

DISPLACED PERSONS: *IDA*'S WINDOW ON VANISHED LIVES

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The Soviet experiment in the Eastern Bloc created a form of displaced person who was different from the traditional forced emigrant. As Czesław Miłosz elegantly explains, “It was only toward the middle of the twentieth century that the inhabitants of many European countries came, in general unpleasantly, to the realization that their fate could be influenced directly by intricate and abstruse books of philosophy. Their bread, their work, their private lives began to depend on this or that decision in disputes on principles which, until then, they had never paid any attention.”¹ People living behind the Iron Curtain (that Cold War term for the Soviet zone) had to put the interests of the state first while remaining fully aware that those interests were mutable and easy to violate: the inadvertent consequences of writing the wrong article or sharing a joke with a friend could be dire. Survival, let alone security, required constant dissembling.

In a mere 80 minutes, Paweł Pawlikowski's *Ida* (2013) brings to life the startling range of dissemblings that shunted people, inevitably, toward lesser or greater forms of compromise. Or even outright betrayal. Long based in the United Kingdom, Pawlikowski left Poland as a teenager in the early 1970s. After several documentaries and a series of contemporary dramas—*Last Resort* (2000), *My Summer of Love* (2004), and *The Woman in the Fifth* (2011)—*Ida* is Pawlikowski's first feature set in Poland. His perspective as a fortunate returnee, aware of his un-lived Polish life, plays a subtle part in a film titled for someone who, effectively, does not exist. Pawlikowski based the tale on people he knew and on his own background, using a monochromatic palette to underline the primacy of memory rather than history. Building the film around the contradictions inherent in a troubled way of life, Pawlikowski and his co-writer Rebecca Lenkiewicz



Ida/Anna (Agata Trzebuchowska), dutiful novice.

Courtesy of Music Box Films

focus on the two greatest powers in Poland at the time: the Communist Party and the Roman Catholic Church.

But *Ida* is no polemic. Intimacy, privacy, and personal choice inform this film, making it simultaneously a story of identity and an ambivalent tribute to a vanished form of society. Every shot conveys something of what it was to live in a country still recovering from World War II, recently emerged from Stalinism, and adjusting to indirect Soviet rule. Pawlikowski uses the film frame to tell this aspect of the story, as characters are rarely centered in the shot, often pushed instead to the margins of the screen. Sometimes part of a face or head dips below the bottom rim of the frame, as if they are running out of room simply *to be*. The spatial displacement becomes a visual metaphor for the imposition of a fundamentally inhuman system and the persistent low-level angst that shaped life in the Eastern Bloc. Focusing *Ida* on a pair of very different women, Pawlikowski gives a nuanced portrait of two cramped possibilities for private life and private thought in such a system: retreat into religion or into a double life (public loyalty to the Party, private escape into casual sex and alcohol).

Ida is set in 1962, not long after Władysław Gomułka, First Secretary of the Polish Workers' Party, managed to

Film Quarterly, Vol. 67, No. 3, pps 30–34, ISSN 0015-1386, electronic ISSN 1533-8630.
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convince the Soviet Union of both Poland's loyalty and the necessity of tailoring Polish Communism to Polish traditions. This bargain, struck in 1956, changed Poland from a Soviet puppet to a client state. According to Norman Davies, there were "three specific features of the Polish order—an independent Catholic Church, a free peasantry, and a curious brand of bogus political pluralism."² Davies adds that "the position of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland after the Second World War was stronger than at any previous period of its thousand-year mission."³ The intended plan was for Communism to prove itself superior, causing these other three rivals to weaken and disappear; eventually, of course, the opposite occurred.

Though *Ida* is true to its time, it can't escape its audience's awareness that the system that looks monolithic to its characters will, a few decades on, swiftly crumble. Its cinematography signals this very fragility. Pawlikowski, along with his directors of photography Łukasz Żal and Ryszard Lenczewski, softens the black-and-white contrasts into dreamlike charcoals and grays. The film looks like snapshots come to life, with the occasional close-ups held long enough to call to mind Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), which like *Ida* pictures a world in which death shadows life, where even an unknown past has a hold on the present. Despite getting the details of its period right, *Ida* never looks vintage; nor does it resemble, except in its lack of color, actual films from the 1960s. In fact, it is more melancholy than films made in the 1960s, for today's audience knows too much about the intervening fifty years, in which even the defeat of Communism can hardly be termed a success.

The story opens as novice Anna (Agata Trzebuchowska) prepares to take her final vows. Her Mother Superior (Halina Skoczyńska) insists that Anna visit her mother's sister Wanda Gruz (Agata Kulesza), Anna's only living relative. She tells her that Wanda refused the convent's request that she take her infant niece and has shunned any contact over eighteen years. The Mother Superior does not reveal that Anna's aunt is a demoted state prosecutor, whose punitive zeal earned her the nickname "Red Wanda."

Making her way through the deep snow around the convent in her anachronistically severe postulant habit and outsized suitcase, Anna looks like the banished child in a fairy tale, heading off toward some kind of wickedness. She observes the world through a tram window en route to her aunt's place, her modest veil and plain habit a kind of armor. In this first half of the film, Anna is often behind glass or framed by a window, at a remove from life. Other than a photograph of her infant self in her mother's arms,



Wanda (Agata Kulesza) and *Ida*/Anna unearthing their past. Courtesy of Music Box Films

Anna's only evidence of her mother's existence is a jagged stained-glass window, part of what was the family farmhouse, with each window, of course, another frame, another way of cropping out part of life, of having only a limited view. Pawlikowski may tread lightly with the symbolism, but living behind glass aptly describes life in the Soviet satellite states.

Anna's arrival at the door to Wanda's flat sets up a pattern of approach and retreat, another fairy-tale aspect of their relationship. There is nothing magical or surreal about *Ida*, yet throughout there are images suggestive of fairy tales, of the folk-tale alternative to history, often anathema to tyrannies and organized religion. The references may be more suggestive than manifest, but like a fairy-tale heroine, Anna's story finally turns on luck.

Smoking, blocking the entryway, Wanda coolly gives her niece the once-over. The wariness characterizes Wanda, but is also shorthand for any encounter with someone new in the society at the time. In a system in which people were encouraged to keep tabs on each other, anyone unfamiliar, blood relation or not, was initially best kept at arm's length. As they make their way to the kitchen, Wanda says nothing to or about a man dressing on the edge of the rumpled daybed, his exit barely acknowledged. The chilly start makes Wanda's revelation—Anna's birth family is Jewish, her given name *Ida* Lebenstein—comfortless. After virtually expelling her, Wanda tracks Anna down as she waits at the bus station and brings her back to her place. Showing her family photographs, Wanda suggests that together they make the trip that Anna is planning to make, to find her parents' graves. "They have no graves," Wanda reminds her. "Neither they nor any Jews..."



Anna's expression of unsettling discoveries.

Courtesy of Music Box Films

Much of *Ida* has the feeling of old-fashioned photographs, where priority was often given to place over people. Once Anna and Wanda are out on the road, shot after shot foregrounds the land around them, inhospitable and barely populated. The women seem shrunken, minuscule. On this trip, where their Jewishness becomes defining, Wanda especially seems alien and unwanted, despite her family having farmed this land. Because Anna remains veiled, she is treated like a full-fledged nun and even asked for a blessing. But she too seems rattled by the surroundings, as if the violence visited on her family were somehow working its way into her.

Kerchiefed, glamorous, and chain smoking, Wanda makes an undeniably worldly counterpart to her prim niece. As she drives through the wooded countryside, she asks Anna about any “sinful thoughts,” wondering how valid “those vows of yours” can be if she hasn’t even tried sex or dancing. As if to counteract Wanda’s suggestions, they stop at a roadside shrine, where Anna falls to her knees while Wanda smokes near the car. Each clings to the outward signs of what sets her apart. Like many others, this shot has the feel of a vernacular snapshot, like something glimpsed from a passing car.

In subsequent scenes, it is Anna who seems older and more experienced, with the middle-aged Wanda eager to hold on to any shred of youth still available. Yet a brief courtroom scene shows Wanda as a committed hard-liner. Taken together, Wanda and Anna offer a subtle take on the options for women in the supposedly egalitarian people’s democracies, where, despite surface equality, the real power still rested with men. Both women reflect the ways their environment has shaped them: obedience and

piety for Anna, bullying and cynicism for Wanda. Undone by their grim inquiry, each resorts to a familiar solace: several stiff shots for Wanda, the church for Anna.

At the family’s erstwhile farmhouse, current occupant Feliks (Adam Szyszkowski) denies that any Jews ever lived there, even though Wanda’s questions never mentioned Jews. Nothing is straightforward. Feliks’s family hid the Lebensteins, then, fearful of being exposed, decided to kill them. (Davies points out that “the wartime holocaust also consumed the greater part of Polish Jewry—almost one half of the total victims.”)⁴ “I can destroy you,” Wanda tells the uncooperative Feliks as Anna looks on. So little has changed in the landscape and the town, they could be talking months rather than years after World War II. Wanda recognizes she will have to track down his father, the man who actually hid Anna’s parents.

When Wanda later drives into a ditch, her alcohol level so high she is forced to sleep in jail, Anna ends up on the local priest’s makeshift cot. He knows why they are in town and asks if she has some connection to a, “No, nothing.” Sitting on the cot, her head sinks to the very bottom of the frame as if under the weight of her denial. Observing the subservience of the arresting officer when he realizes that Wanda’s claim to immunity was valid, Anna asks who she is. “Nobody these days,” Wanda says, recalling her former clout. They both seem almost exhausted, aware that whatever they discover will likely be something they would wish they didn’t know.

When saxophonist Lis (Dawid Ogrodnik) joins the two of them, first as a hitchhiker in the back seat, later as part of the entertainment in their pokey hotel, his lighthearted character tempers the seriousness of the story. Life for Lis is no more than a series of gigs. Anna’s sacred uniform holds no special gravity for him. Instead, the character of Lis stands in for the way that people are able to muddle through, even under a repressive regime: he is harmless, seemingly untouched by the history that threatens to engulf Wanda and Anna. Ogrodnik plays him with appropriately cheeky diffidence.

Jazzed like a teenager, Wanda has a good time dressing up, encouraging Anna to drop her guard and ditch her habit. Each is desperate in her own way and desperately identifying with what sets them apart from the other. In the course of the film, Wanda and Anna’s relationship oscillates from frosty tolerance to sisterly amusement and even soothing affection. Kulesza is the undisputed dynamo of the film, her acting on a par with Jeanne Moreau and Simone Signoret and, given the period, invoking both.



A roadside shrine and roadside smoke. Courtesy of Music Box Films

Like them, she combines ferocity and eroticism, resulting in a complex character who is selfish, maddening, occasionally lethal, and terribly sympathetic. First-timer Trzebuchowska has a tougher brief: she is given an unformed person to work with, yet manages to register the unsettling transformations in Anna's life with precision and grace. Pawlikowski, using very little dialogue but staging startling performances, shows an unusually complicated on-screen female relationship in which the man plays only a secondary role.

Wanda drinks and flirts, finally shooing away the partner she danced with all night as she stumbles back to their room. Anna disapproves in the way of someone inexperienced, someone who believes in ritual and ceremony. "I'm a slut and you're a little saint," Wanda says, adding that "this Jesus of yours adored people like me," in a pivotal scene of the film. Wanda's despair is a combination of what happened to her and of what she has done to others. She

knows there is no life without sin, that no one is spared; Anna, in her smug naivete, still feels exempt.

Wanda's comments, and a brief tussle over the Bible, propel Anna out of the room and to the ballroom where the band is winding down with John Coltrane's "Naima." Fragments of music are key in *Ida*. The selections, which include Mozart's *Jupiter Symphony*, Italian and American pop, and jazz, convey the ways the Western world seeped into Poland, no matter how much the Party legislated against decadent influences. For Wanda it is a distraction, for Anna a provocation, as the music from the dance floor reaches her, luring her into conversation with Lis.

Wanda rejects Anna's easy piety as false, knowing that Anna remains untested by temptation, by suffering, or even by being Jewish. Faced with Wanda's toughness, Anna chooses to look away, even to absent herself, disavowing her own connection to Wanda. Only when they confront Szymon (Jerzy Trela), Feliks's hospitalized



Soothing affection between Wanda and Anna.

Courtesy of Music Box Films

father, does Anna identify herself as Ida. Pressuring bed-ridden Szymon, Wanda becomes the stony-faced prosecutor again, but speculating on the details of her family's murder, she collapses (dropping partly below the frame of the shot). Halfway through the film, they finally touch each other, Anna maternally cradling Wanda in the stark hospital hallway.

Only after Wanda's collapse does Anna stop watching and begin to take action, bartering Feliks's dodgy claim to the property against unearthing her family's remains. Though she offers no argument to his justifications, neither will she shake on the deal. Feliks's flat declarations that "No one can prove anything anyway" and "What happened, happened" are all too reflective of the historic denials about complicity with slaughter that remain unresolved well into the twenty-first century.

Trooping across a large meadow toward the woods, the silhouetted figures of Feliks, Anna and, reluctantly, Wanda, once again suggest a fairy-tale fate. "Why am I not here?" Anna's question—after Feliks digs up the bones—seeks rational explanation in what was irrational. "You were tiny. No one would know you were Jewish," whereas her cousin, Wanda's son, was "dark and circumcised." Her survival was a matter of chance.

Burying the remains in the family plot in a neglected Jewish cemetery, Anna and Wanda reach a kind of peace with each other, even a gentle tenderness. Leaving Anna at the convent, Wanda gives her a brief, close hug, the two of them more peers than aunt and niece. Their experiences together over a few days have been largely unspoken, but profoundly affecting. Presence and absence have equal weight in this film, which is reflected in the unseen dead

and the spare dialogue. Pawlikowski is refreshingly unafraid of silence.

In her own way, each woman separately reels from her discovery. Anna's brush with the outside world, including a delicate flirtation with Lis, is enough to sow doubt. She becomes distracted, eventually putting off her vows. Meanwhile, Wanda resorts to any diversion, finally laying the family photographs out like a game of Solitaire. Instead of bringing resolution, the proper burial seems to do the opposite, serving to make life impossible. With devastating efficiency, Wanda opens wide her windows, puts on her fur-collared overcoat, and jumps.

Later, alone in Wanda's apartment, Anna tidies up, then sheds her habit, dresses in Wanda's things, smokes and drinks. In this brief sequence, she transforms from girl to woman, in a certain way, keeping Wanda alive. At the funeral, veil-less for the first time publicly, Anna listens to officials extol Wanda as "the faithful handmaiden against anti-Socialism." Over strains of the *Internationale*, she notices Lis. They dance to Coltrane and wind up in bed, where Lis offers Anna a life together. They can "get a dog, get married, have children, get a house"—"And then?"—"The usual. Life."

Encasing herself again in her habit, Anna leaves him and sets off on foot. The film's last scene is an extended handheld tracking shot of Anna as she walks from the city to the country in twilight, her face occasionally illuminated by passing headlights. Her decision to return to the convent is a kind of independence. Even Wanda might approve. It circles back to the opening of the film, when Anna is seen painting and then helping to install a statue of Jesus on the convent grounds, subject to the rigid faith she has known since childhood. Confidence has replaced her initial meekness. Walking on her own, she has chosen this path rather than obeyed. Her action is no longer rote.

The erased Ida Lebenstein stands in for the Jewish wartime victims as well as the psychologically displaced persons of Communist Poland, hectoring by the state into conformity. Pawlikowski offers no neat resolution, only indelible characters and exquisite images that pay tribute to what has been irretrievably lost.

Notes

1. Czeslaw Milosz, *The Captive Mind*, trans. Jane Zielonko (New York: Vintage, 1990), 3.
2. Norman Davies, *Heart of Europe: The Past in Poland's Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 9
3. *Ibid.*, 10.
4. *Ibid.*, 88.