

7

OBCHOD NA KORZE. (The Shop on Main Street.)

Blažena Urgošíkova

In the mid-1960's, young, creative artists appeared on the Czech film scene with fresh film and projected a new conception of the present and the past in a new way. *The Shop on Main Street*, however, was made by Ján Kadar and Elmar Klos in the tradition of classical film, without any particular formal innovations such as complicated dramatic structure or impressive camera work, and even without any visible influence of the international trends of those days such as cinema verité or the French New Wave. The modernity of *The Shop on Main Street* was not based on any technical characteristics but on its content – on another way of viewing the reality of the Second World War. After a series of movies about the occupation years of 1939-1945, narrating or describing this period in a linear and uniform way, opposing heroism and cowardice, *The Shop on Main Street* concentrates instead on profoundly penetrating the thoughts and feelings of people who lived at that time and experienced a fear which broke their will to resist and led them to criminal acts. It asks the question of whether a human being has the right to build his happiness and personal security on the misfortune of others, and answers that question with a story of someone who committed a crime because he did not have the strength to resist evil.

The locale of the story is a typical small town in the so-called Slovak State (established by secession of Slovakia from the Czechoslovak Republic at the beginning of the Second World War), where the citizens gradually come under the disintegrative influence of the new order organized by the government under the protection of the expanding German empire. Seemingly – at least in the beginning – this influence manifests itself in comical and provincial ways. However, behind all this funny business is a tragic reality – the Jewish residents of the town will be deported to concentration camps and face death. In this situation the moral conflict unfolds, the conflict of the main protagonist whom the viewer meets at the moment when the new society distributes power, rank and wealth. This fellow acquires a portion of the loot and although it is very negligible and almost worthless, still it signifies the first step toward a compromise which, in the end, logically leads him to crime. At the beginning of the story, he is scarcely distinguishable from his victim. Both of them – he a common little businessman, she an aging owner of a small store and a Jewess – used to accept the same moral code and honor the same rules of living. Their collision does not take place at the intellectual level but rather in the deeper layers of life. Its roots are really misunderstanding and misinterpretation of one's own actions and also of the actions of others. The old lady does not comprehend anything taking place before her eyes, anything of what looms ahead.

The carpenter Brtko does not understand the senselessness and criminality of his compromise. They both pay for it by their death.

The film is made with an unusual sensitivity toward the need to alternate bearable doses of the tragicomic with fully tragic elements and situations. It has outstanding editing and music, and shows a fine sense for detail. The acting performances of the Slovak actor Jozef Kroner and the Polish actress Ida Kaminska mesh beautifully, and the picture was honored by a number of prizes.

In: Thomas, Nicholas and Vinson, James (ed.). 1990. *International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers 1. Films*. St James Press. Chicago and London, pp. 647-648.