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"1945: A Hungarian Film Reckons with Antisemitism"

*1945* (dir Ferenc Török, Hungary, 2017, b/w, 97 min, in Hungarian w/English subtitles) is a narrative feature film set in a remote Hungarian village in the immediate aftermath of World War II. The director, Ferenc Török, a member of the European Film Academy, is a recipient of the Béla Balázs Award, a state recognition for outstanding achievement in filmmaking; the film was Hungary's selection for the 2018 Academy Award for best foreign-language film. This adaptation of an acclaimed short story by Gábor T. Szántó--writer, poet, and longtime editor of the Hungarian Jewish political and cultural monthly *Szombat*--was co-produced by the Hungarian Film Fund and the Claims Conference (New York). The film powerfully interrogates a pivotal moment in the history of the Holocaust in Hungary as villagers confront the sequellae of their complicity in the fate of their former Jewish neighbors.

Based on my comparative research in intergenerational post-Holocaust Hungarian cinema, my presentation foregrounds the legacy of anti-semitism in contemporary Hungary and includes film extracts, selections from Szántó's original text, and interviews I conducted with the screenwriter and director. The film engages a critical moment previously evoked by Hungarian documentary filmmakers such as Gyula Gazdag' s *Package Tour/Társasutazás*, 1985).

<sup>1</sup> The Nazi and Arrow Cross regimes were followed by Soviet occupation in a climate of food shortage, inflation and severe deprivation. After the war, the Hungarian government instituted procedures intended to facilitate restitution claims for goods and real estate privately owned by Jews which, perhaps paradoxically, “made it difficult for many potential claimants to receive compensation.”<sup>2</sup> Even during the war, solidarity was in short supply, expropriation and looting customary. From 1944, Jewish such possessions were allocated to Hungarian citizens, enabling them to lawfully receive the wealth of their Jewish neighbors. When steps were taken to reclaim Jewish property, conflicts among the inhabitants were common. Jewish survivors often found that when they returned to Hungary, they had not only lost everything but had also become targets of a new wave of antisemitism, as I have suggested, for example, in my essays on the 2005 film adaptation of Imre Kertész's 1985 autobiographical novel, *Fateless* (*Sorstalánság*).<sup>3</sup> In “The Jewish Question in Hungary after 1944,” the historian István Bibó addresses the issue of non-Jews benefitting from *numerus clausus* laws: “These opportunities revealed and worsened the moral degradation of Hungarian society, presenting an appalling picture of insatiable avarice, a hypocritical lack of scruples, or at best cold opportunism...” (165)

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<sup>1</sup> 1945 remains one of the few films every produced in Hungary about the theft of Jewish property during the Holocaust.

<sup>2</sup> World Jewish Restitution Organization

<sup>3</sup> Catherine Portuges, “Imre Kertész’s *Fateless* on Film: A Hungarian Holocaust Saga,” *The Holocaust in Hungary: Sixty Years Later*, eds. Randolph Braham and Brewster Chamberlain (New York: Columbia University Press) 349–363; Portuges, “Imre Kertész and the Filming of *Sorstalánság* (*Fatelessness*),” *Imre Kertész and Holocaust Literature*, eds. Steven Tötösy and Louise Vasvari (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press)

<sup>4</sup> A member of the National Peasant Party (1939-48), radical reformists who adhered to a ‘third way’ position, Bibó joined the government of Imre Nagy in the anti-Stalinist 1956 Hungarian uprising. He was arrested, spent 15 months in prison and was given a life sentence. After an amnesty in 1963 he was released under constant surveillance, continuing to write essays smuggled out of Hungary and published in the west. István Bibó, “The Jewish Question in Hungary” in *Atlantic Studies on Society in Change* no 69 (New York: Columbia 1991)

This parable of guilt and denial features a superb ensemble cast, photographed in luminous high-contrast black and white by world-renowned cinematographer Elemér Ragályi (Béla Balázs Award, Kossuth Prize), and a modern sound design incorporating archival music and Jewish motifs to intensify themes of guilt, secrecy, and taboo by acclaimed composer and media artist Tibor Szemző. Historically detailed art direction and production design was contributed by László Rajk Jr., the dissident architect/designer son of László Rajk, interior minister during the Horthy regime, condemned to death by his erstwhile comrades at the behest of Stalin in eastern Europe's first show trial in 1949, and whose ceremonial reburial in September 1956 catalysed the October rebellion in Budapest. The film represents this climate of distrust, recrimination, and denunciation, gesturing toward conflicts intensified by diverse perceptions of the Soviet occupation.

When I spoke with the screenwriter, Gábor T. Szántó-- the grandson of Holocaust survivors and the only Jewish member of the major production team of *1945*--he reminded me that:

“A substantial segment of my novels and short stories focuses on the post-Holocaust experiences of Jews in Central Europe, their experiences under the communist regime and their contemporary search for identity. My short story *Homecoming* (Házatérés) served as basis of our screenplay and the film is one of my writings that focuses on post-Holocaust experiences...[Written in 2003] it has no actual-political connotations, but it does have a strong connection to the Central-East European general structures and social mentality, and the ambivalence towards accepting responsibility for the past wrong-doings. Mixing the experiences of survivors and that of the second generation in my writings is not at all accidental. It is mapping reality: our life is pervaded by all that our parents experienced. We react to their suppressed experiences, which they so much wish to forget.”

Szántó's larger body of work concerns the second generation of Jews in Central Europe and its efforts to face both past and future with the burden of their parents' Shoah experiences

as well as their own struggles in survivor families under Communism. In the absence of intergenerational Holocaust transmission within families, and in search of their own identity, the second (and third) generations consider what Jewish future – if any – can be possible in East-Central Europe:

“One of Hungary's major neuroses derives from the two World Wars: the loss of two-thirds of the territory of the country after WWI. Hungarian identity is also very fragile. There is a minority complex, a constant fear that the nation will disappear... On the other hand, Jews also have a fear of the “Other”, because of the traumas of the Shoah and because of the fragile Jewish identity. People with fragile or no identities, desperately need the „Other” to create an enemy to be afraid of. By comparing themselves to this “Other”, they can try to recreate their own identity on the remnants of their “original” identity.”<sup>5</sup>

It is the summer of 1945 and Hungary, an ally of Nazi Germany, has been liberated by the Soviet Union. In the opening scene we see the town clerk, the de facto mayor, shaving in preparation for his son's wedding to Rózsi, who is to help manage a pharmacy previously owned by a Jewish deportee, and whose former lover still hovers nearby. Soviet-controlled radio reports on the Nagasaki A-bomb and the Sino-Soviet War signify that the war is still being fought in the Pacific theater. At the same time, on the outskirts of the village, the morning train steams into view, carrying two solemn black-clad Orthodox Jews—a white-bearded elder, Sámuel Hermann, in a knee-length overcoat and round, broad-brimmed hat, and his son. We sense from the opening lines that the villagers know things are about to change: Their presence ruptures the order of the village, with far reaching consequences: many fear the return of still other putative survivors from deportation, dreading the prospect of relinquishing

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<sup>5</sup> Catherine Portuges, “Traumatic Memory, Jewish Identities: Remapping the Past in Hungarian Cinema,” *East European Cinemas*, ed. Anikó Imre: American Film Institute Film Readers series (New York and London: Routledge) 120–133

ill-gotten gain, in this haunting account of the immediate postwar moment in Hungary that also played out in other national European contexts.

Yet another father and son, Gentile peasants, have been hired to haul trunks labeled “perfume” from the station through the town, as the Jews solemnly march behind the wagon. Their unheralded arrival unleashes suspicion and paranoia in the clerk and his countrymen. The words “They’re back!” are sufficient to arouse panic among the villagers--'they' being unnamed, faceless Jews thought to have perished in the Holocaust. Meanwhile Red Army soldiers lurk on the sidelines, seeking to enrich themselves through the daily business of Occupation. For although the war is over, the victorious Russian troops show no signs of leaving. Some returning Hungarian soldiers, like the muscular malcontent Jancsi, formerly engaged to Kisrózsi, welcome their presence, while others fear what is to come.

As they make their way through the village to an unknown destination, the purpose of their journey is obscure. The two Jews are given scant dialogue over the course of the film, while the villagers talk among themselves in hushed tones of mounting paranoia. “We have to give it all back,” the town drunk tells the clerk, István, believing that the strangers have a connection to the town’s deported Jews. Appearing to dismiss the concern, István nevertheless understands that fear, having played a decisive role in betraying the local Jews, an act for which his opium-addicted wife holds him in contempt. The narrative unfolds to reveal the village’s veneer of civility constructed on a foundation of treachery; darkened visual foregrounds suggest the presence of conspirators hiding in plain sight, as mounting speculation and mutual

accusation ignites visions of still others arriving to reclaim their expropriated goods.<sup>6</sup> *They're back* and *we have to give it all back*--phrases linked to the return of the repressed yet still recent past.<sup>7</sup>

Fearing the Jews to be an expeditionary force for other Jews who owned property there, a group of villagers armed with pitchforks gather around the as they pray for their dead in the disused Jewish cemetery. Although the filmmakers do not reference it directly, this powerful dénouement is a likely reference to the 1946 pogrom in the city of Miskolc during which two Jews, one a town policeman, were killed by townspeople in what apparently began as a workers' demonstration and escalated into a lynching.<sup>8</sup>

Such reckoning with—and avoidance of-- the past places a particular time and place under a microscope, revealing hidden fault lines and differences that had been suppressed. The premise is compelling: two strangers arrive and depart within a few hours, and nothing is ever the same again. In a reversal of the tropes of the western genre in cinema, down to ticking clocks that might as well be nearing high noon and a canny use of evocative visuals of men waiting in a parched, flat landscape, the cinematography recalls nothing so much as the Austrian-born Hollywood director Fred Zinnemann's classic 1952 Western, *High Noon*, set in a small town in New Mexico, Delmer Davies' 1957 version of the genre, *3:10 to Yuma*, or Sergio Leone's 1968 spaghetti western, *Once Upon a Time in the West*, all of which the director has

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<sup>6</sup> Ben Kenigsberg, Oct. 31, 2017 Review: In '1945,' Hungarian Villagers Are Forced to Revisit Wartime Sins [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/31/movies/1945-review-ferenc-torok.html?referrer=google\\_kp](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/31/movies/1945-review-ferenc-torok.html?referrer=google_kp)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.timesofisrael.com/black-and-white-1945-shows-jews-in-post-war-hungary-faced-a-rainbow-of-gray/Interview>

<sup>8</sup> Cnaan Liphshiz, "Taboo-breaking film depicts Hungary's gim welcome to Holocaust survivors," *JTA* 23 October 2017.

acknowledged as cinematic precursors. The claustrophobic atmosphere recalls postwar 1940s French films such as *Le Corbeau* or *Panique* that focalize the consequences of the return of the repressed, signaling that the past is never really past.

Bibó (who was not Jewish), noted that the official response to the war years was first to argue that the atrocities were the work of Germans and their collaborators, not the majority of Hungarians, while the second was to condemn the resurgence of anti-semitism, observing:

Any group of decent people who gather anywhere with the aim of saying something morally elevated, humane and comforting about this issue will find that no matter how hard they try, they cannot add to these two theses yet deep down, everyone feels that neither says anything, or, to be more precise, that there is something that they are not saying." (155)

It is not evident whether the two men are from the village, or delegates of uprooted or martyred families, intent on recovering their property. They remain nameless, referenced as 'they,' suggesting that most villagers see male Orthodox Jews as little other than the external markers of their religion--hats, beards, and long coats. Ignorance, guilt, and paranoia fuel the inherent suspense. Yet it does become quickly evident that this is a community that has done well for itself by being *Judenrein*: but what do these two mysterious men know? what do they want? and will they be gone before the Clerk's son's wedding tonight? They are not recognized, nor are they from the Pollock family, which, we learn, were the first local Jews to be deported. We also learn that Pollock was the one-time business partner of the chief protagonist, the Clerk, played by Peter Rudolf, a brilliant comic actor in his first dramatic role as a corrupt local official.

In my conversation with the director, Ferenc Török, he notes:

“When we were in pre-production I thought it was a very Hungarian film. We focused on the locations, the language, the clothes. Now after so many festivals — Berlin, Jerusalem, Western Europe and now the United States — it’s a universal topic. We showed in Belgium and the Netherlands...The same stories happened in Amsterdam. People came back and someone else lived in their apartment, it’s a very European story... This is one interpretation. It is only a partially realistic movie, and also symbolic. Of course they did represent the ghosts of those who perished, especially since the village didn’t recognize them and none of the village’s Jews came back. Hungarian deportations took place toward the end of the war, killing 500,000 Jews. Nearly the entire Orthodox community, the Hasidic community from Hungary and Transylvania [formerly Hungary] were annihilated.

The release of *1945* followed the global success of László Nemes’s unsparing and far more challenging *Son of Saul*, also funded by the Hungarian Film Fund and the Claims Conference.<sup>9</sup> *1945* enjoyed wide media coverage in Hungary, garnering accolades for artistic achievements, with predictable caveats from the left, which claimed the film does not sufficiently call Hungary to account for its actions, and from the right, lamenting its ostensibly critical stance. Both films interrogated Hungarian complicity and were denounced by nationalists from the Jobbik party, one member of which exhorted the Hungarian National Film Fund to withhold funding for ‘Holocaust productions.’ Both were produced at a time when prominent politicians from Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s ruling Fidesz party promoted or tolerated the glorification of the legacy of Nazi collaborators and committed anti-Semites. And both mark a progressive step toward breaking taboos in this 75th anniversary year of the Holocaust in Hungary where more than half of the pre-war Jewish population of 850,000 was murdered, and on this day commemorating Yom Ha-Shoah, Holocaust Memorial Day.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Winner of the 2016 Oscar for best foreign language film. Cf "From Shoah to Son of Saul: Cinematic Traces and Intergenerational Dialogues" in *Cinematic Reflections on the Legacy of the Holocaust: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, D. Diamond & B. H. Sklarew eds. (New York & London: Routledge) <https://www.amazon.com/Cinematic-Reflections-Legacy-Holocaust-Psychoanalytic/dp/1138306967>

<sup>10</sup> Among those honored with statues in Budapest alone since 2013 are Miklós Horthy, the pro-Nazi wartime leader, and György Donáth and Bálint Homan, two Holocaust-era politicians who prompted anti-Semitic laws.