

## Films on Polish themes: The good, the bad and the ugly

By: **Don Pienkos**

The recent appearance showing of the made-for-TV film, "The Heroic Heart of Irena Sendler" (Sendler was the Polish Christian social worker who saved as many as 2,500 Jewish children from certain death in the World War II Nazi ghetto in Warsaw) has led some Polish Americans I know to wonder about other films on Polish themes that can be seen in our country - on television or via DVD rentals.

The basic fact is that very few movies dealing with Polish themes have been made in the U.S. or have reached our country with any fanfare from abroad. Yet movies are such an important part of our mass culture, and do have an impact on how people view reality, including historical reality, it is a worthy pursuit to identify those films that have been shown.

Here is this observer's opinion on the best and the worst of the movies about Poland and Polish Americans. Let me place them, appropriately, I hope, in three categories (and in due deference to Clint Eastwood and Sergio Leoni) - "The Good Films", the "Bad" and the simply "Ugly".

### The Good

1. "The Pianist" by Director Roman Polański (2002). This award winning film is enlightening in its treatment of relations between Polish gentiles and Polish citizens of Jewish heritage who became assimilated into the Polish culture. It shows the brutality of Nazi treatment of the Jews of Warsaw in a way never seen before by American audiences. And it gives a shocking glimpse of the destruction of Warsaw following the Polish Uprising of August-October 1944. This is a "must-see" film for Polish Americans.

2. "Katyn" by Andrzej Wajda (2007). This is the long needed World War II telling of the all too little-known tragedy of the murders of 22,000 Polish military officers who perished at Stalin's hands in 1940. It is also the story of the fate of the officers' families, who suffered in various ways in Nazi-, and then Soviet-occupied Poland because of their ties to the murdered officers. This is another "must-see" movie, but one that requires some contextual introduction to be fully appreciated by most Americans and Polish Americans.

3. "Man of Iron" (1981, Wajda). This movie provides us with a portrayal of the birth of the Solidarity union movement and its initial success in Gdansk. Lech Walesa is featured briefly. It is the sequel to Wajda's "Man of Marble" (1977), which has some excellent scenes but is also very long and rather confusing.

4. "To Be or Not To Be" (1942, directed by Ernst Lubitsch). This is perhaps the strangest movie of the World War II era. While Polish theater actors in Warsaw are clever, resourceful patriots in their resistance actions against the Nazi occupation of the capital, the film is in fact a true "black comedy" starring Jack Benny in his greatest film role. And despite its trivializing of the occupation, it deserves to be seen. It has the feel of Nazi-occupied Warsaw too.

5. "Marie Curie" (1943). Admittedly a vehicle for 1940s stars Greer Garson and Walter Pidgeon, this film depicts the life and scientific discoveries of Maria Skłodowska Curie. Unfortunately it also glosses over her deeply felt Polish patriotism.

6. "A Song to Remember" (1945). This Chopin biography stars Cornel Wilde and presents an overblown, but still very interesting, depiction of Chopin's Polishness, patriotic zeal, and his music. This is more than enough compensation for actor Paul Muni's almost unbearable hamminess (as Chopin's too-much-seen-and-heard teacher).



## POLISH AMERICAN CONGRESS

7. "Taras Bulba" (1962). This is the one big screen U.S. "epic" production to give us a glimpse of Poland in its age of 17th century greatness. Poland is depicted as a kind of "evil empire" (in the style of the star wars trilogy), with the Cossacks as the supposed heroes seeking freedom from Poland. Ironically, however, it is the Poles who come out looking far better in the movie. (A Russian version of this story, written by Nikolai Gogol, came out in 2008).

8. "The Decalogue" (1988: Krzysztof Kieslowski). This is a made-for-Polish-TV movie in ten one hour segments. Each episode is inspired in some way by one of the Ten Commandments. Several are simply extraordinary in handling their theme. All are worth watching and thinking about. The episodes were shot in Warsaw, mainly in a drab housing project, giving us a picture of life in Communist-run Poland at the close of its sad 45 year existence.

9. "Gran Torino" (Clint Eastwood, 2008). This is the story of one old Polish American Detroit's response to changing times. A second film in this category - individual and interesting Poles - is "The Great Escape" (1963), which features Charles Bronson as an intrepid Polish soldier who helps lead a massive escape effort from a Nazi P.O.W. camp. Another is "A Bridge too Far" (1977), where Gene Hackman (as Polish Major General Stanislaw Sosabowski) is accurately presented as the only perceptive military officer who recognizes the futility of the foolhardy British-led Allied effort to end World War II - one which ends in disaster.

10. "The Deluge" ("Potop", 1974, in Polish, directed by Jerzy Hoffman). This second part in Henry Sienkiewicz's celebrated trilogy of 17th century Poland is long but very rewarding. It features the greatest of Polish fictional characters, Zagloba, the Polish "Falstaff", and tells the epic story of the failed Swedish siege of the fortress-monastery of Czestochowa and Poland's liberation from its many invaders. Hoffman also made parts one and three of the "Trilogy". They are okay, but are overshadowed by "The Deluge".

### The Bad

1. On this list let's begin with the film adaptation of one of the worst novels of the past fifty years, "Sophie's Choice" (1978). This work would have readers believe that it was a Polish professor who dreamed up Hitler's "final solution"! Fortunately, the movie is so silly and poorly conceived that it is virtually unwatchable. It is practically never shown anymore, not even on TV at 4 a.m.

2. "Man with the Golden Arm" (directed by Otto Preminger, 1955). This unpleasant depiction of Chicago's Division Street Polish American low-lives is based on a novel by an author who made a career by writing such junk. Thanks to indignant and entirely understandable condemnations from organized Polonia, references to the Polish American backgrounds of the characters in the movie and the Polonia in which they lived were excised from the film, so only the weird names of characters like "Zash" (for Zosia), inexplicably, remain. Praised for its presentation of the damage done by heroin addiction, this is still a film to miss. In the same genre is another "realistic" 1948 movie - "Call Northside 777" - a documentary-like effort dominated by star Jimmy Stewart playing a driven newspaperman whose mission is to find the truth behind a Polish American's imprisonment for killing a policeman. Division Street Chicago Polonia again gets no favors, although the movie's focus on seeking justice for powerless, sad and largely mute (here Polish) people merits some praise.

3 "Battle of Britain" (British, 1969). The significant and heroic contributions of more than 140 Polish pilots to the victory over

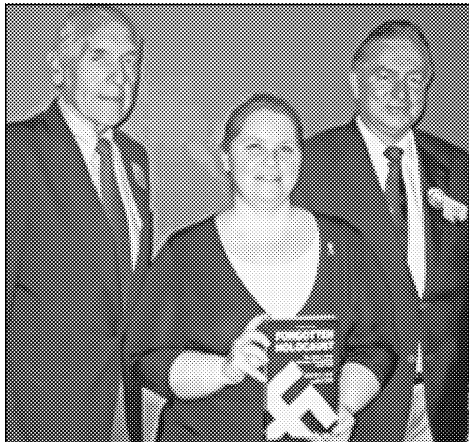
## PAC'S "Children of the Polish Christian Holocaust Survivors" expands into Illinois

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Taking a leading role in the newly-formed "Children of Polish Christian Holocaust Survivors" Committee in the Illinois Division of the Polish American Congress will be Kathy Diipla, M.D. (center) shown here holding a copy of Richard Lukas' "Forgotten Holocaust -- The Poles Under German Occupation 1939-1944."

Welcoming her into the organization is Illinois Division President Casey Chlebek (right) as Frank Milewski of the PAC's New York-based Holocaust Documentation Committee looks on.

Regardless whether the history of the Polish people during the time of the German and Soviet occupation of Poland was merely forgotten or intentionally suppressed, Dr. Diipla has good reason for joining the "Children of Polish Christian Holocaust Survivors."

Her grandfather was one of the nearly two million Polish citizens the Communists shipped out to the Gulag as they imposed a reign of terror in Poland together with the Nazis. Then Dr. Diipla's father, himself only a child at the time, narrowly avoided being sent to Germany to be part of Hitler's diabolical scheme to "Germanize" Polish children.

The recent PBS series describing the tragedy and betrayal of the Polish people, "Behind Closed Doors," is encouraging more individuals like Dr. Diipla to speak up and make sure their family's experiences during the "Forgotten Holocaust" will be remembered. □

Nazi Germany are trivialized and obscured in this otherwise impressive-looking film.

### The Ugly

1. Can anyone find an uglier portrayal of a Polish American than Tennessee Williams' brutish Stanley Kowalski in his "Street Car Named Desire" (directed by Elia Kazan in 1951)? Yah, Brando is just our typical Polish American, sure, and he resides in that great Polonia center called New Orleans! Ugly!

2. Here's a question: just where did the always overacting Paul Muni get his idea for playing a Polish immigrant mine worker in the movie, "Black Fury" (1935)?

3. "Polish Wedding" (1998). This idiotic "comedy" insults Polish Americans in every way in its depiction of 'Polish American family life', 'Polish American moral standards', and the Polonia community itself - church and secular. And this one continues to be shown on TV.

Let me close by mentioning a few pleasant oddities in U.S. movies that only folks like me might catch. These include Marilyn Monroe's oh-so knowing performance as "Sugar Kane" Kowalczyk in Billy Wilder's great comedy, "Some Like It Hot" (1950);

## Poland honors Chet Szarejko

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As an American citizen, Chet Szarejko (center) has never worn a Polish Army uniform.

But what he is wearing in the photo above is Poland's Cross of Merit awarded in the past to many Polish war veterans and Holocaust survivors.

In ceremonies commemorating Poland's May 3rd, 1791 Constitution, adopted shortly after America's Constitutional Convention of 1787, Poland's Consul General Krzysztof Kasprzyk (right) presented Szarejko with the decoration for his efforts to promote the cause of Poland in the U.S., particularly New York City.

Looking on is Frank Milewski (left), president of the Downstate New York Division of the Polish American Congress where Szarejko is vice president and chairman of that organization's Political Activities Committee.

Szarejko spent nearly three years assisting Consul General Kasprzyk in clearing the way for placing a statue of Jan Karski in front of the Consulate on Madison Avenue and E. 37th Street in Manhattan.

Just a few weeks ago, New York City designated that intersection "Jan Karski Corner," according to Milewski. He also noted that Szarejko is well known and highly regarded in New York for the many years he has devoted to the advancement of good will and understanding among the ethnic groups who live there.

Szarejko said it was an honor for him to work on the Karski dedication because of his admiration for this World War II hero "who risked his life when he left German-occupied Poland on a secret mission to England and the United States to warn the Allies the Germans were conducting the genocide of the Jews in his country."

The way Szarejko sees it, "it was shameful that Karski's warning to the West was ignored and the truth about Poland's desperate appeal to get help for the Jews has been just as ignored today as it was then." □

Steven Seagal's heroic, over-the-top "Casey Ryback" character in the anti-terrorist flick, "Under Siege" (1992); and Comedian John Candy's wonderful and 'right-on' cameo as a Polka Band leader in "Home Alone" (1990).

Obviously, the fare about Poles, Polish Americans, and Polish themes in U.S. and foreign major movies makes for very thin gruel. Not a single movie deals with the Polish ethnic or immigration experience in America. Thus we have no "I Remember Mama" or "America, America" to call our own. No biographical treatments of historic figures like Pułaski, Kościuszko, or Paderewski either. And no films based on the work of contemporary novelists like Susan Strempek Shea, at least not yet. Maybe the future will be brighter! We can only wish!

Mr. Pienkos is a National Director of the Polish American Congress from Milwaukee, Wisconsin □