

Poland Searches Its Own Soul

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

WARSAW — In “Defiance,” a clunky but well-meaning action film set during World War II and starring Daniel Craig, the Bielski brothers save hundreds of fellow Polish Jews by

battling Nazis in the Belarussian forest. Directed by Edward Zwick and based on a true story, the movie, released around New Year’s, tried among other things to counter Hollywood’s usual tales of Jewish helplessness during the Shoah.

Whether it did, or instead implied that Jews who didn’t fight bore a measure of

responsibility for their own fate, became a matter of some passing debate in America.

But the film provoked a different sort of fuss shortly before it arrived here some weeks later. Movie critics in Poland wondered whether Hollywood would ever get around to showing Polish partisans as heroes, as opposed to anti-Semites. A book rushed out by a couple of journalists for *Gazeta Wyborcza*, a liberal newspaper, raised doubts about the financial motives of the roughneck real-life Bielski brothers and was pulled from bookstores soon after publication because of accusations of inaccuracy and plagiarism.

Then the movie opened, and the whole issue fizzled. The film quietly disappeared from theaters. Poland, it turned out, had already moved on.

As Europe diversifies, nearly every nation and culture on the continent seems to battle for victimhood status. Poles have especially good reason to see themselves as long oppressed, having been fought over and occupied for much of the last century by vicious regimes. Shifting political power struggles during and after the war, among other complications of Polish Jewish history, led some Polish Jews at certain points to side with Soviets against Nazis and Polish partisans. The whole moral morass, essential to Polish identity, tends to be lost on outsiders, many of whom unthinkingly regard the country, throughout most of the last century at least, as just a Jewish killing field.

Jerzy Halbersztadt is director of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, which will soon begin construction of a new \$60 million home next to the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial, paid for by the nation and the city.

Polish anti-Semitism persists, Mr. Halbersztadt said. “But Poles are more strongly pro-American, and a side effect is that Poland also has the strongest pro-Israel policy, to which there is no opposition anywhere on the local political spectrum,” he added. “Anti-Semitism is no longer an issue particular to us in daily life.”

Michal Bilewicz, a young Jewish psychologist who specializes in Polish-Jewish relations, echoed that thought. He sat one recent morning in his office at the University of Warsaw, in a building that used to be Gestapo headquarters, beside the former ghetto.

Not that there isn’t anti-Semitism in Poland, “but there is no place for it in public today,” Mr. Bilewicz said. “The last time a national survey was done here, in 2002, although the number of anti-Semites rose slightly — and these were almost all older people — more important the number of anti-anti-Semites went way up.”

Tamas Kovacs/European Pressphoto Agency



A rendering of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, which is scheduled to be built next to the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial.

He pointed to books like “Fear” and “Neighbors” by the historian Jan T. Gross, documenting pogroms at Jedwabne and other atrocities by Poles against Jews during and after the war, which provoked much public soul-searching and made denial of Polish complicity no longer possible.

Culture, despite the virtual absence of Jews here, has meanwhile helped shift attitudes in this country, not entirely but significantly. Walk into a Polish bookstore these days, and you’ll find shelves heaving with volumes about Jewish history and culture. There is a Jewish book fair here in Warsaw, a Jewish cultural festival in Krakow, not to mention Mr. Halbersztadt’s museum, planned to open in 2012.

Films like Roman Polanski’s “Pianist,” released in 2002, about a Jewish survivor, allowed that a modicum of Polish decency outlasted the war. And in 2007, “Katyn,” directed by Andrzej Wajda, dramatized the murder of some 15,000 Polish officers by the Soviet forces, a massacre Poles were forbidden to discuss under the Soviets. It also was part of the cultural process of publicly untangling the complexity of modern Polish history. Mr. Wajda has said he made the film now to reach a generation of Polish “moviegoers for whom it matters that we are a society,” as he put it, “and not just an accidental crowd.” That is to say, to reach a generation anxious to unpack the past.

Outsiders’ views of Poland may also be changing, slowly. The other day busloads of Israeli high school students arrived, as they regularly do, at the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial, draped themselves in Israeli flags and sang patriotic songs. Israeli security guards kept a lookout, but with no one else around on a gray, chilly morning, the voices of the teenagers echoed in the silent square against the surrounding Soviet-era apartment blocks.

It was the usual tour of Jewish memorial sites in Poland, a group leader said. Such trips have for years reinforced an impression among Israelis, as the Polish former Foreign Minister Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz once said, that Poland is “just one big cemetery” for Jews.

But it turns out that a few of the students on this trip

were scheduled to meet with Polish students. For the last couple of years the Museum of the History of Polish Jews and an organization called the Forum for Dialogue Among Nations have arranged these meetings.

“Of course there are historical reasons why the perception of Poland is the way it is,” said Andrzej Folwarczny, the forum’s president. “On the other hand, Communism taught Poles that Jewish suffering was only one part of the general suffering of the Polish people, and that the first 150,000 or so victims at Auschwitz were Polish political prisoners. So after Communism, when more and more Jews came here and said, ‘Auschwitz is our place of suffering,’ suddenly these two sides, ignorant of each other’s narrative, clashed over victimhood.

“But gradually more Poles have come to realize that their history is not black and white, that we should be proud of Poles who saved Jews but also be clear that other Poles killed Jews, and that something is missing from our culture” — he was now referring to the Jewish population of three million before the war, today barely a few thousand — “for which we have responsibility.”

Mr. Bilewicz, the psychologist, agreed. He described two interesting studies he conducted not long ago. In one, he said, different groups of Israeli and Polish teenagers, brought together, were told either to chat only about their lives today or to discuss only the war and Shoah. The first group forged easy bonds. The second talked at cross purposes. “Both sides need to learn to empathize more,” Mr. Bilewicz concluded.

The other study surveyed residents of what used to be the Warsaw Ghetto, where virtually no remnants of the Jewish past remain, aside from street names and the memorial. To the surprise even of the researchers, many residents said the Jewish history of their district was crucial to their own sense of pride and home. The study found that the monuments, museums and other cultural reminders of the past were essential to sustaining the neighborhood’s collective memory.

“History is being rewritten here every day,” as Mr. Bilewicz put it. “How come you in America believe that you can change, but Poles always remain the same?”