Letter from a reader on *Zelary*, a Czech film set in World War II

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Zelary is a remarkable 2003 film from the Czech Republic, directed by Ondrej Ontran (and available from Netflix and Amazon). It is the story of a woman who escapes from the Gestapo crackdown on resistance groups in Prague during World War II by the only way possible at the moment: moving to the small mountain village of Zelary, there to pass as the wife of a sawmill worker who is being treated at the hospital where she is a nurse.

Eliska (Anna Geislerova) had carried messages for the resistance, with surprising insouciance, which comes crashing down when she is followed, her mission suspected, and members of her group begin to be executed.

In this desperate situation Eliska agrees to the plan proposed by a colleague, and the film becomes the story of her life as a member of the mountain community of Zelary. Eliska endures a traditional marriage ceremony—costume and cart—and moves into the home of the selected husband, who offers her "kitchen, bedroom, front room and shed." Fortunately for Eliska (now known as Hana), her husband Joza (Gyorgi Cserhalmi) says "she is one of us" when questioned.

The film, set in 1942, is based on the novel and short stories about the town of Zelary by Kveta Legatova, who died only last year at the age of 93—a witness, obviously, to the chaotic and tragic history of the region.

Czechoslovakia came into being as an independent republic in 1918 when the victorious powers carved up the former Austro-Hungarian Empire after World War I. Under the post-World War II Stalinist regime, it eventually became the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. Capitalism was restored in 1989 and the country split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993.

The *Zelary* powerful is theme the of supp community and its recognition of common humanity with a stranger in peril. Eliska/Hana's survival depends wholly on the villagers' tacit collusion with the fiction of her belonging in Zelary. Even as the Nazis call the villagers out of church to witness the execution of someone for "hiding an enemy of the Reich," they do not give her up. Whatever glimmerings of her past may appear, the villagers protect her, and finally befriend her.

Another theme is the saving friendship of women to another woman in difficulty. One such is Joza's former lover who provides a room for Eliska on her arrival. Another gives her clothes and dresses her. An old woman, Lucka, a wise "crone," cures Hana when she is injured. A measure of Hana's integration into the village is evident in a scene when she sits around the table with a group of women and drinks from the bottle with them, as they string beads, sing and laugh.

A village boy, Lipka, is the son of Hana's new friend, Zena, remarried to a drunk who beats him and chases him out of the house. The boy hides in a swamp hut, where he is visited only by the old crone, who brings him food, and the little girl, Helenka, whose function in the film is ingenious; she wanders everywhere with her grazing goat and observes actions she conveys to villagers, such as the attack on Hana by a drunk at the sawmill, leading to pursuit and rescue by Joza.

Throughout the film the actions take place in beautiful mountainous settings where the unthinkable looms up suddenly. Hana becomes lost gathering berries on the green hills, and comes upon three corpses hanging from a tree, the nearby cottage still smoking. Partisans discovered. But the director's view of the conflict is honest: the partisan army, when it appears, is far from ideal; drunk, quarrelsome and quick to shoot. The ragged group rampages and moves on and the

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remaining villagers move to Lipka's swamp for eventual liberation.

Why is this 10-year-old film relevant today? Because it is the story of a real, not manufactured, struggle to survive, with believable people, not super-heroes, and an enemy whose malevolent presence is felt overall, erupting in short bursts of violence: the hangings, the execution. The enemy is a real, not a fictional evil. Under this oppression, genuine character is revealed. Hana, Joza, Zena, the boy Lipka and the crone Lucka are the heroes whose actions save what can be saved.

Czech Lion awards went to the leading actors in *Zelary*, and as well as an international award for the director, Ondrej Trojan. The film qualified as a nominee for Best Foreign Language Film at the 76th Academy Awards in 2005.

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