1945, HUNGARY

Ferenc Török's provocative movie captures a transformative moment in European history **By Tibor Krausz**

ON A hot summer day in August 1945, a steam locomotive pulls into a small country station. Off the train step a couple of pensively taciturn men dressed in black coats: a bearded patriarch in a black fedora and a clean-shaven younger man in a flat cap. They're bringing two wooden crates, whose contents are unknown and which they handle with fastidious care.

The men begin to make their way on dusty roads toward a nearby no-name village, walking wordlessly behind a horse-drawn wagon they've hired to transport their crates.

Cut to scenes in the village where locals are getting ready for a wedding. They're as yet unaware of the strangers whose arrival will shortly cause sparks to fly.

This is a classic Western setup with the time-honored trope of silent strangers, their purpose unknown, coming to town. Shot in black and white, the film has an extra period feel à la "Stagecoach" and "High Noon."

Yet the Hungarian movie "1945" is no shoot-'em-up. Nor are the two strangers itinerant gunslingers. They're Orthodox Jews, a father and his son, who arrive for a simple reason.

"In imagery and basic elements there's definitely a Western style there," Ferenc Török, the film's Hungarian director who is a recognized auteur in his homeland, tells *The Jerusalem Report*. "You have a railway station. You have a town square at noon in summer heat. You have men in hats. You have secrets, a clash of personalities, and a showdown at the end."

COURTESY OF FERENC TÖRÖK

Director Ferenc Török

Word of the two Jewish men heading toward the village travels fast, causing an instant stir, panic even. "The Jews have come," the film's main protagonist, a mercurial town clerk, announces portentously. A portly, mustachioed man with a bald pate topped by a black hat, he dashes off to see the village's gendarme – or sheriff, if you will. "They're back!" the clerk informs him in a furtive whisper.

"How many are there?" the gendarme, suddenly agitated, wants to know. He's garbed in a black tunic in the style of the country's fascist Arrow Cross movement and sports a suitably baleful mien.

"Two for now," comes the answer. "There's no getting rid of these people," the gendarme laments.

Until recently, we learn, there were Jews living in the village, but they're all gone and presumed dead. They have been deported with help from some of the villagers who have seized the Jews' vacant property: a home, a drugstore, a motorcycle, among them.

"We have to give it all back," insists one villager, who lives in the house of a family of Jewish deportees, the Polláks. He's visibly wracked with guilt for having assisted in their deportation. "Everything will come to light!" he predicts mournfully.

The town clerk, who helped send the Polláks to their deaths and now owns their drugstore, will have none of it. He will keep that store whatever the two Jewish strangers may want. "Let bygones be bygones," he says, then curses Jews under his breath. But what if the two out-of-towners have come to take revenge?

THE FILM'S plot takes place over a few hours in a single day as if unfolding in real time. It deals with a transformative moment in Hungary's history within a small community caught up in the epochal realignment of Central Europe's political landscape. Hungary is perched precariously between two opposing ideological realities. The home-grown reign of irredentism and fascism, in which many Hungarians were willing accomplices in Nazi Germany's crimes,

A still from the movie '1945' showing the two Jewish protagonists at a railway station in rural Hungary

has just come to a violent end. Communist rule is becoming entrenched with the Soviet Union now firmly in control of the country – a fact made manifest in the film by Russian Red Army soldiers driving insolently around the village in a military jeep.

Inhabiting this political no man's land, locals are caught in a limbo of uncertainty. Into this milieu step the two Jewish strangers. Not long ago Jews were in hiding and at the mercy of their neighbors; now they move about in public unmolested again. None of this is stated explicitly in the film, but we get inklings of it from snippets of crisp dialogue. "It's a new world now," the clerk observes. "It doesn't matter who's a lord and who's a peasant." A pregnant pause. "So long as he's a Magyar."

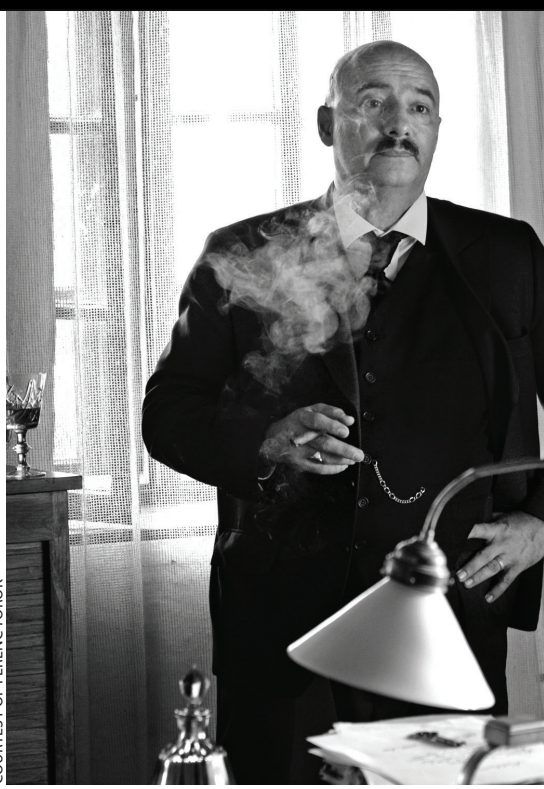
"1945" is a tale of moral reckoning, yet it isn't your usual morality play – certainly not one without ambiguity. To be sure, there is the stock villain: the clerk, István Szentes, played by Hungarian actor Péter Rudolf. The small community's de facto head, he's a petty official of the kind Hungarians call "little kings" – politicos and functionaries who, by dint of their status and position, enrich themselves and lord it over others.

His features frequently frozen in a supercilious scowl, Szentes is small-minded, self-aggrandizing, cocksure and callous. He has no redeeming qualities. He even beats his wife, who self-medicates by sniffing morphine. She rails at him for having sent his best friend, a Jewish neighbor, to his death so Szentes could confiscate his Jewish friend's apothecary. He's a cardboard villain.

YET THE picture that emerges of the villagers in general is more nuanced. "We tried to condense a complex society into a single village," Török explains. Some villagers, we learn, turned on their Jewish neighbors out of avarice. Others abandoned their Jewish friends out of fear. Still others acted against local Jews under duress from the town clerk. Some feel remorse; others don't.

"In the film we see people who wanted to usurp the property of Jews," explains Gábor T. Szántó, a Jewish Hungarian author who wrote the film's screenplay. A novelist and essayist, Szántó is editor of the Jewish magazine Szombat ("Shabbat") in Budapest. "We see people who took Jewish property but want to give it back. We see people who won't give it back," he goes on. "We also see people who are ashamed they didn't help their Jewish neighbors."

The two Jews themselves, Sámuel Hermann and his son (who is left anonymous), remain enigmatic figures throughout the movie. We never learn who they are and where they came from. They leave as they arrived: shrouded in mystery. In between, they rarely say a word and spend most of the film walking silently, like penitential pilgrims, behind the horse-drawn wagon, on which they refuse to sit, until the denouement at a Jewish cemetery. Their mere presence, however, serves to send villagers into



COURTESY OF FERENC TÖRÖK

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frantic bouts of recrimination, denial and confession.

"The two Jewish men in the film are on a spiritual journey," Török says. "They're on a mission."

Here and there, creative camerawork with lingering long shots, courtesy of veteran Hungarian cinematographer Elemér Ragályi, lends the two Jewish characters an exquisite, almost ethereal quality. En route to their as yet unknown destination in town with an unstated purpose, they often appear as small wraith-like figures in silhouette. It's as if, having returned from the dead, they're haunting the villagers with their presence in defiance of those who, just months ago, would have murdered them.

In one recurring shot, the father and son tread slowly and silently through a thin line of pancake-flat horizon stretching across the top of the screen. They're tiny figures dwarfed by a large field of stubble in the foreground. Whether so intended or not, this poignant image is a powerful visual mnemonic of the tragedy that befell Europe's Jews in WWII: the handful of survivors returned to find nothing but desolation.

The film is based on Szántó's elegiac short story "Homecoming," which was rejected by the editors of several literary journals in Hungary when the writer first sought to get it published in 2004. Some of those editors were Jews themselves. "They treated me as a strange bird who kept on writing about subjects they didn't want," he tells The Report. "Even in Jewish literary circles in Hungary you can sense a reluctance to deal with certain issues. People want to forget. They don't want to dwell on the past."

Not so Szántó. He doesn't want to forget and he wants to dwell on the past. "As a writer I've always been interested in the aftermath of traumatic and historic events from a Jewish perspective," he says. "What happens to Jews after the Holocaust? What happens to Jews during decades of communism? What happens to Jews after the end of communism [in 1989]?"

YET EVERYWHERE he's looked in Hungary, he's discovered taboos. "Generally, people don't want to think about Jewishness as a separate identity," he notes. Thus, assimilation remains a largely unexplored topic in local Jewish literary circles. So does local Holocaust survivors' collective loss of Jewish identity during postwar decades when communist ideology, official policy and state propaganda combined to erase all differences between people with diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. "These are the issues I've wanted to address in my writing," Szántó says.

Partly in jest, Szántó calls himself "the last Jewish writer in Hungary," meaning a Jewish author who writes consistently about Jewish themes. "There are no young Jewish Hungarian writers, people in their thirties and forties, who focus on these subjects," Szántó, who is 51, laments. "There's no real Jewish self-reflection in the younger generations," he posits. "The absence of Jewish self-reflection will lead to the dead end of assimilation."

"Homecoming" was itself born of his drive to make up for that absence. "I was intrigued by the recollections of survivors about how they were greeted and treated after they returned from the camps," he says.

Szántó could start asking about that right at home. Both his grandfathers died on the eastern front while serving in Jewish labor battalions. His father and mother, who both came from Szeged in southeastern Hungary, survived the Holocaust as children after being deported with their mothers to a concentration camp in Strasshof near Vienna, Austria. When his father and his grandmother returned to Szeged, they found a Hungarian family living in their home.

Similar scenarios of loss and dispossession played out across much of Europe from Belgium to Poland: Jews who survived death camps returned home to find their homes occupied by people who had either assisted in sending Jews to their deaths or helped themselves opportunistically to their possessions. "'1945' isn't a Hungarian story," Szántó notes. "It's a European story."

A still from the film showing the story's villain, a town clerk, played by Hungarian actor Péter Rudolf

It's also a largely unknown story. "I have to admit I never gave much thought to this episode in history," Török, who is a Catholic, concedes. "But when I read Gábor's novella, I instantly saw its potential as the basis for a film."

The director and the writer, who are longtime friends, started working on a movie based on "Homecoming" in 2005. It would take them a decade, with several fits and starts, to complete the film. Their entire budget would amount to a mere 320 million forints ($1.2 million). They wrapped up filming in 2015.

Then: nothing.

"When we first released the film in Hungary [last year], there was silence. There wasn't much interest," Török recalls. "'1945' deals with a subject that is still taboo in Hungary," he continues. "Local distributors weren't exactly beating a path to our door."

In February, the film was shown at the 67th Berlin International Film Festival in Germany, where it received glowing plaudits from foreign critics. "Superb! A beautiful, gripping drama," raved Variety, the influential American entertainment trade weekly. "1945" took off internationally and has since been going from strength to strength, winning a series of awards at many of the indie, art and Jewish film festivals where it has been shown from Amsterdam to New York to Athens.

Boosted by its foreign success, the film is receiving plenty of attention in Hungary as well. Some 40,000 people have already gone to see the film in the country, which has a population of under 10 million. The critical response to it has been overwhelmingly positive. "We've managed to open up something about an overlooked and intentionally neglected period in the country's past," Szántó says. "I can't claim we've achieved a breakthrough but we're fostering debate about the year of 1945."

MUCH OF THAT debate is taking place along the usual ideological lines. "Some people on the right say we were too critical of Hungarians in the film," Szántó notes. "Some on the left say we weren't critical enough."

In Hungary an almost schizophrenic attitude prevails about the mass murder of Hungarian Jews, some 600,000 of whom perished in the war. Many of them were murdered during a few short months in 1944 after being deported en masse to Auschwitz with the aid of Hungarian fascists and their all too willing local collaborators. Politicians in the ruling Fidesz party pay periodic lip service to Hungary's need to own up to the crimes of many Magyars against their Jewish compatriots in the war.

The same politicians, however, continue to lionize many of those, such as the country's wartime dictator Admiral Miklós Horthy, who helped deport Hungarian Jews or, at the very least, abandoned them to their fate. Recently, the Central European nation's increasingly autocratic Prime Minister Viktor Orbán lauded Horthy, a staunch ally of Hitler, as "an exceptional statesman."

Meanwhile, members and supporters of Jobbik, a popular far-right party, openly traffic in antisemitic and anti-Israel innuendo.

His film, Török says, is a "provocative treatment of a sensitive subject" in Hungary where the role of locals in the mass murder of Jews has long been either ignored or vigorously whitewashed by portraying all Hungarians as hapless victims of the Nazis' crimes – this despite the fact that the country remained a steadfast ally of Hitler's Germany until the end. "Hungarians can't keep on pretending that we were innocent virgins who were raped by the Germans against our own will," Török says. "We have to come to terms with our own culpability."

Szántó concurs. "Hungarians can't just point the finger at the Nazis," the writer says. "They need to face up to their country's own role in the murder and deportation of Hungarian Jews." Yet we shouldn't generalize, either, by damning all Magyars for the crimes of some. "We mustn't homogenize people," he stresses. "Communities, even small ones, are complex and multilayered societies."

That is what, in essence, "1945" is about. "There were evildoers and opportunists [among Hungarians in the war]," Szántó explains. "But there were also people who were sympathetic or were themselves traumatized by being passive witnesses to the deportation and murder of Jews," he says. "We mustn't take a single person, whether he helped Jews or murdered Jews, and declare that person to be representative of a whole society." ■