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"Aryan Papers" : The Polish Connection

Media – Kultura – Komunikacja Społeczna 12/2, 73-79

2016

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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Aryan Papers: The Polish Connection

Słowa kluczowe: Stanley Kubrick, *Aryjskie papiery*, adaptacja, Polska, *Lista Schindlera*

Key words: Stanley Kubrick, *Aryan Papers*, adaptation, Poland, *Schindler's List*

“I was born a few months after the burning of the Reichstag in T., a town of about forty thousand in a part of Poland that before the Great War had belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire.” This is the opening sentence of Louis Begley’s novel *Wartime Lies* – the book Stanley Kubrick wanted to turn into a movie.¹

To what extent Kubrick’s biography influenced his work? His Jewish heritage, for instance, does not visibly translate itself into any aspect of the narrative or imagery in his films. Christiane Kubrick answers: “Like most Jewish families, Stanley’s family came from all over that part of the continent [Europe]. His mother came from Kiev, his father from Romania. But there were also relatives from Poland.”² To be more precise – Kubrick’s grandfather, Elias, was born in Probużna, then a small rural town. Today it is a poverty-stricken village of barely two thousand inhabitants in the Ternopil District of Western Ukraine that was part of the historical region of Galicia. Is T., “a town of about forty thousand” from Begley’s book Ternopil? Is this Kubrick sending a sentimental post card to his forefathers? Is this the main source of the appeal?

“He always wanted to make a film about or around the Holocaust, without ever succeeding” continues Christiane Kubrick. “He was not interested in a documentary but wanted a dramatic and artistic depiction of this lowest point in human history. He finally thought he had found it in Louis Begley’s *Wartime Lies* and was in touch with the studio in Warsaw and searched for locations in Poland and in what was then Czechoslovakia.” We all know what happened later: the film was cancelled when Kubrick decided that it would be a bad business decision to follow Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* with a film of a similar topic.

When Kubrick was scouting for locations, he got involved in a collaboration with Tor – the Polish Film Production Unit recommended to him by Krzysztof Kieślowski, whose films Kubrick enjoyed. In 2014, while preparing the exhibition dedicated to Kubrick’s work in the National Museum in Krakow, the correspondence in the form of faxes and invoices between Kubrick and his

¹ The first-draft screenplay was entitled *Aryan Papers*.

² Personal communications, 10 February 2014.

collaborators on the one side, and the Polish producers on the other, resurfaced. It sheds some light on the preproduction, or even pre-preproduction process of the abandoned project.

It has to be emphasised that the faxes and other documents that became available make up only a fragment of a very patchy narrative. Some communication occurred via phone, some in person and only a portion of it was in writing. On top of that – some faxes either went missing, or today are impossible to decipher owing to the passage of time and the quality of print. However, even this fragmentary correspondence makes a fascinating read giving some insight into Kubrick's *modus operandi*. It starts in mid-February 1992 and lasts until December of the same year. On the basis of its length and intensity it may be assumed that the prospective collaboration between Kubrick and the Tor Unit was quite seriously considered by the filmmaker.

Broadly speaking, the most important thread running through the correspondence concerns either the technical or financial aspects of the planned cooperation. Parallel to it are sections dealing with the production of *Schindler's List* and its possible impact on Kubrick's plans and schedules. Somewhat supplementary, or even nostalgic, is the last, giving witness to the political and technological realities of the era. The primary individuals involved in the exchange were Kubrick and Jan Harlan and from the Polish side two producers: Irena Strzałkowska and Ryszard Straszewski.

The overwhelming impression from the correspondence is one of asymmetry. Kubrick asks a lot of questions expecting very precise answers. Although the Polish producers provide Kubrick with the requested information, at the same time they are completely left in the dark. Kubrick simply chooses not to share with them any details concerning the subject matter of his film, nor the possible shooting schedule. This (again) attests to Kubrick's well known obsession with secrecy and his unwillingness to give away information he did not have to give. This also demonstrates how difficult it must have been for his collaborators to respond to the director's request not having the slightest idea what he actually sought. Although it has to be said that with the consecutive faxes and telephone conversations some details concerning the subject matter of the movie must have eventually been revealed giving the Polish producers a general idea what kind of film Kubrick was planning to make.

The exchange started with Kubrick calling Strzałkowska. The subsequent result of the conversation was Kubrick's written request (24 February 1992) to send him a selection of Polish films made immediately after World War II. The vast majority of them dealt with WWII and included such Polish classics as: *Zakazane piosenki* (*Forbidden Songs*, directed by Leonard Buczkowski, 1946); *Ostatni etap* (*The Last Stage*, directed by Wanda Jakubowska, 1946); *Ulica Graniczna* (*Border Street*, directed by Aleksander Ford, 1948); *Piątka z ulicy Barskiej* (*Five Boys from Barska Street*, directed by Aleksander Ford, 1953); *Dzieje grzechu* (*The Story of Sin*, directed by Walerian Borowczyk, 1975).

The last film, made in the mid-1970s, was probably selected on the basis of its story which was set in the pre-war period. Somewhat surprisingly, the list also contains two Czechoslovak films from the 1960s.

In reply Strzałkowska informs Kubrick (24 February 1992) that “Five films from your list are at the National Archives and they are ready to record them on VHS cassettes (they have the single existing prints of each film therefore they do not want to send them anywhere).” An additional problem arises since none of the prints have English subtitles. When the first batch of cassettes is eventually despatched to Kubrick, they are accompanied by a book dedicated to the director. It is the first ever publication on Kubrick in such a form in Poland. Basically, a collection of articles from the international press were translated into Polish and published by the National Archives in a rather rough and ready fashion.

As expected, Kubrick was not particularly happy on receiving the videos and insisted on getting the original prints. In the fax of 3 March 1992 he asks: “Do you know whether it will be possible to borrow 35mm or 16mm prints of the films the National Film Archive wanted \$2000 to put on video? I will be happy to give them a large enough deposit to make them comfortable allowing the prints to briefly leave the country.” Also, Kubrick extends his enquiry, wanting to learn about other Polish films “which are set in the 30s and going up to about 1949?” This is another indication of the future film’s timeframe, but provides no definite information. At this stage, Straszewski, who temporarily takes over the correspondence from Strzałkowska, somewhat unexpectedly states (4 March 1992) that “It is quite possible to borrow any print we have in the National Film Archives without any deposit” with Kubrick having only to cover the shipment to Britain.

Around mid-March the correspondence switches from obtaining the prints to other more concrete issues. Kubrick enquires about the production costs in Poland as well as the possibilities of obtaining real clothes from both the late 1930s and the war period. On top of that comes another hint concerning the film’s subject matter: is there the possibility to hire German, Russian and Polish military vehicles from the period? Strzałkowska, responding to Kubrick’s queries, assures him of such a possibility, but she stresses again the need for more details in order to be more accurate. Quoting rough production costs figures Strzałkowska states they “depend on the story and the director’s requirements.” Her fax of 11 March 1992 concludes with quite a straightforward, if not urgent, question: “If you really think about filming in Poland there are two necessary items to be known – the script and the shooting period.” As one may expect – she receives no such information. Therefore the only thing she can conclude her fax of 26 March with is: “Waiting for your next instructions.”

The most interesting and most substantial piece of information is included in the fax from Kubrick to Strzałkowska dated 25 August 1992. There are eighteen numbered paragraphs on three full pages of text. Each paragraph deals with a separate issue with Kubrick urging his interlocutor: “Irena, please read this over carefully and answer every question, even if you have to say

'I don't know'." As before – there is a considerable level of secrecy right from the beginning. Harlan is planning to come to Poland to “have a look at some locations, not to choose them, but to get a general sense of the way they look.”

This is followed by another list of queries suggesting (indirectly) the type of film he intends to make. Some of them are more general, like: “it would be better to have a city that still has a lot of original buildings rather than one which was mostly destroyed during the war, as Warsaw was, and now has a lot of modern buildings, or restored period buildings with the right shape but without the aged look to the stone.” Then a list of more detailed requests follows. Kubrick needs:

- a good town of about 50.000 population;
- a small town about 10.000 population;
- a very small peasant village;
- actual budgets or final production costs in detail, of some recent large Polish films;
- a list of all the film studios in Warsaw with the number and sizes of their stages.

As if he was aware of disclosing some secret information. Kubrick states: “From these questions you will know that some of the scenes take place in Lvov and Warsaw.” Another hint, but still the secret remains.

In response (25 August 1992), Straszewski suggests Lublin, a town some 200 kilometres from Warsaw and close to Poland's eastern border. The city might very well stand in for the wartime Warsaw as well as Lvov. Krakow might have been a much better option, but Spielberg is to start shooting there in a few months' time. So, both projects risk a collision. Again, the problem of the script arises. Straszewski is unable to offer Kubrick even approximate figures concerning the production costs, since “the definite prices and sums depend on the script.” He provides some figures from the recent Kieslowski production in Poland. However, as Straszewski emphasises, “Mr Kieslowski's is a contemporary film. Yours will be a historical one and therefore will probably need different means.”

Kubrick, again, requests more details (27 August 1992). He does not want to know just about “the studios in Warsaw that are prepared to shoot feature films,” he simply wants “all:”

- “all the studios in Warsaw;”
- “all the companies” supplying WWII civilian and military wardrobes;
- “all the companies that have 1930s and WWII period civilian cars;”
- “all the companies that have German WWII trucks, jeeps, light armoured vehicles and tanks.”

The problem of Spielberg's project comes up again. “Would there be a problem, if two major films were trying to use the abovementioned items at about the same time?” And again, the vagueness of Kubrick's requests prompts yet another response from Straszewski (28 August 1992): “I cannot answer this question because I do not know when you want to produce your film – you never mentioned it.” This was followed in another fax by an almost desperate plea: “If I knew something more about your script and your dates, I could then start

necessary activities. Without this information and script I can only suggest that it would be a very good idea if you enter with your film before or after Spielberg. In the second case you could use his production group, equipment and other items” (31 August 1992). Still, Kubrick remains unperturbed.

This also marks the last recorded item of direct communication between Kubrick and the Polish production team. The correspondence is taken over by Harlan. He not only visited Poland in early September 1992, but also continued to request more detailed information. Undoubtedly, the questions were there result of previous consultations with Kubrick.

On 7 September, Harlan provides yet another set of detailed questions. They range from the typical fees of top Polish producers, production managers, transport managers etc., through “Polish interior peasant bar or tavern, medium size” plus “small town 1939 interior, rich people’s restaurant 15–20 tables, some 2 chairs, some 4 chairs, interesting decor but nothing outrageous” ending with a question about the number of fog generators. Again, phrases such as “approximately,” “typical,” “a very rough guess of costs,” etc. come up. Not surprisingly, Harlan too seems to be very careful in specifying any details about the film’s content, though the scale of the production appears to be less hazy. Towards the end of 1992 the correspondence gradually shifts towards financial matters with Straszewski presenting Harlan with a detailed budget of a film in production – Kiesłowski’s *White* (15 December 1992).

This is where the main thread of the correspondence runs its course. There are no further written documents. However, to supplement this section, a few minor points should be added, since they attribute to the thoroughness, if not obsessiveness, of the director. One of these is his quest for visual accuracy. An interesting aspect of this concerns placing an advertisement first in a local Krakow daily, and then in a national newspaper in a search for certain Polish magazines, such as “Arkady,” “Światowid,” “Kino,” “As,” and “Dookoła Świata.” These were illustrated weeklies or monthlies dedicated to either current social and cultural issues or travel and travelling. And, yes, Kubrick’s research at this stage included also the list of average monthly temperatures for the cities where he was planning to shoot. Plus the time at which the sun rose and set **and** when the moon rose and set in the selected months.

The production of *Schindler’s List* appears on the margins of the correspondence time and again. Although Kubrick seems to be aware of Spielberg’s importance for the Polish film industry, Strzałkowska’s information about the delay in Spielberg’s production plans and therefore the availability of the Polish crew does not have any visible impact on Kubrick’s proceedings. However, he does want to know about the possible dates as well as the cities where Spielberg is planning to shoot. “I think we will be working at about the same time and if it were possible it would be good not to conflict with each other by working in the same place” (25 August 1992).

Kubrick also wants to know what film studios Spielberg is going to use and the Polish crew he will be hiring. This indicates that towards the end of August 1992 Kubrick was still seriously considering going ahead with the

project in spite of a production that would be in competition not only in terms of its subject matter, but also the schedule. This is why Kubrick is advised by Straszewski to consider Lublin as his primary location. At this stage the technical aspect seems to be the major worry for Kubrick: local staff, production facilities and the props, but – still – not the subject matter of both films. Hence his recurring questions (27 August 1992): “Do you think there could be a problem of two major films trying to use them [i.e. vehicles, clothes, studios, staff] at about the same time?”

Eventually, Spielberg’s shooting schedule is confirmed. With the dates no longer a serious issue, a different kind of problem appears. As it happens, Spielberg’s production manager (31 August 1992) “has already reserved all vehicles, armour, civilian clothes and uniforms from WWII existing in Poland.” This is bad news. Although Straszewski assures Kubrick that it does not mean “that we cannot start fighting for them and divide those things between the two films.” As awkward as it sounds in English, it is a well meaning suggestion. But would Kubrick be really prepared to “fight” over vehicles and armour with Spielberg? The issue of *Schindler’s List*’s production does not come up again. Neither does Spielberg’s name. Either, which is less likely, some of the faxes went missing. Or, what is more possible, Kubrick began to realise that this may be just another obstacle that is impossible to overcome.

Thus the “fight” – real, figurative, or otherwise – for the film was lost by Kubrick. Bad luck, bad timing, or both. One may only speculate what kind of film Kubrick would have made. Whatever the result, one can be absolutely sure it would not have been a horrific, yet sentimental, historical, even truthless, well-meaning, and stereotypical film. Like the one to which the *Aryan Papers* lost its battle.

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Streszczenie

Na początku lat dziewięćdziesiątych ubiegłego stulecia Stanley Kubrick planował nakręcić film na podstawie powieści Louisa Begleya zatytułowanej *Wojenne kłamstwa* – historii Maćka oraz jego ciotki, Tani, zmuszonych do ucieczki z Polski po niemieckiej inwazji. W poszukiwaniu odpowiednich plenerów Kubrick podjął współpracę ze Studiem Filmowym „Tor”. Równoległa produkcja *Listy Schindlera* przez Stevena Spielberga zmusiła Kubricka do porzucenia projektu ze względu na podobną tematykę obu filmów. Čwierć wieku później korespondencja (listy, faksy, faktury, ogłoszenia) pomiędzy Kubrickiem a jego polskimi współpracownikami ujrzała światło dzienne, dając wgląd we (wstępny) etap procesu produkcyjnego filmu Kubricka na temat losów Żydów w czasie II wojny światowej.

Summary

In the early 1990s Stanley Kubrick was planning to make a film based on Louis Begley's novel *Wartime Lies*. The book tells the story of a Polish boy, Maciek, and his aunt, Tania, who are forced to flee Poland after the German invasion. Scouting for locations, Kubrick became involved in a collaboration with the Polish film industry, and especially with Tor Film Production. Eventually, Steven Spielberg's critically acclaimed *Schindler's List* made Kubrick abandon his project owing to the similarity of the subject matter. A quarter of a century later, the correspondence (letters, faxes, invoices, ads) between Kubrick and certain Polish artists and producers has been discovered. They give an insight into the nitty-gritty of the (pre-) production process of Kubrick's planned film on the fate of Jews during WWII.