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# A Delicate Balance: Polish Portraits in U.S. Film during World War II

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## **A Delicate Balance: Polish Portraits in U.S. Film during World War II**

Joseph W. Zurawski

Mission to Moscow (1943) was a film made at the request of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Its purpose was to show support of our ally, the Soviet Union, in fighting against the Axis powers, principally Nazi Germany, during World War II. Most will agree it was more propaganda than fact, embellishing Russia's advances in agriculture, commerce, and industry under Stalin while downplaying the purge trials of 1937 and other Russian internal problems. The Nazi-Soviet Pact to invade Poland is not mentioned nor the Soviets occupying and annexing one-third of Poland's territory. While the facts pointed clearly at the Soviet Union as having a hostile attitude toward Poland, the filmmakers ignored this reality and placated the Soviets while attempting to uphold the spirits of the Poles who first had to endure, and continued to endure, Hitler's terror for the duration of the war.

Within months of the invasion of Poland by Nazi forces, Hollywood was producing *Siege* (1940) which shows and tells the story of the Nazi aggression and the bombing of Warsaw. The film was shot by Julien Bryan, an American journalist who was in Poland in 1939. He took a series of photos which were later published in the December 5, 1939 issue of *Look* magazine. Working with a major Hollywood studio, RKO Radio Productions, the film shot by Bryan was released as *Siege* and distributed by RKO Radio Productions. Hollywood recognized the importance of this film with a 1941 Academy Award nomination for best one reel short. In 2006, *Siege* was also accepted in the National Film Registry as one the most significant American films ever made.

Hollywood recognized the plight of millions of homeless Poles who were in the areas annexed by the Soviet Union following its invasion of Poland in 1939. *New York Town* was released October 31, 1941. It is a story of an immigrant from Poland, Stefan Janowski, who

comes to New York City and shares an apartment with Victor, a sidewalk photographer. Victor takes photos and tries to sell them or a color portrait painted by Stefan. Victor and Stefan's friend Sam, a legless veteran who sells pencils on the street, uses his military pension to hire Bender, a lawyer, to get Stefan citizenship. Bender's advice, however, is that Stefan obtain a position at a university. Bender gets Stefan an interview with the dean of a university and Stefan is hired. This is a most favorable view of what the United States was willing to do for Polish immigrants.

Children from wartime Poland would also be welcomed into American society. *The Greenie* was released January 24, 1942. This film was summarized on Internet Movie Data Base: "Told on the premise that the United States has always been a refuge from those seeking a reprieve from poverty and bigotry, this miniature short from M-G-M is the story of a young Polish boy, unable to speak English, just arriving in New York City with his parents. He leaves his lower East-Side tenement to go play. Passing an open field he sees a sight unfamiliar to him; a group of boys playing baseball. When the boys drop their bats and gloves to hitch a ride on a passing ice-wagon, the Polish boy goes over to the baseball diamond and starts examining the baseball equipment. The boys come back and think he is about to steal their belongings but, when they learn he is a new immigrant and doesn't understand English, they invite him to play baseball with them... and he gets a base hit his first time at bat." It is difficult to conceive of a film that could have been more ingratiating to newly-arrived Polish immigrants.

Prominent Polish American historian Mieczyslaw Haiman estimated that well over one million Polish Americans served in World War II. Considering Poles were approximately four per cent of the U.S. population, Polish Americans constituted eight and one half percent of U.S. Armed forces. The zeal and dedication with which they served was reflected by numerous Hollywood productions. In *Bataan* (1943), American and Filipino forces and

civilians are being driven out of Manila by the Japanese. A unit of the U.S. infantry is assigned to destroy a bridge along the Bataan peninsula which spans a mountainous jungle ravine. Eleven volunteers with vastly divergent backgrounds make up the unit. "They're a mixed group," remarks the commanding officer, "All experts in their own line." Among the volunteers is good-natured, always pleasant, Private Francis Xavier Matowski, engineer, from Pittsburgh, anxious to get back home. Wesley Epps, a black American demolition expert, and Matowski report to the CO, "Me and Matowski made a special collection (of explosives)." Matowski adds that it was not all authorized. As soon as the unit is settled in, Matowski and Epps are busy on the bridge setting the explosives. Matowski checks all the wires and equipment and pushes the lever to blow up the bridge. Back at the camp Matowski responds to the commanding officer's request: "Which one of you guys claims to be good at climbing trees?" with a prompt "Which tree?" He is told to climb the one which is "as high as you can see." Shoes off, Matowski runs up the first few feet of the tree as his friend Epps approves with a broad smile. He quickly shimmies to the palms atop the tree. He salutes. He is shot by a sniper. The sad expression on the face of Epps reflects the developing respect and friendship each had for the other.

In *Gangway for Tomorrow* (1943) a man referred to as a banker is really a hobo travelling on the rails. He insists he has the right to do as he pleases. When arrested for being a vagabond, he is lectured by the judge who explains about earning the right to live the life one wishes. The judge also gives a patriotic speech about how all Americans are contributing to the war effort and mentions several people making commitments to the war effort. One of them is Sam Kowalski who "has three sons in uniform, works 19 hours a day, seven days a week."

*Destroyer* (1943) is a curious film. Although we hear the name Boleslavski mentioned quite frequently, there is no mention of his Polish background. There is also a character

named Sarecky in the film with no clearly identifiable Polish traits. Both names were probably selected to show that all ethnic groups are united against Nazi Germany. Boleslavski, usually called "Boley," was a crew member of the S.S. John Paul Jones sunk in World War I. He is now a welder, and quite the perfectionist, building a new vessel to replace the *Jones*. Unable to gain a position on the ship he is preparing, Boley gives a patriotic speech, telling the story of John Paul Jones and his famous quote. Removing the picture frame which displayed the quote he asks Sarecky to read it. Without looking at the words, Sarecky says, "I have not yet begun to fight." Perhaps this exchange was meant to show Polish unity in the war effort. Boley becomes "the" hero by welding repairs underwater as the ship is sinking. The *Jones* is then able to ram and sink the sub that was attempting to torpedo the *Jones*. As Boley is leaving it is evident he has earned the respect, if not the admiration, of the crew. Even the commander gives Boley the *Jones* commission pendant.

Another film that portrayed a Polish American in a favorable light was *Gung Ho: The Story of Carlson's Making Island Raiders*, (1943) which featured a squadron of U.S. Marines selected for an assignment "above and beyond the line of duty." Of the 15,000 selected for training, 900 were assigned to the mission. Kozzarowski valiantly performed the key task of knocking out the radio relay station on Makin Island by ramming it with a heavy-duty steamroller.

*Air Force* (1943) begins with a negative view of a Polish American, Winocki, who emerges as one of the heroes of a wartime mission. Winocki is in flight school and is falsely accused of causing an accident. He is discharged. Bitter, disgruntled, he is called into service as a gunner for a flight to the Phillipines. After the pilot of the plane is wounded, Winocki takes control of the plane and lands it safely. His commitment to the war effort is total. Clearly, by the end of the film, he is one of the heroes: he saved the plane, the men on board, and the mission.

Otto Preminger directed his first film in 1944, *In the Meantime, Darling*. We meet an enthusiastic Lt. Philip 'Red' Pianatowski and his friend, Lt. Ferguson. Pianatowski and his wife make arrangements so Ferguson may marry and sleep with his wife at a hotel. Ferguson's parents express reservations about Pianatowski and ask if he is really an officer. Ferguson replies, "he's one of the best" and assures her that, "He worked hard to earn it." After their marriage, Maggie Preston was not fit for any on the many jobs which had to be done at the hotel while their husbands were in training at the fort. Shirley Pianatowski enlists Maggie to work in a war plant. Although the movie "features" the trials and tribulations of the newly-married couple, it was obviously made to uplift the morale of the men and women in the service and uphold the commitment of the nation to the war effort. In that respect, Lt. Philip 'Red' Pianatowski and his wife Shirley are clearly the stars.

*Mr. Winkle Goes to War* (1944) is a story of Wilbert Winkle, a bank clerk, who, after 14 years of service at a bank, submits his resignation so he can devote full time to his fix-it shop. The next day he receives his induction for service in the U.S. Armed Forces. When Winkle reports for service his immediate superior was a Sergeant Czeidrowski. He spelled out his name letter by letter. The inductees made fun of the name, claiming the name contained most of the letters of the alphabet. Czeidrowski was quickly labeled as Sgt. "Alphabet." His informed his unit that he goes by the book, by the rules. His command was straightforward and firm. Nevertheless, Sgt. "Alphabet" was accepted as a friend, celebrating with the troops, including Winkle, when basic training was completed. *Mr. Winkle Goes to War* is based on a book of the same name by Theodore Pratt. In the book, the "little sergeant" has the last name of "Czeideskrowski." His language is crude: "You draftees is mostly, alright, except you don't know nothing and got to be learned. It's only once in a while we get a first class One-A jerk like you who is two inches below being the worst kind of gold-brick with a tarnish already setting in. Then we get to break you up in small pieces first before putting you together again

to make something that looks like a U.S. soldier.” Winkle comes to appreciate the sergeant’s efforts, “It infuriated him that Sergeant Czeideskrowski lay dead. It made him see red to think that after Freddie had been made into a decent person, he had been killed.” The screenwriter for the film definitely upgraded the sergeant by not only giving him a taller, commanding presence but also a quite grammatical military vocabulary. The high respect that Sergeant Czeideskrowski earned in the book was reflected in the attitude the soldiers in Sergeant Czeidrowski’s unit showed toward him in the film. Is either “Czeideskrowski” or “Czeidrowski” a Polish name? I suspect Pratt may have known about a famous Polish portrait painter at that time who lived and worked in Poland, New York, Paris, and Vienna. His name was Boleslaw Jan Czedekowski. One of his famous paintings is “Kosciuszko at West Point” (1947) in the collection of the Kosciuszko Foundation in New York City. It seems the screenwriter was trying to simplify Pratt’s original spelling and came quite close.

*The Fighting Seabees* was released in 1944 in response to the inadequacy of war preparation in the islands in the Pacific in 1942. The script prepared for *The Fighting Seabees* follows a format similar for most other war films prepared during the war. There is unity in the diversity of characters. There is Chico, there is an Irishman singing about Ireland. And there is Johnny Novatsky. Even though he had one of the major roles, it appears he was a last minute addition to the cast. His “accent” noticeably changes from a sort-of European at the beginning of the movie to a more refined Anglo-Saxon after a few scenes. Nevertheless, Johnny Novasky is recognized favorably by the other men, one of whom remarks, “Did you see Johnny in action?” He is a very positive character and gets along with brass and the rest of the construction crew.

When Poland or Poland’s armed forces fighting in various theatres of the war were treated in films made in Hollywood, there was careful avoidance of any reference to Soviet troops or the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, films were made that cast Poland, its ideals and

future, usually in a favorable image.

*Arise, My Love* (1940) was one of the first anti-Nazi movies made. It contains one of the first mentions in an American film of Polish Americans fighting in World War II: “So you're going to Warsaw!”; “Volunteer Tomislaus Martinofski **reporting for duty with the Polish Air Force**”; “When did you enlist? – “Before breakfast.” The film features Tom Martin, a Nazi-hating pilot who was imprisoned on death row in Spain as part of the Liberty battalion of US soldiers who helped that country fight the encroaching Nazis. He is freed and continues to battle the Germans in World War II in Britain with the Polish Air Force.

In *Dangerous Moonlight* (AKA *Suicide Squadron* 1941) an American reporter Carole Peters meets a Polish airman, Stefan Radetsky. The film mentions the participation of the Polish Air Force in the Battle for Britain.

*Tomorrow, the World!* (1944) was awarded the first "Writer's Award" by the Hollywood Writer's Mobilization "in recognition of [the film's] superior merit as dramatic entertainment, blended with timely and significant idea content, representative of the best in current thought." Emil, a young teen, comes to the U.S. from Germany during World War II to live with his uncle. From the moment he arrives he tries to convince everyone he is a committed Nazi. He wears his Nazi uniform to dinner, manipulates all situations, makes enemies in school, and speaks freely about his hatred of Jews, Poles and Catholics. To him, “America is a cesspool.” He wants to help the Nazis in any way possible. According to user reviewer, sol 12, on the Internet Movie Data Base: “Two things happen that turn Emil around in his mission, or what he thinks it is, in serving his Fatherland. Confronting Leona [Emil’s teacher] about her being Jewish, in the most vulgar of ways, she slaps Emil across the face that shocks the very self-assured and arrogant young man in him, an Aryan Superman, not only being whacked by a lowly woman but a Jewish one at that! The second incident that brings Emil back to reality has to do with his getting into a fight with fellow student Stanley Dumbrowski... Stanley being



a Polish/American whom Emil felt to be inferior to him was able to take him on and give him a bloody nose and even later force Emil, with their teacher Miss Richards looking on, to apologize to him in front of all his classmates; What An Insult!" Unfortunately, even though the script strongly implied that Poland would be victorious in its conflict with the Nazis, Poles were not able to conquer the Nazis as successfully as Stanley was able to handle Emil.

As with many films made during World War II, *In Our Time* (1944) was meant to be a patriotic film uplifting spirits in fighting the Nazi military machine in Europe. Poland's reaction to the Nazi invasion that launched World War II was featured with the goal of making the Allies more determined to fight against Nazi conquerors. As the news of Germany's invasion of Poland spreads throughout Poland, Uncle Leopold, the "philosopher" of a noble family remarks: "Whatever the fate of Poland might be, we must consider it a great privilege to make the first stand against mankind's greatest enemy." Count Stefan Orwid, who manages the estate, leaves to fight in the war and returns wounded. While other family members prepare to leave Poland, he explains why he would remain to fight for Poland: "As long as a nation preserves its honor, it will always survive." After Warsaw endures 28 days of Nazi bombing, and is burned to ashes, we are told by the narrator as the film ends, "For the first time in history the massive forces of humanity are on the march. And like London, Bataan, Stalingrad, Warsaw has become a symbol of the future world we are fighting to achieve, that will be achieved in our time." These highlights appear to portray Poland at its best; however, and unfortunately, other aspects of the film leave much to be desired. Polish society and policies are not described accurately. The relationship between the peasants living on the Orwid estate and the owners of the estate is more like a feudal state rather than the democracy that was established in Poland following World War I. The mechanization of the fields had the peasants acting like good-natured over-whelmed buffoons, something unlikely for a farm close enough to Warsaw to witness the bombing. Even more disturbing is

suggesting that Poles were seeking appeasement before the war and that its corrupt government is comfortable with fascism. This was the reason why Poles fought so poorly since they were incompetent and poorly trained. Although never mentioned directly, the implication given is that the Polish government-in-exile elected to run away rather than fight. They are cowards and cannot be trusted.

*In Our Time* was released at a critical time in Poland's efforts to insure its territorial integrity after the war ended. At the Tehran Conference in 1943, with Poland not present, and in clear violation of the Atlantic Charter, the Soviet Union was formally granted one-third of pre-war Poland. The Polish government-in-exile was excluded in all "agreements" regarding the future of Poland after the war. In reality, *In Our Time*, used, or more precisely, abused, Poland's plight in the war and paved the way for the Communist takeover of Poland after the war.

Two other films deserve mention since they were meant to determine how the peace settlements will be formulated following the end of the war. In *None Shall Escape* (1944) a war crimes tribunal is assembled in Warsaw which addresses the Holocaust and the massacre of Jews. *Polski Ruch Podziemny* (in Polish, *The Polish Underground* 1944) directed by Bill Donovan Head of the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the CIA, during World War II and [Eugeniusz Cekalski](#), active in filmmaking in London, was released in the United States. The contribution to the war effort by the Poles in Poland is documented.

*Ostatni, Ten* (in Polish, *The Last*, 1941) was a production of the Polonaise Film Corporation, established by a group of Polish Americans for the express purpose of producing a film to reflect the courage of the Poles fighting in World War II. Documentary footage shows the bombing of Poland. The defense of Warsaw is led by Mayor Stefan Starzynski. In the countryside, Janka and Marysia are married in a traditional wedding. Later, they bid each other farewell, moments before the invasion begins. Marysia is wounded during the bombing

and dies a few days later in a Warsaw underground shelter.

*Wiejski Wesele* (in Polish, 1941) The first Polish language film made in color was also a production of a Polish American film company in Buffalo. It is a story about a country wedding.

*Z Dymem Pozarów* (in Polish, With the Smoke of the Fires, 1941) was produced in Hollywood by a third Polish American film company. In a prologue, Polish kings are shown defending Christian values in foreign lands. The film begins in August 1939. Jasiek, a young farmer, lives with his wife Jagna and his old father-in-law. After the Nazis invade Poland in September 1939, there is great uncertainty about the survival and freedom of the nation. Jasiek, wounded during a heroic battle, is sent to a camp, and escapes. The mayor of Warsaw, Stefan Starzynski, is visited by a group of Poles from the U.S. He expresses to them his belief in the heroism, patriotism and strength of the Polish nation. Jasiek returns to his village and dies in the arms of his wife. His last words are, "for my Motherland." In an allegorical epilogue, taken from the prophetic writings of Poland's national poet Adam Mickiewicz, the Polish nation rises from the smoke of fires and the dust and blood of Polish patriots to make the nation grand and powerful again. Poland will be invaded on the first day, Warsaw will collapse on the second day and the nation will be resurrected on the third day. The resurrected Poland will free all European nations from bondage, and all wars among Christians will cease.

All three films were heavily patronized by Polish Americans. The premiers of *Ostatni, Ten* and *Z Dymem Pozarow* were in Chicago where they were shown in several theatres. Proceeds of all three films produced by these Polish American film corporations were donated to victims of the Nazi aggression in Poland.

After the war, a film was released late in December 1945, *Out of Depths*. A commander of a U.S. submarine in the Pacific learned that a group of Japanese was intent on

bombing the U.S.S. Missouri where the Japanese were to sign their surrender. The U.S. commander was going to torpedo the Japanese ship but the torpedo jammed. Then, the decision was to ram the ship. The few who survived were later decorated at the White House. Among those who did not survive was Pete Lebowski.

Two major films, *Madame Curie* (1943) and *A Song To Remember* (1945), were released in Hollywood during World War II which featured cherished Polish historical figures, Marie Sklodowska Curie and Frederic Chopin. Both films featured Hollywood star actors and were heavily promoted, winning several academy awards. Curie and Chopin were shown having a strong love of their Polish homeland and that each fiercely believed in its freedom and independence. As the war progressed, films such as *Tomorrow, the World* proclaimed clearly that Nazi Germany would be, must be defeated. However, films such as *A Song To Remember* and *In Our Time* were careful not to offend the Soviet Union. In all films, Poles were clearly on the winning side. But the “winning side” that was defeating Nazi Germany was already establishing Communist tyranny in Poland. What about Katyn, Lublin, Tehran, Yalta? These topics were not treated in films produced during World War II and the delicate balance U.S. film makers had with respect to Poland’s plight during World War II quickly dissipated into embarrassed mute silence. Although Poles fought bravely and longer than any nation in World War II, the realities of post-war politics, did not allow Poland to be the free and independent as it was before the war.