

In Darkness

The Holocaust, in its infinite variety of horror, continues to provide grist for compelling cinema, especially when its stories have a specific human dimension, one which people can identify with. A very recent example is “Sarah’s Key,” out just last summer (see “Reviews” on this site). The current entry in this fertile field is “In Darkness” from Poland.

“In Darkness” is based on a book by Robert Marshall called “In the Sewers of Lvov” and was adapted for the screen by David F. Shamoon. It tells the true story of Leopold Socha, a sewer worker and petty thief who works in the bowels of the town of Lvov during World War II when Lvov—now in the western part of Ukraine--was part of occupied Poland. In 1943, the persecution of Jews in the town is well underway, and a number of remaining families escape from the city’s ghetto into the city’s dank, intricate sewer system.

This is the world that Socha knows better than anyone, and he encounters the hidden Jews as he roams the underground network. Initially, he has no interest in these cowering exiles. He discovers, however, that at least one family, the Chigers, has money and valuables enough to pay him off for his silence and for the delivery of some minimal food. He gladly takes the payoffs and avoids mentioning their existence, even when pressed by a long-time Ukrainian friend, Bortnik, who has become an officer working for the Nazis.

At first firmly apolitical and only interested in himself and his family, Socha comes to recognize that not only Jews, but *all* Poles are potential victims. This particularly hits him when he finds his sewer worker colleague Szczepiek (Krzysztof Skonieczny) publicly executed in a town square. Gradually, he comes to identify with the family he is assisting and risks his own life to try and save a dozen people from certain death.

“In Darkness” was directed by Agnieszka Holland, a veteran Polish filmmaker who first worked in Poland with stellar directors like the great Andrzej Wajda. She is probably best known in the US for her Oscar-Nominated film “Europa, Europa,” which also had a Holocaust angle about a young Jew passing as Hitler youth during WWII. She later made films as diverse as “Olivier, Olivier,” a version of “The Secret Garden,” and “Washington Square,” based on Henry James. She also found time to direct American television dramas, including episodes of David Simon’s HBO chronicles “The Wire” and “Treme.” With “In Darkness,” Holland comes back full circle to tell a story of her native land at one of its most heartbreaking moments.

The screenwriter David Shamoon, a refugee from Iraq, had the script in hand for years and found producers interested in the story but only if it were done in English. He himself was interested in having Holland direct the film, but she held off because she insisted it had to be made in original languages for authenticity. She was proved right, and the screenplay uses Polish, Ukrainian, German and Yiddish in its final version.

The cast of “In Darkness” is uniformly excellent, both the oblivious Poles above ground and the terrified Jews underground. Among many fine characterizations is that of German actress Maria Schrader as Paulina Chiger, a tenacious survivor trying to keep her diverse family together. Paralleling her excellence is Kinga Preis as Socha’s

wife Wanda, an earth mother who loves her man and, though chary, comes to accept his tossed-off heroism. Also superb is the talented German actor Benno Fürmann (see recently in “Farewell” and “North Face”), playing the stalwart Jewish hero Mundek, who braves the Nazis because he can pass as one of their Aryan equivalents.

Yet the film is dominated by Robert Wieckiewicz as Socha, the stolid man who gains a consciousness and learns pity. The performance is the more effective because of the actor’s pug-ugly face, which looks like a boxer who went 12 rounds—and didn’t win. It’s a working-man’s face and to see it slowly brim with sympathy for fellow creatures whom he comes to see more as Poles than as Jews is gripping. Wieckiewicz is a prolific Polish actor with dozens of film credits to his name. One of his biggest roles comes next, when he plays Lech Walesa in a film biography of the Polish leader directed by the Wadja.

“In Darkness” was one of the five candidates for this year’s Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. It did not win--the splendid Iranian film “A Separation” (see review on the site)—won the statuette. Still it was a worthy effort and worth seeing. *(The film is rated “R” and runs 145 min.)*

(March 2012)