

“Aftermath” Powerfully Evokes Polish Anti-Semitism

By Abe Foxman

After Germany itself, no country has been more scrutinized for its behavior during the Holocaust than Poland. This is understandable considering the fact that three million Jews lived in Poland and the fact that the largest death camps were in Poland.

Sometimes, however, this scrutiny takes awkward turns. From time to time one hears references to the “Polish” camps, and it is necessary to set the record straight: These were German camps located in occupied Poland.

At other times one hears comments such as the Poles learn their anti-Semitism from their mother’s milk or the Poles were even worse than the Germans. These are most unfortunate comments because while Polish anti-Semitism was real and virulent, there is an implication of something historic and inherent about Poland that does not square with the record.

The question that must be posed is: If Poland was always an anti-Semitic country, why were three million Jews living there on the eve of World War II? The answer is that for many centuries, Poland was a more welcoming place for Jews than countries in Western Europe.

Jewish communities were given a degree of autonomy and stability in Poland that did not exist elsewhere in the late Middle Ages and early modern period. Anti-Semitism existed, of course, but Jewish life could flourish. It was only later, with the dissolution of the Polish Empire and, particularly, in the 20th century with the emergence of reactionary political forces, that Polish anti-Semitism took a turn for the worse.

In sum, the history of Poland and the Jews is a lot more complicated than some would have it. Still, the power of anti-Semitism in modern Poland is real and never has it so brilliantly been portrayed as in the Polish film “Aftermath,” which recently came to the United States.



It is a story of two Polish brothers, one now living in America who goes back home. He sees that his brother is being abused by his neighbors. He learns that it was a result of his brother’s digging up tombstones of Jews that were used to pave a local road and setting them up in the field behind his house.

Whatever his attitude toward Jews, he explains that “they were human beings. There is no one left to look after them.” People began to call him “Jew lover” and other even less pretty epithets. This, however, is only the beginning of the tale. As it evolves, the story of those dead Jews becomes more and more gruesome and relates back to events that took place during World War II.

The film is one of the most riveting Holocaust-related films I have seen for several reasons.

First, it is not in your face. The story and the revelations slowly emerge and are all the more powerful when they do.

Second, anti-Semitism is shown not to be a simple phenomenon, but one with many layers. Both of the brothers themselves make anti-Semitic references and yet each is very different from their hate-filled neighbors. For the brother living in Poland, even if he carried with him common stereotypes about Jews, using tombstones to pave a road was too disrespectful. So he took a stand.

And for the brother coming from America, concern about issues of property in the town led him to pursue with vigor and integrity the true story of what happened to the Jews of the town and the role of prominent members of the community in those events.

Third, through the telling of a story it shows the importance of recovering the truth of the past in order to repair the present and the future.

While this is a fictional account, it is based on the horrific events that took place in Jedwabne in 1941 when the Germans invaded. Jan Gross has written an important book on the subject. Much like when Gross’s book came out, so too when “Aftermath” appeared in Polish theaters there was much controversy. The filmmaker was accused in some circles of defaming the Polish people. Others, however, commended him for speaking truth about terrible acts committed by respectable Poles.

“Aftermath” is a must-see film. In a sophisticated way, it does a better job of communicating the power and destructiveness of anti-Semitism than almost any other film. And it is a story about heroes, about people who do the right thing even if they are less than perfect people themselves.

Poland’s history toward the Jews was, indeed, complicated. But the power of anti-Semitism in that country in the 20th century was profound. Coming to grips with it is an imperative of our times.

AFTERMATH
Thursday, March 27 • 6:00 PM
Digiplex Destinations, Bloomfield

18th MANDELL JCC HARTFORD
JEWISH FILM FEST
MAR 20-30 2014 HJFF.ORG

mandell
JCC
greater hartford

YOU
BELONG
HERE



860-236-4571
www.mandelljcc.org