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JUDITH CRIST,
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Herald Tribune

'Shop on Main Street'

—One You Should See

"THE SHOP ON MAIN STREET"

34TH STREET EAST THEATER

A screenplay by Ladislav Grossman, directed by Jan Kadar and Elmar Klos, produced by Barrandov Film Studios, a Marie Desmarais-Eurofilm Presentation released through Prominent Films. In Czech with English subtitles. Running Time: Two hours and eight minutes. With the following cast:

Tono Brtko Josef Kroner
Rosalie Lautmann Ida Kaminska
Evelina Brtko Hana Silvkova
Marcus Kolkotsky Frantisek Zvarik
Rose Kolkotska Helena Zvarikova
Imro Kuchar Martin Holly
Katz, the barber Martin Gregor

By Judith Crist

"The Shop on Main Street," deservedly the highlight of the last New York Film Festival, can now be seen by the general public. You cannot afford to miss this brilliant and extraordinary film.

Brilliant in performance and extraordinary in accomplishment, this Czech movie is a traditional one in technique. Its scope, however, is remarkable and its achievement rare, for it manages to translate the apocalyptic tragedy of our century into human terms and to do so with laughter and tears, with scorn and compassion, and with the simple beauty of truth.

The tragedy, almost beyond conception in its enormity, is not only that of the six million Jews who were exterminated by the Nazi or of the millions of "ordinary" men and women who stood witness to their murders; it is the universal tragedy of bigotry's debasement of humanity and of well-meaning fools. And in this film, writer, directors and actors have succeeded in encompassing all this in a small town and epitomizing the tragedy in the relationship of two people.

The two are Tono Brtko, a ne'er-do-well carpenter, as nondescript as the lackadaisical mongrel at his heels, and Rosalie Lautmann, an elderly Jewish widow insulated against the troubled world of wartime Slovakia by failing eyesight and hearing.

Tono has not fared well under the occupation, not so much because of any overt opposition to fascism but rather

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because of his aversion to his brother-in-law, Marcus, an avaricious opportunist who has become the local fuehrer. Through him, however, egged on by his greedy, nagging wife, Tono is appointed "Aryan controller" of the widow's button shop—only to find it bankrupt. The Jewish community puts him on salary to protect the old woman; she herself is under the delusion that her friends have provided Tono to assist her.

The two can scarcely communicate. The old woman, cocooned by her deafness and the routine of her pious little household, delighted to have someone to cozen and cook for and patronizingly tolerant of her bumbling new assistant, chirrups away happily in Slovakian and Yiddish, sharing treasures and memories with him. On his part, Tono is soon filled with an affectionate respect, an awareness that he is in the presence of a lady, and assumes an air of awed protectiveness.

Slowly but surely, as the two have earned our affectionate laughter, the overwhelming artistry of the film makes itself felt, for its makers have not taken the easy path of settling for good and evil, of playing upon our heart-strings through the old woman or of offering anyone a clear-cut morality tale. For it is Tono who becomes the focal point of the duet that comes to a dramatic climax when the town's Jews are to be deported and he is faced with the choice of saving Mrs. Lautmann or himself.

Not, mind you, for a moment are we unaware of the woman Ida Kaminska portrays, a woman with all the failings and all the dignity of old age, with the purity of the innocent and the sweetness of the loving.

But it is Josef Kroner's Tono who becomes a figure of fascination because he remains so ordinary a human being. His lack of vice is his virtue; it is in juxtaposition to the grasping bluster of his in-laws that he emerges as a tolerant man of peace and to the blowsy sensual and near-vicious greed of his wife that he is seen as a gentle, good-natured fool. And there lie the roots of the tragedy, in feckless inertia, in dull indifference, roots buried by the smug Sunday strollers on the Main Street, being bared in the huge guardist monument under construction across the way, finally exposed in the murder of the "white" Jew and laid bare in the final horror.

In his direction Jan Kadar, working with the actors, has chosen to underline nothing and everything; through script and performance by an impeccable cast the miniscule moment and tiny gesture become part of the enormous drama.

We have no goose-stepping troops, no monsters with whips herding the deportees, no torture sequences. We see only bits and pieces, as Tono does in peeking through the shop shutter, until, like him, we face the final realization that the nightmare is the reality.

Nowhere does the film lag; nowhere is there an exploitation of the emotions, nowhere the jolting realization that we have turned from surface comedy to "significance." We are concerned from beginning to end with ordinary people, in all their complexity. Totally without pretension, with two great performers creating unforgettable portraits, "The Shop on Main Street" stands as one of the fine films of our time, for all time.

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