

A story about certain postcards from closer and further journeys

13 December 2020 marked the 39th anniversary of the imposition of martial law in Poland. In such a reality, in the streets of Łódź, where ZOMO (Motorised Reserves of the Citizens' Militia) scattered the demonstrators, Waldemar Dziki filmed his excellent debut – “Postcards from a Journey” – which constitutes one of the best Polish films about the Holocaust, ghetto and its imminent end.

After the events of March 1968, the subject of the Holocaust was ousted from the Polish culture. If it appeared, it assumed the form of afterimages, allusive historical metaphors (an adaptation of Schulz's prose by Has in “Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass”), distant references to places connected with this “dry pogrom” – such as platforms filled with friends leaving the Gdańsk railway station, or a symbolic scene of a farewell to the past at the Jewish cemetery in “How Far From Here, How Close” by Tadeusz Konwicki. The Jewish characters appeared episodically – somewhat embarrassingly portrayed in popular Polish series (the character of Columbus in the “Columbuses” and Sommer in “Polish Roads” – both directed by Janusz Morgenstern). However, it was during this saddest decade of the Polish People's Republic – the 1980s – that the Polish film readdressed the subject of the Holocaust. There are several reasons for such a turn of events. Political decisions were the most important ones. Isolated by the introduction of martial law and the wave of repressions, Jaruzelski's team was desperately searching for an international legitimation, and the opportunity was seized on 19 April 1983 – the year of the 40th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The festive celebrations resulted in an image disaster. Participation in the Honorary Committee of the Celebration was offered to Marek Edelman, which the man refused and manifested his moral objection through an article in “Tygodnik Mazowsze”. In the article, he categorically opposed the symbolic appropriation of the memory of the Uprising by the Red Guards of martial law. The fiasco was completed by a delegation from the Palestine Liberation Organisation who, in the presence of the Israeli government representatives, compared the Israeli occupation to the one whose tragic

anniversary had just been celebrated.

However, the rulers' belief in film as an art, which has the greatest influence on the formation of social-historical notions, resulted in the fact that during martial law, four films about the Holocaust were directed for production, including two that described the Warsaw Ghetto from different perspectives: the view from the outside – an intimate film by Stefan Szlachtycz "Tragarz puchu" (Warsaw. Year 5703) and Waldemar Dziki's debut whose action takes place in the ghetto – "Postcards from a Journey".

Dziki's film has the power of a debut's talent, which is not always as spectacularly revealed in subsequent works. Filmed in the liberal environment of the Karol Irzykowski Studio, the movie was an adaptation of Ladislav Fuks' debut novel, "Mr Teodor Mundstock", written in 1963 (Polish edition – 1966). The plot is set in Prague, Czech Republic, and tells the story of a nearly sixty-year-old, lonely man whose uninteresting yet stable life (he is a legal adviser in a twine factory) is brutally interrupted by the arrival of Germans. The Jews are forced to wear a yellow star and, with time, they start to be displaced. The oppressive terror thickens, and the title character decides to "adapt" to death – this is his method of overcoming fear. The exercises occur in his imagination and include possible variants of humiliation, torture and pain. When the day of deportation arrives, Mr Theodor finds within himself a strange peace and permission to die.

Fuks was a trained psychologist with no family history of the Holocaust. He looks at his Jewish character like a lab technician looks at a Petri dish and notes the progressive stages of disintegration. Terror is affirmed at the level of language: dense, full of metaphors, the narration simulates delirium, the chase of thoughts – typhoid delusions.

This is what fascinated Dziki and prompted him to chose for his debut a book that interested him in his early youth (his mother sent him a copy of the book from Zakopane as a gift). This breathlessness of claustrophobic expectancy had something of the hopeless atmosphere of martial law, yet the novel, based primarily on an internal monologue, required mastery in adaptation – the debutant was aided by an excellent screenwriter associated with the "Tor" Film Studio, Witold Zalewski. Although the plot was transferred to Polish reality, the topography of

the place has not been specified. It is a ghetto on occupied Polish territory. Most likely in Warsaw (the symbols of "Fighting Poland" appear on the wall), yet somebody mentions the Kraków synagogue, the yellow stars are sewn on the Jews' clothes – so maybe in Łódź... An unspecified location of the film becomes a certain type of synecdoche – totum pro parte – representing the state of ghetto imprisonment. The completed scenario is to be realised in Karol Irzykowski Studio – the youngest of the existing ones and thus the least ossified, the most progressive. However, martial law is an ongoing process. Television has been boycotted, the actors are not willing to play, the work on the film about the ghetto has been prolonged, and the subject appears too controversial. Dziki is determined: "Paradoxically, martial law makes me understand more and more what Fuks is writing about^[1]," he will say in an interview with Marek Hendrykowski.

He receives a modest budget of ten and a half million PLN (i.e. below the average for a TV film). He begins to discuss the topic with actors. Regardless of the boycott, they agree to play in a young debutant's movie in the studio, where the dissident "colonels" were created: "Christmas Eve '81" by Leszek Wosiewicz, Robert Gliński's "Sunday Pranks" and Wiesław Saniewski's "Surveillance". Among those who agreed to act is Halina Mikołajska – barely released from the internment and recovering in Mały Cichy, Maja Komorowska – who is openly supporting the opposition, as well as Władysław Kowalski (Mundstock becomes Rosenberg in Dziki's film), Janusz Michałowski, Sława Kwaśniewska, Jerzy Trela and Henryk Bista.

The photos are taken in the very heart of Łódź – Kościuszki Street. ZOMO is stationed in the opposite hotel. In the city, demonstrations continue and the streets are filled with pungent gas. The crew still does not have official permission to shoot yet they decide to start filming. Years later, the director recalls that, due to the intensity of gas, they could not work even in hotel rooms. "Maja (Komorowska – BK's note), who has just returned from sending parcels to people in prison, and Halina (Mikołajska – BK's note), who has left the internment seven weeks earlier were sitting at the table".^[2] The team decides that the attempts of recitation should take place at night when the air does not stifle the actors. From the modest funds, Andrzej Przedorski manages to create an extremely suggestive, expressionistic scenery. The contemporary Łódź is full of vacant buildings. The city's Genius loci may be defined by the sight of hovels, deserted

courtyards and the overwhelming ugliness that arises as soon as we leave the veduta of the palace on Piotrkowska Street. The production designer finds an abandoned tenement on Targowa Street, where ZOMO had previously stationed. The filming lasts twenty-nine days. The work on the set is intertwined with the reality of martial law – as if for that moment, the fictional and real stories had merged: “When we were shooting an outdoor raid scene with a hand-held camera, demonstrations continued three streets farther, by the churches (...) We had two motorcycles leaving with six soldiers, here – the raid, and a few hundred meters farther – the ZOMO pacified the demonstration with batons and water. The crowd escapes through the street and backyards and suddenly falls into our lighting. Witek Dąbal (the operator – BK’s note) screams to take the camera away while people are running straight towards these motorcycles,”^[3] is how the director recalls the set.

The debut was a success. The premiere took place on March 1984 – already after the lifting of martial law. Despite the excellent reviews, the film was not considered a success in terms of attendance. It is too intellectual, difficult to process, full of sadness. Regardless of this oblivion, it remains one of the most beautiful and original Polish films devoted to the Holocaust. Perhaps it was not a good time for a premiere – such despair, misery and inevitability of death visible on the screen was too tragic for the fatigued Polish audience, deprived of illusions about liberation. However, this may be the only moment in the history of Polish cinema, in which a crumb of memory of that despair intertwined with the sadness of reality of the early eighties.

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Photo: “Postcard from a Journey”, film poster by Krzysztof M. Bednarski, 1983

[1] M. Hendrykowski, "To się pamięta." (You Will Remember That). Interview with Waldemar Dziki in: *Debiuty polskiego kina* (Debuts of Polish Cinema), M. Hendrykowski (ed.), Konin 1998, p. 280

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 282

[3] *Ibid.*



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