

# The Holocaust as *Via Dolorosa*: The mysticism of Piotr Chrzan's *Klezmer*

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*Written and Directed by Piotr Chrzan*

Polish filmmaker Piotr Chrzan's feature debut, *Klezmer*, was screened at this year's Venice Film Festival and premiered in Poland at the Warsaw Film Festival in October. Along with such recent efforts as Władysław Pasikowski's *Aftermath* (2012) and Paweł Pawlikowski's *Ida* (2013), Chrzan's film attempts to treat the Holocaust artistically and to provoke further discussion on the sensitive subject of the role Poles played in the extermination of the Jews.

The low-budget *Klezmer*, whose title refers to a musical tradition of Ashkenazi Jews, takes place in eastern Poland in the summer of 1943 during "Operation Reinhardt," the liquidation of the Jewish ghettos.

Several peasants walking through the woods find a wounded Jew (Filip Kosior), who escaped the transport train taking him to a concentration camp. Dragging the body of the young man through the forest, they face the dilemma of what to do with him: save him from death or leave him to his fate, turn him over to the Germans, to the Polish "blue" police or the local authorities.

Chrzan depicts the complexities of his various peasant characters, who include a shrewd wartime operator, Marek (Szymon Nowak); a Nazi collaborator, Pazyniak (Rafał Małkowiak); a small-town Romeo, Michał (Lesław Żurek); a village "idiot," Witek (Kamil Przystał); a local hussy, Maryśka (Weronika Lewoń); and a young war widow, Hanka (Dorota Kuduk).

The dying young man brings out the characters' hidden animosities, prejudices, fears and confusions, provoking different reactions towards the Holocaust. While some of the peasants are ready to divide the victim's personal belongings and the small reward they expect to receive for turning him in, others, like Hanka or Michał, are ready to help the hunted man.

Chrzan is obviously appalled yet fascinated by the crudity and even savagery of his fictional subjects. The rural population's ignorance was continuously reinforced by the

Catholic Church, which portrayed the Jews as unchristened pagans. The Church, of course, most fundamentally, was an essential component of the class system that held wide layers of the peasantry in poverty and misery, the objective basis of social and ideological backwardness.

Chrzan's *Klezmer* exposes the role of the Catholic clergy who encouraged the surrendering of Jews to the authorities. Age-old anti-Semitic prejudices jibed well with the racial poison of the Hitler regime, which saw the Jews as responsible for the program of international working class solidarity, materialism and socialist class consciousness.

In *Klezmer*, absurd medieval claims about Jews drinking the blood of Christian children for ritual purposes are folded into the political propaganda of Poland's fascistic National Democracy (ND, or *Endecja*), which portrays the Jews as "drinking the blood" of the nation by exploiting Poles and hiding their fortunes to avoid paying taxes, etc.

Chrzan deserves credit for a serious and brave effort to deal with Polish history. However, in the end, *Klezmer* fails to create a truthful and all-sided portrait of the Holocaust and the epoch as a whole.

The problem is fundamentally one of historical knowledge and perspective. How is the artist to represent accurately and richly the thoughts and feelings of a social class at a given moment in time? The demoralized state of the rural population in Poland under the ghastly conditions of the World War and the Nazi atrocities cannot be conveyed simply through "snapshots," so to speak, immediate representations of attitudes and opinions. Those attitudes and opinions have a history, have been shaped by enormous antecedent events. Without a consideration of those events, how far can one progress?

Anti-Semitism and, for that matter, all sorts of prejudice are secreted through the pores of capitalist society. They breed in conditions of poverty and economic insecurity. The bourgeoisie uses these poisons as a means of mobilizing sections of the middle class, the ruined farmer, clerk and others, against the working class and socialism. But they become mass phenomena only under certain conditions.

The Russian Revolution gave rise to great hopes and expectations throughout the world, including among the advanced workers in Poland. The emergence of the nationalist-Stalinist clique in the Soviet Union and the various Communist parties resulted in major defeats for the working class in China, Britain, France, Spain and elsewhere. The catastrophic policies of the Stalinists in Germany opened the door to Hitler. All this, including the massive crimes of the Stalin regime in the late 1930s, had a profound influence on the social and political atmosphere in eastern Europe. In Poland, the tragic fate of the working class movement was not only the result of severe persecution by the bourgeois state, but primarily due to the Stalinization of the Communist Party of Poland (KPP) and the purges of the late 1930s. The KPP, riddled by internal conflicts, disoriented politically, failed to fight for a socialist solution to the pre-World War II crisis of Polish society. On the eve of the Nazi assault on Poland in 1939, the vanguard of the country's labor movement was either politically disoriented or physically destroyed.

Unfortunately, in *Klezmer* Chrzan adopts a largely ahistorical and moralizing approach to the events. This is in keeping with the norm in the film industry today. Shallowness and narrowness in the depiction of social and political relations of that epoch are characteristic of virtually all the Polish intellectuals and artists who have recently dealt with the issue of the Holocaust.

Chrzan, attempting to compensate for a lack of historical understanding, seeks to explain the Holocaust in semi-mystical terms, an escape that has a long history in Polish art and film. This tendency to represent social and historical events as the painful, metaphysical experiences of the individual limits the movie's themes, which ultimately reduce themselves to hopelessness and an indictment of the Polish population.

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The passive Jew intrusively symbolizes Christ and his suffering. In one of the scenes the exhausted peasants place the Jew by the fallen tree creating a Golgotha-like scene: Jesus on a cross, a thief on either side. Enriched by the music of Mahler and Bach's "Have Mercy, Lord," the film turns into *Via Dolorosa*, a spectacle of static spiritual meditation on Jewish suffering and death.

The tragedy of the Holocaust is mystically tied to the tragedy of Poles who, by failing to act morally in regard to the Jews, unwillingly cause their own demise. *Klezmer* thus becomes a national tragedy, a warning against repeating the same mistakes, possibly in relation to the current refugee crisis and the anti-Muslim hysteria spread by the Polish media.

The long-standing contempt of the Polish intelligentsia toward the peasantry finds expression, perhaps only half-consciously, in Chrzan's mockery of the villagers and, in particular, in his depiction of Witek. It takes the viewer some time to figure out that the boy is mentally ill and not just the caricature of a "dumb peasant." The voyeuristic and misanthropic portrayal of prostitution, of the peasants' vulture-like stripping of their victim's belongings, of the ease with which they commit murder, reveals an unhealthy obsession with human pathology. Such a presentation of what people are capable of under wartime conditions does not explain much, but it helps to vilify the rural population, shifting the burden of the Holocaust onto their shoulders. Ultimately, *Klezmer* drags along, becoming a rather frightening and sordid experience at certain points.

The sympathetic moments are rare, but valuable. In such a small community, Jews and Catholics know each other. Hanka recognizes the hunted man as a local wedding musician. She also risks her life by hiding a Jewish girl, Rozalka (Ewa Jakubowicz). Helping Jews in German-occupied Poland involved great risks; the penalty was death. (Of course, filmmaker Roman Polanski survived by living with a Catholic family for a time during the war.)

The film presents the various motives for helping Jews, including human compassion, but also financial gain and, in the case of hiding children in particular, hopes of bringing about conversion to Catholicism. Hanka teaches Rozalka Catholic prayers for camouflage purposes, but converting the girl to Christianity might be a goal in itself.

Despite its substantial flaws, intellectually and artistically, *Klezmer* remains a noteworthy attempt to deal with the complex issue of Polish anti-Semitism. This reviewer can only hope that the director will explore and deepen his understanding of the connection between the rise of fascism and the suppression of the working class movement in 1930s.

Without a serious grasp of the roots of Polish anti-Semitism and fascism, Polish workers and young people today will not be in a position to fight these tendencies as they express themselves in the present politically dangerous situation.



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