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The Film Ida

A review by Roger Mesznik; July 14, 2014

Today, Lynn and I saw (with friends) the film IDA, a Polish film provided with English subtitles.

I was moved and puzzled, induced to think and grieve, and left a bit cold. I am very glad to have seen it, and I recommend it.

The film is set in Poland of the 1960s. A novice in a convent (Ida) is talked by the mother superior into meeting her aunt prior to taking her vows. Talking to her aunt for the first time, Ida discovers that she (Ida) was born to a Jewish family, and that her parents and her baby cousin were assassinated during WWII after being stashed for a while by a neighbor in a hideaway in the forest. She also discovers that she was spared as a Jewish baby by being deposited with the village priest. She was saved because she was too small to recall anything, her skin was not dark enough to betray her, and she would not show evidence of a circumcision. She eventually discovers that the then-assassin is a still-living neighbor whom she manages to see.

While watching the film, my first thoughts were directed to the many victims of the Shoah I knew and know who were damaged for life, often damaged irreparably, even though they were spared the gas chambers, the camps, and the killing fields. The story arc of Ida made me think of the people who ended with no descendants. The arc made me think of the people who were never able to overcome the futility of lives rendered sterile, people whose lives were deprived of meaning and purpose, people whose lives were eviscerated of hope, people whose decisive years were wasted hiding in a coal cellar, or in a forest, or under false identities, or in convents and monasteries, or with false families. These

victims were not killed, but many of their lives amounted to little more than seeing their respective survival to its predictable end.

From my family history, from friends and acquaintances, from the literature, and from this film again, I was made to feel once more for the millions of victims whose lives were spared, but whose substance and vitality was drained from them with no recourse. Viewed with hindsight, reincarnation in Israel or in the US (to choose the two overriding such destinations) seems so self-evidently healing, and so often heroic and praiseworthy. But we do not have many auto-biographies of the many victims who never healed. Untold numbers of lives are right now draining into an amorphous insignificance of lost hopes and forgone opportunities. They are departing without a record; they are leaving this world without having left any imprint.

I also knew and know people who spent years fighting the Nazi occupation. Many of them spent those years also hoping to create a world in which such monstrosities will never happen again. These hopes were appropriated by false saviors and by idolatrous characters who promised Eden on earth. These liars eventually delivered nothing but disappointment, more pain, more deaths, and many more broken hearts and disillusioned minds.

Ida is in her early twenties. And yet, at the film's end, she elects to surrender to her original destiny and live out her life as a nun. But the convent is a sad place. It is lost in a far corner of a small village, devoid of any effective purpose and doomed to eventual abandonment. Its decaying old house is too big, its economic basis is missing, and its superficial religious role is fulfilled by greeting people with "God be with you" and the off-handed dispensation of a blessing to a little baby.

Prior to deciding to return to the convent, Ida clearly foreswears the opportunity to seek justice, or revenge, or even a modicum of compensation for the crimes committed against her and her family.

She could have returned to the convent driven by an urge to escape this sordid past. She did not. She could have done it because she elects to devote her future to some grander vision of her religious calling. She did not. She could have done it because she simply wanted to live it up when finally liberated from her oppressive past and present. She did not.

She seems to return to the convent out of a deep sense of self-abnegation; and nothing more. The misery of being a Jew in this hostile world at this hostile time is

transformed into an elective controlled misery of self-denial and empty sacrifice. Is it a possible, half-hearted “religious answer” to the well-known “survivor guilt”, or is it only a convenient regression into familiar contexts? This process saddened me.

It seems that her just-discovered past has so broken her that all she can do is to spend the remainder of her days in meaningless self-denial. To be sure that the denial is indeed as painful as it is supposed to be, she even engages in a discovery of what she will miss when taking her vows. She does it on the advice of her aunt who commits suicide shortly after suggesting this possibility to her. After celebrating the memory of her dead aunt by following her advice, she snuffs the remainder of her own life in quiet obedience to inconsequential, anonymous self-effacement. Is she committing a slow-motion suicide which is formally consistent with Catholic religious precepts, but a suicide nonetheless? And to make sure that the viewer understands the depth of this meaningless sacrifice, she is shown as a beautiful and attractive young woman at the prime of her life, and she is told so more than once in the film.

I felt betrayed by Jean-Marie Lustiger, the Jewish boy who had a successful religious “career”, becoming the Catholic Archbishop of Paris. I was moved by his request to have a Hebrew Kaddish prayer recited at his funeral at the portal of the Cathedral of Notre Dame to abide by the beliefs of his parents who were murdered on account of their Jewishness. I am of two minds about Edith Stein, (aka St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross), a girl of deeply religious Jewish origin who studied medicine, converted to Catholicism, became a nun, and who was apparently either unable or unwilling to save herself when the Nazi came for her in her convent and exterminated her in Auschwitz.

However foreign to me these acts are, they are decided acts of conscious commissions; they are manifestations of a free will which decides to try and leave its imprint on the world to the best of its lights. Ida’s slow suicide is not a commission; it is an omission; it is a denial of responsibility. This is why I was saddened by this Jewish variant of the stereotype of the Catholic martyr.

It evoked in me the loss of so many others, whether or not they had converted. To gauge the impact of the film’s purposeful design, I tried to imagine the same film with an uncircumcised boy and a monastery. It would work mechanically, but not nearly so well. Male saints are usually not so passive. The sympathy for Ida is driven, in part, by the female gender role and the loss of a beautiful girl. This is why the film left me also cold.

Though I am saddened by Stein and Lustiger, their path is consistent with the trajectory of more than 90% of all people who were ever born Jewish. A nation (or a people) which were dominant in the Mediterranean of the Roman world could only be reduced to a rather small few million survivors by continuous shedding of co-religionists, whether forced or voluntary. Lustiger, Stein and untold others tried as best they could to follow their ideas. Ida and untold others like her just gave up. They gave up and they reverted, they yielded to convenience and familiarity.

I do not deplore weakness. I do not deplore accommodation (Think of Primo Levi working inside as a chemist and saving himself in Auschwitz). I do not even deplore instrumental treachery if needed for survival (think of "Sophie's Choice"). But I am depressed and angered by Ida's (non-) choice.

The aunt says at one point: "I went to the forest to fight; and for what?" She was clearly a "Court Jew" of the Communist party. She was not a Court Jew because she could lend money; she had none. She was a Court Jew because she could lend unflinching reliability. She and others like her made up the only population segment that the power-seizing communist regime could reliably count on to be steadfastly anti-fascist. As a judge, she became known as "Red Wanda". She could have been relied on to mete heavy punishment to fascists and collaborators; but also later probably to "Bourgeois

Counterrevolutionaries". We do not know whether she did also sit in judgment over "Zionist Trotskyists" or "Neo-rightist-deviationists" (speak Jews). She had clearly tried to shed her past. When forced to face it again through the eyes of her niece, she clears what she can, and then she commits suicide in a manner which is statistically decidedly non-female and atypical for women. With her suicide, she grants Ida full liberty to select her own future because the only and just established familial ties are terminally severed. Ida is cleared of all attachments. Ida is now free to choose.

The emptiness of the aunt's position is also emphasized by a tinny rendition of the anthem "The Internationale" on a poor tape recorder at her funeral. All that is left of the grandiose attempt to "create a new man" and save humanity is this spooky rendition of the hymn of a promised salvation. The aunt's name, Wanda, is the most common Polish name after Maria. Apparently unwilling, as a Jew, to take on the name Maria, she chose a generic appellation, a really common first name, a name of the people; and probably, in its time, also for the people.

The film put an odd emphasis on the insignificance of this drama in the grand sweep of history. However weighty the situation for Wanda and Ida, it means

ultimately nothing for everyone else. When Ida mentions to a new acquaintance that she is of Jewish origin, he replies "I have some Gypsy background in me". Is this the film maker's invitation to rise above the biological destiny and the historic determinacy? Are we supposed to become self-defining individuals, unbounded by a common past and our common history?

The filmography is very intriguing. In many passages, the characters are set within the lower part of the picture frame. It makes the viewer feel as if tiptoeing up to an open window to peer through that window into another person's life. For me, it created another distance to the characters. It provided me more detachment, and it made me feel more disengaged. Did the filmmaker do it to emphasize that the story is ultimately no more than the self-defining defiance of inconsequential individuals?

The setting was very well presented. The ruts and potholes in the road as they drive, the black and white tiles, the recurring spiral staircase, the peeling paint in the hospital, the communist-fashion heavy heels on women's shoes, the gloomy air, and the all-pervasive suspicion.