KINONIK

THE SHOP ON. MAIN STREET (1965)

Directed by Ján Kadár

WEDNESDAY March 4th 7PM

SATURDAY March 7th 2PM

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Slovakia, 1942. A carpenter is bestowed with a piece of paper which deputizes him as the Aryan controller of a button shop. The shop is broke. The owner is an elderly Jewish widow who can't hear him explain what's changed. He doesn't want the job, but he takes it anyway.

Ján Kadár spent four years in a Hungarian labor camp during the war. His parents and sister were murdered at Auschwitz. "I did not know I was a Jew until Hitler spoke of it," he said later — a sentence that is essentially the plot of this film. He and co-director Elmar Klos made it during what he called a period of "sweet anarchy," a brief intermission when censorship relaxed and Czechoslovak artists could say the quiet part out loud. In 1958 the pair had been banned from filmmaking for a satirical fairy tale that asked whether you'd sacrifice your comfort to save a friend. By 1965 he and Klos had won an Oscar for The Shop on Main Street, and many of his students had gained international fame for launching the Czech New Wave. By 1968 tanks rolled into Prague, the Wave broke, and Kadár had moved to the United States.

For most of its runtime, The Shop on Main Street plays as warm comedy. Small-town gossip, domestic squabbling, drunken dinners with your fascist brother-in-law, a man whose highest ambition is washing his feet in hot water. This is Czech cinema's oldest tradition, the little man getting by: Hašek's Good Soldier Švejk, a national hero who survives the empire by cheerful compliance. Tono Brtko is that man. First the film loves him for it, and then it shows him what compliance costs.

Tragedy arrives in the third act, but the comedy doesn't stop. It just stops being funny. A wooden nationalist monument goes up in the town square — ridiculous, menacing, both at once. No concentration camps are shown. No senior officials appear. The highest authority is your wife's sister's husband. The catastrophe happens in rooms where everyone knows each other's names.

Tono isn't evil. He's accommodating. The film asks us, “What’s the difference?”