



***Kanal (Sewer)* is a Spring 2026 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library of Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Below is Kino Ken's review of that dvd film.**

18 of a possible 20 points = **1/2 = a minor classic**

**Poland 1957 black-and-white 96 minutes subtitled live action feature drama
Zespól Filmowy "Kadr" Production Manager: Stanislaw Adler
a pd entertainment dvd release**

**Key: *designates outstanding technical achievement or performance
(j) indicates a juvenile performer**

Points:

- 2 Direction: Andrzej Wajda***
- 1 Editing: Halina Nawracka**
- 2 Cinematography: Jerzy Lipman***
- 2 Lighting: Jerzy Lipman* and Antoni Tabak***
- Special Visual Effects (Pyrotechnics): Kazimierz Kutz***
- 1 Screenplay: Jerzy Stefan Stawinski**
- 2 Music: Jan Krenz***
- 2 Production Design: Roman Mann***

Set Decoration: Leonard Mokicz*

Costume Design: Jerzy Szeski*

Makeup: Halina Sienska*

2 Sound: Józef Bartczak*

Narrator: Tadeusz Lomnicki

2 Acting

2 Creativity

18 total points

Cast: Teresa Izewska ('Stokrotka'), Tadeusz Janczar* (Ensign Jacek 'Korab'), Wienczyslaw Glinski* (Lt. 'Zadra'), Tadeusz Gwiazdowski (Sgt. 'Kula'), Stanislaw Mikulski ('Smukly'), Emil Karewicz (Lt. 'Madry'), Vladek Sheybal* (composer 'Michal'), Teresa Berezowska (Halinka), Zofia Lindorf (old woman looking for daughter), Janina Jablonowska (screaming woman in sewer), Maria Kretz* (wounded woman), Jan Englert (j) (Zefir), Kazimierz Dejunowicz* (Captain 'Zabawa'), Zdzislaw Lesniak ('Maly'), Maciej Maciejewski (Lt. 'Gustaw'), Adam Pawlikowski* (S.S. man), Kazimierz Kutz (insurgent escaping from sewer), Ewa Wisniewska (girl carrying water), Roman Polanski (crawling insurgent), Lech Wojciechowski (insurgent next to sewer exit), Ryszard Filipinski, Wlodzimierz Bednanski, Zenon Dadajewski, Witold Grabowski, Andrzej Mirecki, Jerzy Molga, Ryszard Ronczewski, Tadeusz Ross, Roman Zaluski, and Edward Zebrowski (insurgents)

***Kanal (Sewer)* opens with newsreel photos of war-devastated 1944 Warsaw. Narration spoken by Tadeusz Lomnicki informs auditors the ghetto has been liquidated and the Warsaw Uprising has been under way for fifty-five days. Most resistance against Nazi occupation has already been crushed. Surviving elements of it are increasingly forced underground.**

The selfsame interpretive narrator introduces key members of one particular detachment as the camera focuses on each of them briefly. At this point, the group is attempting a final stand in a largely destroyed neighborhood almost entirely dominated by German forces. It's led by Lieutenant 'Zadra', who has seen too much of a losing cause as his company shrinks to platoon size. Once seventy strong, the outfit currently numbers a mere forty-three.

Among these is young Halinka. She's enamored of Lieutenant 'Madry', an experienced second-in-command who still believes resistance is meaningful and heroic. Eventually Halinka will discover her officer lover has previous commitments he's been hiding.

Only in his mid-twenties, Ensign Jacek 'Korab' is vigorously alert, prepared to battle on in the name of Polish freedom. Using a spade to break the chain uniting a remote-controlled Goliath mine to its operator, he stops the machine successfully but is then shot by the enemy.

Keeper of company records is Sergeant 'Kula' of the bullet-shaped head. He turns out to be a liar and opportunist, hardly the fellow you'd want to be trapped alone with in a bunker or sewer.

Handling the grenade launcher for insurgents is 'Smukla.' 'Slim' is an ammunition specialist whose mechanical skills prove no match for German cunning.

Accompanying these fighters are two floaters who carry no weapons and lack official identification as part of the larger organization. They are composer-pianist Michal and the boy Zefir. Michal's attachment is probably due to his belief the commander will establish telephone communication with other areas of the city, including the one where his wife and son are living. Zefir, the "marshmallow" in short pants, runs errands between underground leaders and seems to regard himself as a Polish counterpart to Gavroche.

As these ragged remnants of the Home Army and tagalongs steal through trenches to set up temporary residence in one of the few local buildings still mostly intact, their conversation reveals philosophical convictions as well as details of their precarious position. Obviously they have only two options remaining. One, they can make a final suicidal stand where they presently are. Or two, they can follow the directive of contact Captain Zabawa, who orders them to move into sewers and relocate themselves downtown.

In order for that journey to succeed they must rely on newly arrived 'Stokrotka.' Daisy has travelled the sewer system in the past and can guide them to the Wilcza street turnoff leading to Warsaw's city center.

Their travels first take them to the city's sole intact street-level barricade, behind which frantic Resistance members attempt to corral civilians and marshal them in some kind of order to protection below. These scenes are chaotically heart-rending. For the majority of people seen will soon perish one

way or another. Either from starvation, malnutrition, madness, suicide, or SS bullets.

Delay is impossible for 'Zadra' and his companions. They are not medics, nurses, or psychiatrists. The problems of homeless citizens are sociopolitical ones best left to the intentionally stalled Red Army on the eastern side of the Vistula River. 'Zadra' is concerned only about bringing comrades safely to a rendezvous with other Home Army stragglers.

To accomplish this, he and his associates must enter the lightless world of urban sewers and traverse about three miles of mucky, stinking waste. What they will encounter down there is unknown. There could be Germans waiting for them. Maybe panic-stricken women and children will clog the tunnels. Pestilential rats are likely, too. Should they lose the navigational services of Daisy ... Best not to even begin pondering that.

The second part of the film recreates an infernal slog through the Warsaw sanitation conduits. What starts as an orderly file breaks apart soon into distinct subgroups. One of these is led by Lieutenant 'Zadra' himself. A second consists of Lieutenant 'Madry', Halinka, and Michal. The third comprises a majority of the platoon's survivors and includes the boy 'Zefir.' At the rear is a necessarily slower-moving duo of Daisy and dying Jacek.

Without its orientation expert Daisy, 'Zadra' and his lead cluster become lost. The turnoff to Wilcza Street proves extremely elusive. Retreating parties trying to escape ammonia being injected by Germans into sewers cause even more confusion about how and even whether to proceed.

The largest subdivision falls so far behind it soon loses touch completely with the advance unit. The fate of these individuals is left unspecified.

'Madry's threesome dissolves due to internal chaos. When a crisis develops about whether to continue as planned or turn back like many others they encounter, the trio's leader admits he's married. Partner Halinka learns she's been bedding down with a husband and father. She cannot tolerate this situation. Suddenly extinguishing their available light source, the disheartened young woman uses resultant darkness to commit suicide with a pistol she previously wheedled from her lover. Michal slides into insanity, having been informed by his wife via telephone that she and their son are about to be arrested and probably executed by the enemy. He wanders solo through

underground passages quoting from Dante's *Inferno*. Though appropriate, it's hardly encouraging to hearers.

Down to a solo act, 'Madry' finds what seems like an unguarded ladder leading out to daylight. Availing himself of this unexpected resource, he ascends to ground level. Only to meet a kind of reckoning for his selfish unconcern about those he was charged with guarding.

Unable to push expiring Jacek all the way to the relocation site, Daisy attempts reaching a closer goal: the Vistula River. On its opposite bank sit Red Army troops which have opted not to get involved in either reinforcing or rescuing Poles. There's another obstacle between them as well. One requiring equipment neither Jacek nor his assistant currently possess ...

Eventually 'Zadra's vanguard happens upon an outlet to the upper world. Unfortunately, it's fairly impassible. As three hand grenades have been left attached to barbed wire hanging over it. 'Slim' manages to deactivate two. The third one is more resistant and explodes when the insurgent loses his footing while trying to neutralize it. 'Zadra' and archivist 'Kula' slip past his lifeless body to freedom. When 'Zadra' then asks the sergeant where the others are, his subordinate's response is they're far back in the maze somewhere, completely detached. Not just behind them, as 'Kula' had previously declared cheerily.

Faced with betrayal of trust, a frustrated lieutenant must decide whether to accept temporary freedom for himself and the sergeant or go back down to potential death in order to reunite with the remainder of his forces.

What will he do? Borrow this video and find out. Is the film's conclusion justifiable? Keep in mind events described actually occurred and 'Zadra' is none other than screenwriter Jerzy Stawinski.

Kanal is a grimly realistic, grubby, brutal look at warfare. There's no glory or victory anywhere. At best a participant emerges from it still alive. Barely.

Using constructed sets near a Lodz movie studio rather than actual Warsaw sewers, Jerzy Lipman and Antoni Tabak managed to obtain amazing clarity of illumination in subsurface scenes.

An insistent mobile camera allows viewers to track along with protagonists. It never foreshadows outcomes, thus maximizing drama, suspense, and surprise.

Jan Krenz's mostly eerie, unmelodic music fits ideally with situations depicted and Józef Bartczak's sound recording captures every nuance of dialogue and reverberation.

Jerzy Szeski designed ruggedly distressed costumes, insuring they became progressively deteriorated as action unfolded.

Equally distinguished was Halina Sienska's makeup. It totally deglamorized faces of actors and actresses. These onscreen warriors looked utterly exhausted and thoroughly dirt-caked. As they certainly should, given the circumstances.

Roman Mann's production design took full advantage in surface scenes of devastated apartments still standing in ruins throughout Warsaw at the time this film was shot.

Apparently real ammunition was employed in the scene where beleaguered Polish Home Guards attempt sneaking away from what was left standing of a targeted refuge in order to access relative security offered by undamaged sewers.

Halina Nawrocka's editing was as satisfying as could be expected given the episodic nature of the screenplay and its lack of a central protagonist serving as focal character.

Though each cast member delivered convincingly realistic performances, especially notable are Teresa Izewska's brazen, compassionate Daisy and Tadeusz Janczar as despairingly dependent Jacek. Vladek Sheyba's traumatized musician Michal is quite unforgettable. Wienczyslaw Glinski is excellent in the role of philosophical pessimist 'Zadra.' In briefer supporting roles, Maria Kretz as a wounded, yet verbally stoic wounded woman and Adam Pawlikowski portraying a curtly efficient S.S. officer are particularly excellent.

Andrzej Wajda's inspired and thoroughly researched direction maintained both historical accuracy and optimal tension. As usual for his films, symbolism abounds. However, it stays appropriately in the background. Except for the film's visually ironic conclusion, which it would seem was just too irresistibly tempting to abandon.

One of the greatest anti-war films of world cinema, *Kanal* just might be *the* most potent graphic depiction of humanity's irrevocable folly – using military means to achieve a desired social or political end. Because of justifiable explicit war violence and several instances of vulgar language, the film is solely appropriate for adult audiences.

This pd entertainment dvd release includes three special features: 1. a twenty-seven minute subtitled documentary *On KANAL* which supplies a great deal of data about how the film came to be made and how it was received both in Poland and abroad, 2. a twenty-eight minute interview by director Wadjda of Jan Nowak-zejioranski (a courier charged with being the liaison between Poland's government in exile and the Polish Resistance) shedding light on why Allied assistance didn't reach insurgents of the Home Guard, and 3. a Gallery comprised of fifty-five production stills of *Kanal*.