse. The standardized country-wide curriculum taught it as part

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[1] Best Foreign Language Film and its predecessor Special/Honorary Achievement Award.
[2] Mason Wiley and Damien Bona, *Inside Oscar: An Unofficial History of the Academy Awards.* New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1987.
[3] Carlo Celli, *Gillo Pontecorvo: From Resistance to Terrorism.* Lannham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005.
[4] The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, ed. "The 33rd Academy Awards (1961) Nominees and Winners." Santa Monica Civic Auditorium, 17 April 1961.
[5] Wiley and Bona, Ibid.

of the mandated history courses in middle school and again in high school, concentration camps were a common reference in the media and speeches by officials. It was shaped somewhat differently, though, than what "the Holocaust" commonly means today.[6] The word itself did not occur under communism (its frequency was only growing in English at that time too)[7] and while the goal of the policy to exterminate the Jews was always taught and acknowledged, it was seen as a subset of the Nazis' broader goal also to kill anyone who resisted them, with the Communists among the victims put on a particular pedestal as both the martyrs of and people's saviors from the Nazis and their Central European allies. Under such circumstances, the filmmakers – already restricted by all kinds of mandates – found little motivation, and even less room, to employ thematic developments that would overshadow the Communists' postulated central role.

The injunction and any individual desire to do so notwithstanding, the inclusion and political superimposition of the Communists in World War II narratives of the Holocaust was particularly difficult to achieve in the Slovak part of the former Czechoslovakia, which probably contributed to the fact that after the political restrictions began to ease in the late 1950s, two Holocaust films were made that concerned Slovakia and one the Czech lands, although the population ratio and quantity of film production was the reverse of that between the two parts of the country. The Czech lands were integrated in Germany and Nazi opponents were sent to concentration camps during World War II, while Slovakia was a separate country, which deported most of its Jews, but not its political opponents (until after the German military intervention of 1944).[8] That was ignored in World War II Czech and Slovak narratives and the perception of the Holocaust common in the democracies remained backgrounded. The topic of the Slovak World War II movies was the massive anti-totalitarian uprising of 1944, whose image was reshaped, too, to present the Communist as its organizers and leaders.

There was another reason why topics focusing on the situation in Slovakia during World War II were difficult to put forward under the Communist regime. There was a range of parallels between, on the one hand, the Communist system of government, which Prague first called "people's democracy" and later "socialism," and on the other hand Bratislava's government during World War II, which described itself as "totalitarian and authoritarian"[9] – from the abolishment of multi-party elections through the effective captivity of the country by a superpower on which it bordered. It was quite characteristic of cinema in all of the Communist countries, and partly of other art, to let historical parallels and parables convey to the audiences implicit criticism of the otherwise untouchable circumstances of their present lives. Paradoxically, then, the Communist government in Prague effectively held back a focused critical depiction of what it saw as its nemesis.

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[6] Richard L. Rubenstein and John K. Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz: The Holocaust and Its Legacy*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Konx P.

[7] Zoë Vania Waxman, *Writing the Holocaust: Identity, Testimony, Representation.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006.

[8] Peter A. Toma and Dušan Kováč, *Slovakia from Samo to Dzurinda.* Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution P., 2001.

[9] Miroslav Fabricius and Katarína Hradská, eds. *Jozef Tiso – Prejavy a články (1938-1944).* Bratislava: AEPress, 2007.

As repressions began to relax after the denunciation of Joseph Stalin in Moscow in 1956, a process much slower and almost uneventful in Czechoslovakia by comparison to the developments in neighboring Poland and Hungary, so did artists begin to address the Holocaust in a more direct manner. Before television took over, film was the most closely watched medium by the population, and therefore watched closely by the authorities. The Slovak filmmaker Peter Solan finished the first screenplay whose story took place in a concentration camp in 1958, but the authorities shelved it, [10] so the first film concerning the Holocaust that early post-Stalinist Czechoslovakia saw was a politically more acceptable Czech story released in 1959. *Romeo, Juliet, and Darkness* (*Romeo, Julie a tma*; dir.: Jiří Weiss), based on the like-named novel published the previous year,[11] showed the disturbing tragedy of the Holocaust through the death of the female protagonist, her characteristically Jewish name Ester in the novel was replaced with the common Czech Hanka (Dana Smutná) in the film, but also offered a modicum of moral comfort to Czech society, which – except for two Nazi sympathizers – tries to protect and hide her from her German persecutors.

Three years later, the originally shelved Slovak *Boxer and Death* (*Boxer a smrť*; dir.: Peter Solan, 1962) placed the whole action in a concentration camp (Oświęcim/Auschwitz). It was based on the like-named Polish long-short story[12] by Józef Hen inspired by actual experiences of the pre-war Polish bantamweight champion Tadeusz Pietrzykowski.[13] As a bow to the waning Socialist Realist doctrine, the central character, Ján Komínek (Štefan Kvietik), is coached on his way to a moral decision by a Polish Communist fellow inmate, Węźlak[14] (Józef Kondrat), but the earlier doctrinal objection to the screenplay had become obsolete with the growing political-cultural relaxation, which started in Slovakia somewhat earlier than in the Czech part of Czechoslovakia, namely that the character of Walter Kraft (Manfred Krug), one of the concentration camp commanders and a boxer, too, was not negative in a sufficiently straightforward manner. The film's focus was on the plight of opponents of Nazism during World War II rather than on any specific ethnic or religious group – the leading characters are not Jewish – and on ethics – one's response to a chance to accommodate evil without personally harming anyone.

An associated contextual obstacle on the way to a shift of the cinematic focus from the Nazis' broader totalitarian, warmongering, and racist policies to the Holocaust was the Communist handling of religion and ethnicity. Because all religions were seen as the antithesis to what the authorities called Marxism-Leninism, film characters hardly ever displayed their religious heritage and even less so any personal faith. Outside of

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[10] Peter Sloan in an interview with Iris Kopcsayová, "Režisér Peter Solan – Najlepšie roky som stratil." *Sme*, 14 May 2009.

[11] Jan Otčenášek, *Romeo, Julie a tma*. Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1958.

[12] Józef Hen, "Bokser i śmierć." 1955, in: *Cud z chlebem. Opowiadania*. Warsaw: Iskry, 1956; which Peter Solan read in Czech in: Józef Hen, *Zázrak s chlebem.* Translated from the Polish by Josef R. Burian. Prague: Naše vojsko, 1958.

[13] Wojciech Lipiński, "Still an Unknown European Tradition: Polish Sport in the European Cultural Heritage." *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 1996.

[14] *Venžlak* in its Slovakized spelling in the screenplay.

the world of the movies, too, no data on the religious composition of the population were collected in Communist Czechoslovakia.[15]

Theoretically, it might still have left Jewishness open to filmic representations as cultural-cum-ethnic identity. That, however, was hampered by the Communist policy to disallow entering three identities as ethnicities in the census – Rusyn (Ruthenian), Romani (Gypsy), and Jewish, each for a different reason. The approach was not a novelty in the case of the Jews. It was registered as religious, but not another, identity in the former Habsburg Kingdom of Hungary in order to augment the number of people registering as ethnically Hungarian. Czechoslovakia, which incorporated part of the former kingdom when it was created in 1918, allowed both types of registration. 2% of the population in Slovakia registered Jewish ethnicity and 4.1% registered Jewish religion during that period, the two groups largely overlapped.[16] The old-new ban on formal registration of Jewish identity after World War II went hand-in-hand with the offer to change people's characteristically Jewish names in order to, presumably, protect them from a repetition of what the Nazis did during the war.

Under the circumstances, even if any filmmakers tried, they would have been left with few politically permissible techniques to mark a character as Jewish as opposed to ethnically Slovak, Czech, Hungarian, outside of the specific context of the deportations and the Holocaust, when they were marked as Jewish by their oppressors. A rare instance of an attempt to do that was in the film *Death is Called Engelchen* (*Smrť sa volá Engelchen*/*Smrt si říká Engelchen*; dir.: Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos, 1963). The character of Marta (Eva Poláková) is clearly identified as Jewish in the like-named original novel by Ladislav Mňačko,[17] but that identity remains largely unreferenced in the film, as Marta lives and helps the resistance during the war without being recognized as Jewish.

The relaxation of the Socialist Realist doctrines continued fast in Czechoslovakia in the early 1960s. While *Death is Called Engelchen* was still being filmed, the journalist Ladislav Grosman published his short story "The Trap,"[18] which became the basis for his subsequently published "literary screenplay,"[19] and then of the film *The Shop on Main Street* (*Obchod na korze*; dir.: Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos, 1965). It brought the first filmic representation of the broad societal context of the Holocaust in Slovak and Czech filmmaking. All of its characters are Slovak citizens, whether they are identified as Jewish or by default, presumably, Christian or non-religious, and range from those who oppress the Jews, to those who work against the oppression, to the eventual victims of the Holocaust.

The central character Tono Brtko (Jozef Kroner) is placed in the middle and his story of an "Aryanizer" of a diminutive button store aims at a larger target. While in a reductive reading he might appear to represent the sum total of about 2,000[20] World

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[15] With the exception of a single survey in 1950, only two years after the imposition of Communist rule in Czechoslovakia. – Federální statistický úřad, Český statistický úřad, Slovenský štatistický úrad. *Statistická ročenka České a Slovenské federativní republiky 1990.* Prague: Federální statistický úřad, 1990.

[16] *Zprávy Štátneho úradu štatistického XIV1535.* Bratislava: Štátny úrad štatistický, 1933.

[17] *Smrť sa volá Engelchen.* Bratislava: Slovenské vydavateľstvo politickej literatúry, 1959.

[18] Ladislav Grosman, "Past." Translated from the Slovak by Gabriel Laub. *Plamen,* 1962.

[19] Ladislav Grosman, "Obchod na korze, lit. scénář." *Divadlo,* 1964.

[20] All of their ca. 12,000 businesses in Slovakia were taken away from the Jews, about 10,000 of them were small-scale trades and liquidated, about 2,000 were given to non-Jews. Ľudovít Hallon, "Pozícia Ústredného hospodárskeho úradu v politickom, hospodárskom a spoločenskom živote Slovenska v rokoch 1940-

War II Aryanizers in the country, a tiny fraction among Slovakia's population of about 2.6 million at that time, the film ended the previous 15 years of mainly political-propagandist rhetoric on the Holocaust and broadened the societal resonance of Tono's actions to the moral challenges of the non-Jewish population under totalitarian control in much of Europe during World War II. Hardly any among the non-Jews in the real world were Aryanizers, but just like Tono became fond of Rozália Lautmann (Ida Kamińska), the Jewish lady who remains oblivious of the fact that the button store is not hers any more, many among the population at large and also among the viewers at the time the film was released, used to have Jewish friends or at least acquaintances whom they first observed being deprived of the rights, however limited, of the majority of the citizens and whom they then watched being rounded up in a publicized and public manner, and deported in everyone's plain view. *The Shop on Main Street* was the first among Czechoslovak films that addressed the question of complicity not of the by-then stereotypical cinematic character of an anti-Semite or Nazi sympathizer, which Tono's character was written not to be, or an opportunist or chickenhearted denouncer, which Tono was shown not to be either. By extension of those attributes, then, the character was thematically readable as a representation of the dilemmas – actions or non-actions – of those in society at large who witnessed, but were not directly affected by the Holocaust.

The Shop on Main Street, soon recognized outside of the country, too, benefitted from the increasing domestic political relaxation, which enabled the filmmakers to give it a higher degree of artistic veracity than would have been allowed in the repressive 1950s. The Nazi sympathizers did not need to be and are not shown as unconvincing, cookie-cutter abstractions of evil (one[21] actually enjoys Tono's ridicule of Adolf Hitler), the "positive" characters are not forcefully foregrounded, any implicit praise for society and hope of a better future demanded in Socialist Realist filmmaking is trimmed to a particularly brief scene missed by many viewers almost at the end of the movie, and *The Shop on Main Street* closes with a definitely non-Socialist Realist visual reopening of the filmic button store followed by a prolonged tracking shot of Tono and Rozália, happily together again in a mise-en-scène lit and eventually faded into white in the style of typical filmic representations of the hereafter.

Considered in its broader social context, the progression of the early films made in Czechoslovakia that included and eventually focused on the Holocaust, was confined by the fluctuating level of Communist control. If we wanted to abstract from that and ponder what the cultural response might have been otherwise, only concomitant evidence suggests under the circumstances that societal demand, or at least expectations, were not pronounced enough for the filmmakers at large to hammer at the boundaries of what was allowed in that direction – the key artists who pushed the limits in all of these projects were Jewish.[22]

1942." In: Ján Hlavinka and Eduard Nižňanský, eds., *Arizácie*. Bratislava: Dokumentačné stredisko holokaustu, 2010.

[21] Town Commander Markuš Kolkocký played by František Zvarík.

[22] Józef Hen (Polish – author of the novella and co-screenwriter of *Boxer and Death*), Jiří Weiss (Czech – director and co-screenwriter of *Romeo, Juliet, and Darkness*), Peter Solan (Slovak – director and co-screenwriter of *Boxer and Death*), Ladislav Grosman (Slovak – author of the short story and co-screenwriter of *The Shop on Main Street*), Ján Kadár (Slovak – director and co-screenwriter of *The Shop on Main Street*).