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How Film Was Repressed in Poland

By **EDWARD ROTHSTEIN**

A transcript of a film-censorship proceeding, sent secretly from Poland to the West, offers an unusual glimpse into the cultural policies of the regime in Warsaw.

The transcript, which first circulated among members of the outlawed Solidarity union, provides details of a censorship meeting that took place April 23 at the Ministry of Arts and Culture in Warsaw, four months after the imposition of martial law in Poland. The meeting was called to advise the Government whether to release a film dealing with the repressions of the Stalin era in Poland. Out of fear that the subject would be inflammatory, the film was withheld from circulation.

At the meeting, which was surreptitiously recorded, the Stalinist period, the contemporary regime and the film were discussed by a deputy minister, professors, film makers and writers. The transcript, which has been published in the October issue of *The New Criterion*, a new journal of the arts, has been called a "remarkable document" by émigrés from Communist countries because it provides a graphic example of cultural debate under totalitarian conditions.

Some weeks after the meeting, copies of a 15-page single-spaced Polish typescript made their way, reportedly through Paris, to the Committee in Support of Solidarity in New York. The document was translated into English by Jerzy Warman, a Polish émigré, member of the committee and graduate student of political science at Columbia University.

While such documents from underground sources in Communist countries are difficult to authenticate, inquiries by *The New York Times* here and abroad show that the salient aspects of the transcript are genuine. It has been confirmed that the Polish director

Andrzej Wajda, who is working in Paris, in fact sent a letter supporting the film. The text of the letter accurately appears in the transcript.

The film's director, Ryszard Bugajski, has also confirmed that the meeting took place, that he was present and that arguments were presented by participants matching those in the document

Transcripts of similar Government debates have been published in the Polish underground press and in the journal Index of Censorship, but this is the only such document known to exist since the imposition of martial law Dec. 13.

Moreover, the film, "The Interrogation," deals with a sensitive historical issue—the arrests and tortures of the Stalin era. Its graphic scenes of torture touched so sensitive a nerve in the Government that after the hearing, the decision was made not to release the film.

Every New Film Is Discussed

Mr. Bugajski, who works in the Studio X led by Mr. Wajda, has said that he thinks it unlikely the film will be released in the foreseeable future. The only print is kept in the Central Cinematographic Administration in Warsaw.

The central participants in the meeting made up a purely advisory board that is convened to discuss every new film in Poland. All speakers are aware that they are not making actual decisions. The debate, in fact, has the quality of a staged drama. Mr. Warman, in his introduction to the transcript, points out the remarkable qualities of the transcript's arguments and language.

The discussion follows certain unwritten rules; there are no criticisms of the regime, no mention of Solidarity and no explicit discussion of Stalinist practices. Words are chosen with caution. Everyone seems to know that there is a very important ear listening at the keyhole. But everyone also pretends it is not there.

The Deputy Minister of Arts and Culture in charge of the film industry, Stanislaw Stefanski hopes that "*nobody will lack the courage to express his opinion, here as well as*

outside." A professor of philosophy, Henryk Jankowski, stresses that the commission would be effective only "*if we do not allow ourselves to be frightened.*"

Yet the arguments and language are rarely straightforward. Kazimierz Kozniewski, a writer supportive of martial law, argued that the film was "*greatly moving,*" with its story of "*degenerate things,*" but perhaps it should not be seen in the contemporary "*political situation.*"

"*We are,*" he said, "*choosing — well, maybe not us, because we are only advisers, but perhaps we, too, have the duty to say it—between two bad alternatives. A film of such passion will evoke great passions in return. Still, to pass over those things in silence. But one could say: Silence? — There is no silence on the subject.*" He concludes, "*So I admit that I feel helpless*" "*one thing is certain: the decision should not be taken lightly.*"

Even the minister is cautious, not quite getting the party line correct on Stalinism. It is generally referred to as that "*painful period.*" The minister becomes alarmed and confused after making too literal a reference to the "*years of terror.*"

The result is a dialogue, as Mr. Warman pointed out in an interview, in which "all the speakers are quite adept at concealing what they are saying while alluding to it."

The rhetoric becomes knotty and contradictory. "*I do not want to employ circumlocutions,*" the minister says before proceeding to do so.

"*I do not wish to enter into polemics,*" announces an opponent of the film before beginning his argument.

Like art works in totalitarian conditions, every expression also takes on double meanings for safety. The transcript recalls the surreal verbal worlds of Eastern European literature.

Joseph Brodsky, the Russian émigré poet, commented on the discussion style:

"*This is accepted locution in Socialist countries. You can't call things by name because then*

you would have to take the next step."

Stanislaw Baranczak, a Polish émigré and associate professor of Slavic literatures at Harvard University, pointed out that the minister's style was even an "*official language in Poland.*" He "*tries to be cautious and not offend anybody, because he is not sure what future developments will be.*" There is an awareness in all speakers that more than abstractions are at stake.

Everyone present is aware that the film does have a political meaning. During 1981, when it was made, the cultural thaw under the influence of Solidarity went along with interest in the Stalin period. The film originally included a contemporary subplot concerning Solidarity. One actress, Agnieszka Holland, is a member of Solidarity. Another is Krystyna Janda, who was featured in Mr. Wajda's films, including "Man of Marble" — which, coincidentally, concerned a film maker's difficulties in attempting to make a documentary about the Stalin years.

But the film's advocates cannot acknowledge that criticism of the regime is implied, so, as Mr. Warman points out in his introduction, they argue that the film is not political, but purely "historical."

Art or History?

Another group of speakers, "the moderates," make a distinction between the film's "high" esthetic quality and difficulties in releasing it. Passions would be raised and the audience would be unable to make the necessary distinctions between the past and the present, between, as one professor put it, "*Stalinist non-Socialism and the Socialism of the state of war.*" This group, playing on both sides of the fence, uses the most convoluted and most theoretical arguments.

But it is the opponents of the film who have the most strength and have least to fear. Mr. Baranczak pointed out that they use the fewest euphemisms. They attack the work as both art and as history. They call it "one-sided to the point of offending artistic dignity," "loathsome," "disgusting," "simplified" and "tendentious."

The key opponent is Bohdan Poreba, a film maker whose father was imprisoned in the Stalin era. He leads the Grunwald Patriotic Association, an anti-Semitic nationalist group opposed to Solidarity. He objects to the omissions of background information from the film, alluding to Jewish influence in the Stalinist regime. He says:

"Really, dear friends, there must be a standard of truth in art's generalizations." Such arguments do not explicitly defend Stalinism, but they do attack the film's version of it, asking that it give background reasons for the Stalinist excesses; this tactic implies a defense for the regime as well.

These positions, their argumentative strategies and their contorted, style, are not atypical in totalitarian' countries. Mr. Brodsky recalled similar discussions on editorial boards in the Soviet Union. Despite the discussion's "terminological maze," Mr. Brodsky said the "level of discussion is slightly higher than that in the Soviet Union."

He also felt that public knowledge of such a transcript might actually be to the Government's benefit; it "demoralizes the opponent," revealing the limits being imposed. It is clear from the transcript, from the fate of the film and from recent events in Poland that the film's most virulent critics are representative of those holding cultural power.

Yet Mr. Baranczak noted a difference, from earlier published examples of such hearings:

"Everybody here was very concerned with the present situation. Everybody knows how the audience' would react to this film. That is a new factor in these discussions."

That concern acknowledges that large portions of the Polish public are opposed to Government policy. This might be a sign of a precarious position. Even permitting such a hearing is a pretense of democratic propriety; it serves to let off critical steam.

The transcript's lesson for the West, according to Hilton Kramer, editor of *The New Criterion*, is less ambiguous. "It presents us with a salutary warning of what can happen

when the state is in a position to control art and thought."