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Agata Trzebuchowska plays an orphaned nun in *Ida*.

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Film 'Ida' keeps its focus on a family's history

BY DARLEEN ORTEGA

The Holocaust continues to be a popular film subject, but with ever more widely uneven results. To be sure, there are many worthy stories left to be told of courage and unrectified wrongs, and of the long-term effects of systemic evil on the human spirit. But many such films get derailed by complicated plots, or they plow old ground, thereby missing the universal questions lurking in stories of the Shoah.

"Ida," the first Polish-language film of British director Pawel Pawlikowski (a native Pole who has lived his adult life in the UK), avoids those pitfalls in part by keeping its focus particular. Its subject is an 18-year-old orphan, Anna, who has a lived a sheltered life in a rural convent and is preparing to take her vows to become a nun. It is 1962, and life in Soviet Poland is evidently austere, but especially so for solemn Anna. Her days are marked by work and quiet rituals, which she performs with devotion.

Anna is not happy when her Mother Superior tells her that

Emotional Journey

she has one living relative, an aunt, whom she must visit before she takes her vows. The film demonstrates the confines of Anna's world, and her wish to remain inside them. Only duty could lure her outside the convent; she little imagines the duty to which she may be called once she ventures outside.

She travels to the city to meet her aunt, who is as different from Anna as it is possible to imagine. A former state prosecutor in the political show trials of the early 1950s, Anna's only living relative came to be known as "Red Wanda," and presumably sent many people termed enemies of the Communist state to their deaths. Wanda is now a judge

and a Communist party insider. She also is plainly as cynical as Anna is devout. After a brief encounter in which she bluntly tells Anna that she is a Jew, that her real name is Ida, and that her parents (including Wanda's sister) were presumably killed during the war, she sends Anna on her way, as though there is nothing more to be said.

At first ready to leave, Anna does so -- but soon turns back. She may lack the experience of her aunt, but she exhibits a kind of intuition that could well be assisted by years of spiritual practice. Wanda is ready for her. Anna strongly resembles the sister she lost 18 years before, and seems to have awakened something in her.

Neither woman displays any sentimentality, but Anna is curious. Wanda tells her of her mother's idealism and her artistic temperament. Anna wants to see where her parents are buried; Wanda advises her that it is unlikely there will be a grave to visit, but offers to take Anna to the home about which it seems she had not thought to be curious. They travel by car to the small community where Anna's parents lived, to find out what happened to them.

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