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Los Angeles Times

Impact, Emotion in Superb Czech Film

BY KEVIN THOMAS

Times Staff Writer

"The Shop on Main Street" is a masterpiece. Not within recent memory has there been a picture with such emotional impact. Superb in every way, this Czechoslovakian film, exclusively at the Fox Lido, should be a strong contender in the upcoming Oscar race.

Set in a sunny Slovakian town during World War II, it tells of a humble carpenter's efforts to protect an aged Jewish widow from deportation. A homely, clown-like figure who is regarded by his proud peasant wife as little better than a village idiot, he is actually a man of intelligence and independent thought.

Arrogant Relative

Therefore, he is an anathema to his arrogant Nazi brother-in-law, commander of the local fascist guard. Like a man throwing a bone to a dog, the commander appoints the carpenter as "aryan controller" of a tiny notions shop on the village square.

Expecting to receive a gold mine, he is dismayed at discovering that the shop is bankrupt, its deaf proprietress sustained by the other Jews in the community. Not only is she unaware of her true financial state but also that a war is going on.

The stage, then, is set for tragedy. Having created a situation in which to pursue to the utmost the

conflict between a man's responsibility to himself and to others and, consequently, the extent to which he can submit to a monstrous authoritarian regime without being destroyed by guilt, directors Jan Kadar and Elmar Klos pull out all the stops. For their heroine, as superlatively played by Ida Kaminska, is quite the most irresistible old lady to appear on the screen since Katie Johnson in "The Lady Killers."

Background of Terror

Against a background of mounting terror, the relationship between the widow and the carpenter, whom she thinks is merely a shop assistant, develops with warmth and humor. Kadar and Klos create a pathos that culminates in a heart-rending climax in which the carpenter must choose between saving himself and sacrificing the old lady.

As the carpenter, Josef Kroner gives a Chaplinesque performance that is as flawless as Miss Kaminska's. "The Shop on Main Street" represents as much a breakthrough for the Czechoslovakian cinema as "Ashes and Diamonds" did for the Polish several years ago.