

was over.” For the latest incarnation of the New Man, life under early capitalism is following the script of a bad Hollywood adventure film. The props of this new life are presented in contrasting inventories of stuff. Here is a partial list from the older world, that of local marketplaces in small town and rural economies that survived even under communism:

Heart-shaped cheeses, eggs, pickled cucumbers. . . . live birds in shit-stained cages, carrots, parsnips, cream in metal cans, black rapeseed oil in old vodka bottles . . . pigs’ heads, cows’ udders, flies, the stink of burnt feathers, the dry smell of burlap sacks, old women’s armpits, honey in bottles.

Suddenly, magically, this cornucopia of the real and the edible is replaced by

Beatle boots with stacked heels and turned-up tips, plexiglas cuff links with naked women inside, neckties on elastic bands pre-tied and labeled ‘de Paris,’ gold chains, crimson lipstick, Dacron, nylon raincoats with silver buttons, Cossack boots with zippers . . . all made of bright psychedelic polymers as in a child’s kaleidoscope.

More important, here is the pivot point of moving from a system of want to a system of plenty:

From the reek of cabbage you entered a world of glistening, sterile color, everyone did, those too who had hardly anything, who had seen these manmade hues only in their churches during May services. And that was the real revolution, because it took place in their hearts and eyes, and from that time they were destined and nothing could stop them in their march.

You will note the colors of the May religious services that also appeared in *Tales*, formerly encountered rarely and then under conditions of piety or reverence, now constantly visible, bright bait for the unwary. The want and need of essentials have been replaced by an addictive craving for a plenitude of inessentials.

This is a version of the decline and fall of communism in Poland without reference to Solidarity, the role of the Catholic Church, or the Polish Pope as engines of old-fashioned nationhood, or the economic and diplomatic vises squeezing Poland’s Soviet patron and its failed tightrope-walker, Gorbachev. In fact, it is a kind of superfortified “dialectical materialism” that has produced the change, if we grant that “materialism” in its coarsest form—sheer stuff—has a grim power over spirit. The move from dreams of useful, earthy goods rendered in earth tones to the new toys of life that come in unearthly hues is clear, the pathway irresistible, and the result both laughable and sad—it is all a futile process that drives the lives of the new

“businessmen” and their customers. *Nine* leaves its characters splayed out and limp like ragdolls soaking in a puddle of stale beer and its readers equally battered. Is there a way out of this mess? How exemplary can Stasiuk’s personal response, flight to the mountains and participation in an older, “timeless” rural economy, be? How exemplary should it be? And just how widespread and structural is the mess, anyway? We would have to go other Polish writers to see if Stasiuk’s lamentations are part of a collective refrain, or if any of his peers see a glimmer of light anywhere. With an exception noted below, I have not yet undertaken the suggested comparison.

(To be continued in the next issue)

Hollywood’s War with Poland, 1939–1945

By **M. B. B. Biskupski**. Lexington, KY: Kentucky University Press (www.kentuckypress.com), 2010. xii + 362 pages. ISBN 978-0-8131-2559-6. Hardcover.

Raymond T. Gawronski, SJ

The day I gave the valedictory at my New England college, my father, an honorably discharged veteran of the “greatest American generation,” took me aside and said: “I know what this country is like: I will understand if you change your name.” We have all understood why, and many of us have disappeared into an “Anglo” identity. But why should one deny the heritage that gave us a John Paul II?

There are plenty of good reasons, at least in America, and M. B. B. Biskupski digs deeply into one very important, indeed crucial, time and period of American life to investigate how the American film industry consistently ignored, belittled, and demonized Poland and the Poles, whether in Europe or America. More: he demonstrates how an image was created that had no relation to reality. Professor Biskupski’s book is exhaustive in its study of the films and serials that Hollywood produced during the war years. The documentation could hardly be more painstaking: almost one-third of the book is given to notes.

The study is rich and nuanced, leaving a reviewer sorely tempted to simply rehearse much of the book. A few main points will have to suffice here. For example, though Poland had the strongest underground in Europe, lasting throughout the war, it was totally

ignored in the movies in favor of much less significant players like Norway, Czechoslovakia, or France. Professor Biskupski is a subtle writer and very knowledgeable, so he intimates that Czechs were favored by Hollywood, though their contribution to the war effort and their suffering at Nazi hands were incomparably less than that of the Poles. He implies that this is because they would be docile with the Soviets (as they were, at least relatively speaking, with the Germans). This is part of the pattern that elevates other nations at Poland's expense in the estimation of Hollywood: the more pliable toward Soviet domination, the better the portrayal. There are no Poles at Rick's Café in Casablanca.

Biskupski's research is meticulous as he explores the development from book to scripts to film, and demonstrates how often portrayals of Poles were transformed from favorable to "nasty"—a word he has to use, alas, all too frequently. He demonstrates that the government agencies charged with overseeing wartime films were themselves following a pro-Soviet policy and willing to overlook bad portrayals of Poles. Biskupski's thesis—more than amply demonstrated and carefully argued—is that Hollywood was dominated by a leftist mentality that supported a strong communist core of writers. Once the wartime alliance with the Soviet Union was formed, the U.S. government was intent on seeing that nothing was done to damage the image of the Russian ally: this fed into the leftist sentiments of the Hollywood community perfectly. More, that community was very heavily Jewish—he cites one authority who states that in 1936 "of eighty-six major producers in Hollywood, fifty-three were Jewish" (p. 323, fn. 70). The Jewish community, fairly recently immigrated and coming from what had once been Polish lands, had a very negative image of the country they or their recent ancestors had left. Of this community Warner Brothers was most notably hostile, the "Brothers" themselves seriously misunderstanding or even misrepresenting their own family's roots and experiences in Europe. As so often, Poles were held accountable for historical Russian crimes: "Polish police" were blamed for wrongs in a place where no such police could possibly exist. Moreover, the more recently arrived Polish Catholic community in the United States was very largely working class and relatively powerless to defend itself. Although there had been a Polish presence in the world of film early on, this presence actually became smaller and of no significance.

These factors combined to produce a "perfect storm" in which it was in no one's interest or to no one's taste

to portray Poles and Poland well, and it was in virtually everyone's interest to lionize the Russians at Poland's expense. Interestingly, Biskupski also notes that there was a tremendously favorable image of notably large numbers of Irish ethnics in American films of the time, as was similar with Jewish characters. The Poles, scripted with ludicrously unpronounceable names, were vilified in every way imaginable as degenerate cretins, cowardly and mentally unstable, heirs to a Fascist culture, stupid peasants of worthless culture, ruled by totally selfish aristocrats, or in need of correction by other ethnic groups. Hollywood was willingly doing Moscow's work of destroying the Poles as a significant member of the European war effort and subsequent "settlement," while adding twists of its own and creating what would become the standard American image of the "dumb Polack." All of this had no bearing in reality. The names Poles were often given could not possibly be Polish, or even of any other nation. The actors depicting the rare Poles in film were virtually never Poles and were indeed invariably typecast as short (generally less than 5'6") and very swarthy: they were the "bad guys," dark and foreign. In one remarkable film a tall, fair Pole is cast as a non-Pole.

This book has been my Lenten reading, and I confess it has been a penance reading it because it stirs painful memories that any Polish American of the mid and late twentieth century would have been raised with, starting with the World War II movies. It has been a penance occasionally made lighter by the author's bits of humor and his penetrating intelligence. At times the material becomes so absurd that the author has to laugh and the reader with him, and it is a joy to see him strong and knowledgeable enough to allow laughter to soften anger at such relentless injustice. But even so, one chuckles in a very dark place because what Professor Biskupski is documenting—carefully, responsibly, without polemics or dramatics—is that which in its full-blown form could be called little less than "cultural genocide." What else can we call it, when the children of one identifiable minority are taught by the media of the dominant culture that they were born into a nation of mentally inferior people?

Professor Biskupski's work is a very important, indeed an essential contribution to the work of undoing and healing that cultural genocide. He is a keen observer of films, and I strongly urge him to continue his work through Stanley Kowalski and Archie Bunker to "the Big Lebowski." Δ