A Short Introduction to *Forbidden Songs* (1947)

Zakazane piosenki (1947, Forbidden songs) was the first feature film released in Poland after the Second World War. Conceived and written by Ludwik Starski, a Polish Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, the film remarkably adopted the genre of light musical comedy to portray the diverse experiences of Warsaw's inhabitants during the period of Nazi occupation (1939–45). The film's score, created by Roman Palester, draws heavily on authentic popular sources, notably satirical Polish "street songs" banned by the Nazis but nonetheless performed as expressions of resistance and a means of psychological sustenance during this time of deprivation and terror. In this regard, *Forbidden Songs* is an important historical document of the actual music performed by ordinary citizens of Poland during WWII. It's also a document of the immediate postwar period in Poland—a window on a moment in 20th-century Polish history that had not yet settled into an "official state narrative" of wartime events, nor into a later "Holocaust narrative."

Today, the film remains an important commemorative symbol of national survival, as well as an iconic record of Polish wartime history. Audiences still appreciate the film's heroics, witty dialogue, romantic subplots, treasured movie stars, and evergreen songs. Recently, every year on August 1, the songs of the film are performed in Warsaw during a massive, outdoor singalong concert staged to commemorate the anniversary of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. Yet for all its enduring popularity, few have recognized that the film's music provides the key to a hidden story of Jewish survival—that of Ludwik Starski's--as well as a provocative public witnessing of Soviet, as well as Nazi German, aggression. *Forbidden Songs* thus provides insight into the ways in which music has the ability to communicate what in periods of oppression and censorship may not be spoken.

Now, for a bit of historical background on the film. In late summer of 1945, just a few months after the liberation of Warsaw and the end of the War, the illustrious Polish screenwriter and songwriter Ludwik Starski posted a newspaper advertisement soliciting forbidden songs that had been performed by street musicians during the occupation. Ordinary citizens enthusiastically responded to the call and Starski, aided by the director Leonard Buczkowski, shot footage of a dozen or so authentic street songs—roughly 30 minutes of cinematic musical reportage. Starski's collection of defiant, patriotic, satirical anti-Nazi songs was a tribute to the everyday role that music played in psychologically sustaining the capital's inhabitants during the years of Nazi oppression. In this regard, his project was similar to other early postwar Polish publications of wartime ephemera, such as subversive cartoons, anecdotes and jokes that surfaced alongside the more sobering memoirs of survival, and initial tallies of the nation's losses; it was intended as an authentic, if modest, record of Polish cultural resistance during the war. For Starski, the film was also a means of processing personal trauma, an escapist project that helped him start life anew with gratitude for the popular song that had been central to his prewar days.

Dozens of film sketches and scripts were soon created. Of the handful that received serious consideration, all, unsurprisingly, concerned the German occupation. But authorities could not agree on an "appropriate" war narrative. Amid the indecision, infighting, writing and re-writing, Ludwik Starski's modest song documentary took center stage. Topically benign as well as optimistic and uplifting, Starski's songs presented an easy framework on which to build a chronological story of the occupation. Starski's actual experience collecting the music would provide a meta plot for the fictional film. Actors were hired, and a pre-destruction Warsaw recreated in undestroyed Łódz. Thirty

minutes of footage were soon expanded to 100, and Poland's first postwar feature film improbably took the form of a musical comedy shaded dark only by the familiar betrayals and tragic losses of the war. Starski thus ably traversed a minefield of competing narratives to produce a film that would both please the public and pass the state censors. His scenario struck the right chord for a war weary populace eager to celebrate the nation's defiance and courage in the face of oppression.

Starski commissioned Roman Palester (1907-1989) to create the film score. As an immensely talented composer and one of the few seasoned film composers to either survive the war or remain in Poland, Palester was an obvious choice. Palester also turned out to be a sympathetic colleague whose own wartime experiences were arguably as perilous and fraught as Starski's. Though Palester was raised Catholic, his father had been born to a Jewish family and converted in early life; his step-mother was deeply involved in the underground Polish Council to Aid Jews; his half-brother was a Home Army soldier; and his family's apartment a refuge to numerous Jews in hiding during the course of the occupation.

When the film was released in movie houses around the country amid great anticipation on January 8, 1947, audiences cathartically wept. Critics went on the attack. The influential communist poet and essayist Adam Ważyk, who returned to Warsaw from the Soviet Union with the First Polish Army, complained that the film appealed to "cheap sentimentalism," and portrayed a bowdlerized view of the occupation that "had little to do with reality." Other critics chimed in, calling the film a "falsified" view of history that wallowed in the "trivial atmosphere reminiscent of prewar films." Ważyk also audaciously suggested that such a film could only be produced by people who knew

nothing about Nazi cruelty. Within three months the film was withdrawn.

Over the next year-and-a-half it was reworked to meet the demands of censors who called for "corrections:" specifically, more German brutality and a greater emphasis on Soviet liberation. While the opening of the film was changed, and a few moments of Nazi brutality were made more overt, the songs of the film overwhelmingly escaped closer scrutiny. Only Chopin's song “Leaves are Falling” was cut. No doubt the censors were concerned that its 19th-century nationalist text would all too easily inflame age-old Polish-Russian enmity. Surprisingly, though, at the very heart of the film, Starski's haunting, invented song about the experiences of Warsaw's Jews, set to the tune of “Mayn Shtetele Belz,” remained.

By 1949, even in its remade version, the film's overall aura of uplift and thanksgiving for survival would be interpreted as a postwar anomaly, causing the film to be shelved for nearly a decade as the Soviets exerted greater control over cultural messaging during the 1950s. While the revised film subsequently remained in limited circulation to commemorate anniversaries of its release, other Polish cultural gatekeepers attempted to preserve authentic musical memories of the war by other means. In 1970, the Polish state-owned record label separately released a *Forbidden Songs* LP performing a majority of songs that appeared in the film, but Starski’s ode to the suffering of Warsaw’s Jews was omitted. Today in Poland, there seems to be an overwhelming amnesia among Polish audiences about "O Warsaw mine’s” reference to the Warsaw ghetto. It is quite simply received as one of the most beloved nostalgic songs of the film because it is understood as the song about the heart of Poland, about Warsaw, about the nation's struggle for survival.

But this striking film is also a reminder for us to consider the frictions of official and private memory in perilous times. As during other such times in Polish history, it would take a close listening to the music to understand fully the deeper meaning of apparently "light" entertainments. As in the past, music here again proves the key to unlocking some of Poland's most closely-guarded narratives.

Thank you so much for coming out to see this film. I hope you enjoy it.

Barbara Milewski, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Music

Department of Music and Dance

Swarthmore College

October 15, 2019