

Document Citation

Title	Feature: Jewish hero, Polish saint
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Source	<i>Jerusalem Post</i>
Date	1992 Feb 15
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	12
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Korczak, Wajda, Andrzej, 1990

Why would a Polish director want to make a film about a Jewish victim of the Holocaust, even if his death was an act of heroism? True, it is in the nature of heroes that their stories have a wide-spread, often universal appeal. Also, they are commonly fated to transcend the specific historical context from which they arose and enter the domain of individual interpretation. However, there is something about Jewish history in general, and the Holocaust in particular, that does not lend itself easily to borrowing.

Since Jews have historically suffered as a result of the hostile sentiments of their Gentile neighbors, it is at the very least surprising that one of these neighbors should now choose to adopt a Jewish hero as one of its own. Noted Polish director Andrzej Wajda, however, has elected to do just that.

In what he claims will be his final cinematic offering, he has meticulously recreated the story of Janusz Korczak, the Jewish pediatrician who in 1942 declined all offers of false documents which would have made an escape possible, and followed the orphans in his care into the confines of the Warsaw Ghetto, and from there to Treblinka, where he perished with them.

While to many Jews Korczak is symbolic of one who chose to share the fate of his people, Wajda's Korczak is as much a Polish martyr as he is a Jewish victim. He is first and foremost a Pole, and his death is portrayed as a loss to Poland.

Korczak, an Academy Award nominee as best foreign film, is being released here.

Though the screenplay for *Korczak*, written by long-time Wajda collaborator Agnieszka Holland, was completed as far back as 1981, it took Wajda—the man who made *Man of Iron* and *Man of Marble*—almost a decade to raise the necessary financial backing. Hollywood was interested, but only on condition that the final product be lighter, less bleak and funnier than the original concept. Wajda refused. "I cannot make a *Dr. Zhivago* or a *Holocaust*," he said. "Hollywood productions of that kind are unnatural fictions. I'm striving for authenticity."

It is evident that great pains were taken to recreate the gruesome surroundings that were the Warsaw Ghetto in which, according to German documentation, 450,000 men, women and children were enclosed in an area designed to house no more than 50,000.

The Warsaw Ghetto has today been replaced by a modern housing estate, but Wajda declined to opt for set-building. Having decided to recreate the story with as much realism as possible, it was imperative that he find a location that could be transformed into the ghetto with relative ease.

He did not have to look far. Wajda found what he needed just across the Vistula, in Praga, a miserable slum inhabited by desperate and heavy-drinking workers. All that Wajda added was a wall across a street or two, representing the ghetto wall, barbed wire and a sentry box.

When it came to the *human* backdrop of the film, Wajda approached his subject with a similar degree of unsentimental naturalism: in the gutter a child plays hopscotch beside a corpse, the chairman of the Judenrat is beaten for refusing to sign a transportation order, a solitary Jew stalks the cold, wet streets crying out his warning: "The Germans have ovens, and they stoke them with Jews!" Wajda goes so far as to depict German soldiers industriously filming the degradation to which they have reduced their victims.

On several occasions, he intercuts the action with actual documentary footage. To facilitate this approach to truthfulness, Wajda resolved to shoot *Korczak* in black and white—a courageous decision from the purely commercial point of view, but one that allows for almost imperceptible transitions to and from the documentary footage.

"As a director," says Wajda, "I simply tried to rediscover the simplicity and honesty of my early black-and-white films. Over the past three decades, European cinema has stunningly renewed its language and improved its



Jewish hero, Polish saint

An unusual semidocumentary new film by Polish director Andrzej Wajda turns Janusz Korczak from a Jewish victim into a national martyr.

By Tamar Vital

technique, but it has lost its naive faith in the audience's desire for beautiful and simple stories. We have become used to a lot of contrived clichés and show-off devices used by directors to frighten, surprise or entertain. But because of its very subject, such things were out of place in *Korczak*."

The film opens when, among the first ominous signs of the Nazi regime, Korczak learns that due to his Jewish origin, his popular radio broadcasts are no longer to be permitted. It follows with the rounding up and transfer of Warsaw Jewry to the Ghetto, among them Korczak and his 200 wards, where they endure suffering and starvation. Entirely preoccupied with the daily struggle of feeding and clothing his children and retaining a semblance of normality in their lives, not to mention a roof over their heads, the doctor consoles himself with the hope that "Nazis are ruthless, but surely they'll spare children."

When, inevitably, Korczak comes to understand the reality of the situation and finally accepts that it is not within his power to save the lives of his children, his sole concern is to ensure that they die with as much dignity as possible, and that they should not die alone.

For himself, he rejects offers of forged pass-

ports (including an American one) and escape routes and chooses to remain with his children. To ease their suffering, he bargains with the Judenrat for extra provisions, is willing to risk beatings and humiliation, and visits the ghetto cafe where local black-marketeers and collaborators pass the hat to raise funds for his orphans. "Education is my business," he says, "not politics." Finally, when the moment arrives, he instructs his pupils to put on their best outfits and prepare for an outing. Then he leads them to the railway station and boards the train to Treblinka with them.

"Many great film artists," says Andrzej Wajda, "have tried to represent a saint on the screen, and many have failed. Evil has so many faces. It is so excitingly rich and inventive. Good is defenseless, naive, dull. Hence the very idea of a film about Dr. Korczak seemed pointless. But sainthood derives from human weakness, and man's fight against his own weakness has always been art's main motif."

Undoubtedly, Janusz Korczak's is one of the most inspiring stories to emerge from the destruction of European Jewry. But Korczak was a Jew, and Judaism

has no saints. Perhaps this is one of the most disturbing aspects of the film to a Jewish viewer: The very notion of regarding one's heroes as saints and then investing them with human characteristics is foreign to Judaism.

The concept of sainthood was almost certainly not as familiar to the residents of the Warsaw Ghetto as it was to those who resided without. Wajda's Korczak is as heroic a man as the doctor undoubtedly was, but he is presented through Polish-Christian eyes, as a saint rather than as a man of flesh and blood. This Korczak never wavers, never so much as stops to consider the offers of escape.

Is it conceivable that, knowing he was going to certain death, and that there was nothing whatever he could do for any of his children—that regardless of whether he accompanied them or not, they would die at the same time and in the same manner—he did not even once ask himself if there were not some purpose in saving himself in order to continue his good work? It is known, for example, that Korczak visited Eretz Yisrael several times and seriously considered settling here.

In the movie, Wajda's Korczak has no private life, no friends, no past or present loves. His whole being is given to his vocation. He is a pacifist, a quiet man who will turn the other cheek rather than fight back. He will have no part in any attempt at armed struggle. Instead he tends to his flock as best he can until the time comes to lead them to their fate. Certainly a depiction more in the vein of the New Testament than the Old.

It is interesting to note that in Wajda's ghetto no Yiddish is spoken. The only time it is heard is in the cafe where black-marketeer and collaborators come to relax. There, an entertainer sings a Yiddish song, flinging her arms above her head and wearing her shawl about her shoulders in a manner more resembling a Gypsy than a Jewess.

There are hardly any Poles to be seen in *Korczak*; it is a story about Germans and Jew in which Poles take no part. The one Polish woman with whom Korczak has any contact is willing to risk her own life to save the good doctor and one of his children. One could almost forget that these incidents took place in one of the most antisemitic countries in Europe. Only the young girl with whom one of the teenage orphans falls in love appears wearing a fur coat bought cheaply in a market now saturated with expensive products previously belonging to Jews. Wajda does not permit his hero to reach Treblinka. In the closing scene, shot in slow motion, the cattle car carrying the doctor and his children inexplicably uncouples from the train and comes to a halt. Its doors slide open and the children spill out, laughing, onto the open grassy field.

The film in general, but this fantasy ending in particular, has become the focal point of a vocal assault on *Korczak* by a number of critics, mainly French, who regard it as a manifestation of a traditional Polish attempt at ignoring Poland's passivity or complicity at the genocide of Jews. Claude Lanzmann, director of *Shoah*, walked out during a benefit screening, crying antisemitism. *Le Monde's* Danielle Heymann asked: "Treblinka as Redemption for Jewish children? No! Many times no!"

But not all are in agreement. Director Roman Polanski, himself a Holocaust survivor, and Marek Edelman, one of the leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, have both stated that they can detect no signs of antisemitism in the film.

This dispute does not detract from Wajda's seriousness of purpose, and the conscientiousness of his approach to the making of *Korczak*. Neither does it bear any relevance to the film's cinematic merits, to its maker's professional abilities, or to the significance of this endeavor, which marks the liberation of Polish cinema from a long period in which Jewish topics were virtually forbidden. Though it is a story of the Holocaust—a historical episode that is uniquely Jewish—this film is very much a tribute to a Pole by a Pole. But this does detract from the rare courage and bravery of the hero himself: Janusz Korczak. ♦