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Director seeks 'truth' of horror

Moviemaker Andrzej Wajda lost his father in the 1940 Katyn forest killing of army officers he brings to the screen.

By Vanessa Gera
Associated Press

CZAREK SOKOLOWSKI *Associated Press*

THE MISSING NARRATIVE: *In telling the story of 22,000 Polish officers' deaths at the hands of the Soviet secret police, Andrzej Wajda felt obliged to omit any episode about his father's demise.*

WARSAW — In the chilling final scene of "Katyn," the new film from Oscar-winning director Andrzej Wajda, Soviet secret police methodically execute one Polish army officer after another in a dank cellar, washing away the blood with buckets of water in a calculated choreography more at home in a slaughterhouse.

For Wajda, filming the scene proved one of his greatest personal challenges. Not because his own father suffered that fate in the notorious 1940 massacre — an episode so tragic that nearly seven decades later, its mention evokes painful remembrance — but because he knew that the surviving spouses and children of the 22,000 Poles killed would see their deaths gruesomely played out on the big screen.

"This was the most important thing to me — how to make the movie in a way that would not hurt them, how to make them accept this as the truth and to say, 'Yes, this is how it happened,' " the 81-year-old Wajda told the Associated Press.

He described "Katyn" as his most personal movie ever, given that his father was among the Polish officers killed by Soviet troops on the order of Josef Stalin. What made it even more painful was the fact that his mother lived out the rest of her life holding out a vain hope that that her husband, Lt. Jakub Wajda, might have survived, since his name never appeared on any official list of Polish soldiers killed in World War II.

"She nourished the illusion that he was alive somewhere and would come back from the war," Wajda said. "Until her death, she hoped he would be found."

Wajda said the story was born not just as a way to provide information about the massacre, but as a way to tell a story that involved his own family.

"I wanted to tell a story about something in my area of experience, about my father and my mother. It all happened in a time that I still remember," he said, speaking at the film school in the Polish capital that he founded, and where he had just finished giving a lesson to a group of young filmmakers.

The film was released in Poland this fall, and has so far sold 3 million tickets in the country of 38 million people. It is scheduled to make its international premiere at the annual Berlin Film Festival in February, and Wajda is hopeful it may be picked up for distribution in the United States and elsewhere.

But he acknowledged that the complicated historical context of the film may prove esoteric to some foreign viewers.

The film opens in 1939 after Germany has invaded Poland from the west and the Red Army has moved in from the east, carving up the country based on the notorious Molotov-Ribbentrop pact between Hitler and Stalin.

Wajda depicts Poland's agony in the opening scene where, on a bridge, Poles fleeing the Nazis collide with their countrymen fleeing the Soviets.

It is symbolic, but based on actual events. So is another metaphorically charged scene that shows a Soviet soldier who removed a Polish flag from a building, ripped it apart and used the white portion to wrap around his foot as a sock. The half that was red — the color of communism — is put back on the building.

The message is clear: Poland is obliterated and the communists are in charge.

The flourish is typical Wajda.

"Those who know my films know that I make such symbolic scenes, that this is my specialty," said Wajda, who received an honorary Academy Award in 2000 in recognition of his works that maneuvered between a repressive communist government and an audience yearning for freedom.

The movie depicts not only the crimes carried out in the Katyn forest and elsewhere and the devastation of the families, but also what Wajda called the "Katyn lie."

He traces the fate of the wives and a sister of fictional officers who struggle to learn the truth about their loved ones from the Soviets, who controlled part of Poland for a while early on in the war and all of it afterward. The crimes get blamed on the Nazis. Another thread of the film details a young woman who erects a gravestone for her brother killed at Katyn; it is quickly destroyed by the communist government.

Wajda, who was 13 when the war began, did not feature his father among the characters.

"It would have been hard for me to tell his story since I don't know what really happened," Wajda said of his father, whom he recalled as a dutiful officer.

Despite his father's absences, Wajda vividly recalled "wonderful moments when he taught me how to ride a horse. At that time, the whole Polish army was still on horseback."

His father also taught him to draw, which inspired him to study fine arts before attending the Lodz film school, which launched a career that won him renown for films like "Ashes and Diamonds," "Kanal," "Man of Marble," and "Man of Iron."

To him, Katyn is one of the most tragic war crimes in history and a topic he could not have tackled before communism collapsed in 1989 because Moscow refused to acknowledge it.

"I never thought I would live to the moment when Poland would be a free country," Wajda said. "I thought I would die in that system."

Associated Press writer Monika Scislowska contributed to this report.