This semi-documentary film (and Poland’s last Yiddish feature) features the comedy duo Shimon Dzigan and Israel Shumacher who had recently returned from the Soviet Union, and Jewish children who had survived the Holocaust. Directed on location by Nathan Gross and Shaul Goskind at the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee-supported Helenowek Colony, an orphanage and school near Lodz, this film includes Dzigan and Shumacher’s virtuoso turn as all the characters in Sholom Aleichem’s “Kasrilevke Brent” (Kasrileve is Burning), and an exchange of roles where they become the children’s audience. Reversals continue during the performers’ visit to the children’s residence, as the children teach adults about the healing possibilities of music, dance and storytelling. Our Children was produced under the scrutiny of the Polish Communist Party and subsequently was not allowed to be shown in Poland.

—National Center for Jewish Film

Our Children
(Poland, 1949)

Directed by Natan Gross and Shaul Goskind.
Starring Shimon Dzigan and Israel Shumacher.

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Everything is Illuminated
(USA, 2005)

Adapted from the novel by Jonathan Safran Foer.
Directed by Liev Schreiber.
Starring Elijah Wood, Eugene Hutz, Boris Leskin.

Everything is Illuminated begins in goofiness and ends in silence and memory. How it gets from one to the other is the subject of the film, a journey undertaken by three men and a dog into the secrets of the past. The movie is narrated by Alex, a Ukrainian whose family specializes in “tours of dead Jews.” Alex and his grandfather drive American Jews in search of their roots to the places where many of their ancestors died. It’s a film that grows in reflection. The first time I saw it, I was hurtling down the tracks of a goofy ethnic comedy when suddenly we entered dark and dangerous territory. The second time, I was more aware of the journey Schreiber was taking us on, and why it is necessary to begin where he begins in order to get where he’s going.

—Roger Ebert

Directed by Władysław Pasikowski.
Starring Ireneusz Czop, Maciej Stuhr.

Aftermath
(Poland, 2012)

Inspired by Jan Gross’ book "Neighbors," about the 1941 massacre of a Polish village’s Jewish population by their Catholic neighbors, Pasikowski’s Aftermath retools the material into a fast-paced quasi-horror film, complete with spooky lighting, ominous music, unexplained phenomena and hostile townfolk. Aftermath have unleashed a firestorm of controversy in Poland. This contemporary reaction is mirrored within the 2000-set film, since it concerns two Polish brothers encountering virulent anti-Semitism when they unearth old Jewish headstones used to pave roads and reassemble them as a de facto cemetery in their wheat field. (Indeed, the film’s townspeople issue death threats and call the gentle brothers Jews, in much the same manner that gentile lead these Polish actor Jerzy, was labeled a “Jew” and threatened upon Aftermath release).

—Variety

Directed by István Szabó.
Starring Ralph Fiennes, Rosemary Harris, Jennifer Ehle.

Sunshine
(Hungary, 1999)

The century, or at least one Hungarian Jewish family’s experience of it, from the twilight of empire to the fall of Communism, is the subject of this churning, sometimes clumsy, often thought-provoking—and decidedly long—film. It follows in the footsteps of movies like Visconti’s Leopard and Bertolucci’s 1900, epics that aspired to to show, at once panoramically and intimately, the process of historical change. "I predict this will be a century of love, justice and tolerance,” a rising star of the Austro-Hungarian judicial system named Ignatz Sonnenschein, declares after his toast. You don’t need to know much about the last hundred years—just that they were characterized by an awful lot of hatred, injustice and intolerance—to grasp the irony. But fortunately, the film pulls away from such obviousness and views the lethal unreason of the past hundred years with gravity, humor and, most remarkably, with something like sanity.

—New York Times

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