In Washington, DC where I live, films on the Holocaust come late and quickly disappear. I saw *The Aftermath* (Poklosie) on a video that my friends had brought from Poland. I did catch *Ida* on a big screen. I was urged to see the films by my friends from New York – the world greatest Jewish audience – where both of them apparently made a great impression. Besides, I was intrigued by a favourable review of *Ida* in the New York Jewish weekly *Forward*.

The sensational feature *The Aftermath* is clearly modelled on the 1992 documentary *Birthplace* which deals with my discovery of the grave of my father: the main protagonist arrives from America at the place of crime; his private investigation follows; witnesses do not cooperate; the unearthing of human bones becomes hard evidence; departure. But *The Aftermath*, a fiction treatment of this topic, is both artistically condensed and artificially amplified as if its horrific subject was not sufficiently shocking. The story line is obviously based on the historical mass murder of the Jews in Jedwabne and the film’s action takes place in the same district of Łomża, but in an unbelievable village previously inhabited by 26 Jewish farming families. In reality, some colonies of Jewish farmers existed in sparsely populated Belorussia and Crimea, but not in land-hungry central Poland. It is also hard to believe that a crucifixion was perpetrated in the contemporary Polish countryside. Such an atrocity is mentioned by the narrator of one of the true stories in my collection *Drohobycz*, *Drohobycz*, but that happened during the 1943-44 civil war between the Ukrainians and the Poles in Volhynia. A Holocaust story definitely does not need emotional reinforcement of this sort. There is also a palpably false scene where the hero, who has allegedly learned to read the Hebrew, finds the name ‘Izaak’ on a matseva (tombstone) which in Hebrew would actually be written ‘Yitzhak’. If *The Aftermath* attempted to shock, it achieved this goal, but if it tried to appeal to conscience, its effect in Poland has been the opposite: it has provoked defensive reflexes. A friend writes from Poland that most of the audience there deems the film ‘a failure, kitsch, exaggerated, calculated to provoke scandal and increase box office takings’. However, the producers do not need to worry about this reception in Poland, since the film—it seems—is intended for export. An influential American Jewish opinion-maker asked me to help promote the film in this country and was quite disappointed when I refused. American Jews, who not long ago were taken in by the ‘symmetrical’ Polish-Jewish play *Our Class*, are duped by a distortion in the opposite direction.

A friend from New York writes that *Ida* is also ‘strongly based’ on *Birthplace*, and if its strongest scene: the unearthing of the grave (as in *The Aftermath*) is not plagiarism, it is clearly inspired by the earlier film. Plagiarism it is not, but all three films deal with murder, investigation and exhumation. In two of them the murder tool is an axe, in the third a barn set on fire as in Jedwabne; in three of them – although not ‘Birthplace’ – the action takes place in the Łomża region, and all four depict a crime without punishment.

*The Aftermath, Ida etcetera*

Henryk Grynberg
Like *Birthplace*, *Ida* is made in black-and-white and with no musical soundtrack. It also adopts the same minimalist approach with no superfluous footage (*Birthplace*, a diploma assignment, was limited in length by the minimal allotment of tape available to the Director).

*Ida* is a subtly constructed drama and exquisitely directed. The female lead, who has not previously appeared in film plays marvelously without over-acting. But as in the play *Our Class*, the clever story is based on a faulty understanding of history and makes little sense. What Jewish woman, especially a communist, would, after the Holocaust, not seek to retrieve her niece - the only other survivor of her family - from a Catholic convent? If she had some psychological inhibition - as the film seems to indicate - her party comrades would have easily persuaded her: What is it, comrade? You want to leave a child in the hand of nuns who will bring her up as our enemy? In addition, other Jews would have exerted pressure or retrieved the child themselves. Competing Jewish organizations sought, bought out and fought over the precious few Jewish children who had survived. Subsequently, why did this Jewish communist prosecutor, who admits that she ‘sent people to their death,’ not investigate the murder of her own child and her own sister whom, as she says, she loved very much? The film seems to imply that communist authorities did not prosecute the murder of Jews. This is not correct. An antisemitic prosecutor might have been reluctant to do so, but not a Jewish prosecutor. In addition, why did she did reclaim the house of her murdered sister, the inheritance of her surviving niece, occupied by the murderer whose guilt was well-known? The law allowed taking back small real estate (only palaces and large ‘capitalist’ apartment houses were nationalized). My mother and step-father (who was an idealistic communist before the war) were able to reclaim several family houses which they later sold (primarily to those living in them).

Psychologically and historically unbelievable is also the Jewish woman’s cynical remark that she had left her child in order to go and fight ‘I do not know what for.’ She went to fight for life, for her loved ones, to fight the murderers as did all the others who had such an opportunity, even if in doing so she sought to establish a communist regime power, which subsequently disillusioned her. It is not true that as a prosecutor she ‘sent people to their death.’ Even if on the basis of the indictment she demanded the death penalty, it was the judges and jurors who convicted and sentenced the accused. They often did so on orders from above but not from the prosecutor. Historically untrue is also her sarcastic statement that she prosecuted ‘enemies of the people.’ This phrase was used in Soviet political trials in the second half of the 1930s when the children of revolution devoured one another. People’s Poland punished concrete acts against the state, and acts of betrayal, such as collaboration with the German occupier, cooperation with (genuine or fictitious) anticommunist organizations, or hostile intelligence agents. I remember lengthy radio broadcasts of such trials, and, as an activist of ZMP (Związek Młodzieży Polskiej—the Polish equivalent of Soviet Komsomol), I parroted the insults that were levelled against such people; these did not include ‘enemies of the people.’

Like *Our Class*, *Ida* is a morality play, but with a much more pessimistic moral for the Jewish viewer. Both its Jewish heroines are lost; one commits suicide, the other returns to
the convent, which means a flight from life if not outright suicide. The Christian religious victory, though well-founded, is obviously not a consolation. The conclusive rhetorical question the young heroine asks her suitor: ‘And what then?’ is ambiguous and not only philosophically. For what would a daughter of murdered Jewish parents tell her non-Jewish children when they are stigmatized as Jews?