1945: The horrors of the Holocaust in Hungary

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11 May 2018

Directed by Ferenc Török; screenplay by Török and Gábor T. Szántó

Hungarian director Ferenc Török's *1945* is a serious effort to come to terms with the ghastliness of the Holocaust in Hungary. Co-written by Török and Gábor T. Szántó, the movie was adapted from the latter's short story, "Homecoming."

The 91-minute, black-and-white film opens in mid-August, 1945. As bored Soviet soldiers lurk around the railroad station, two Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, Hermann Sámuel (Iván Angelusz) and his son (Marcell Nagy), disembark from a train in a small Hungarian town.

The duo hire a horse-drawn cart owned by Mihály Suba (Miklós B. Szekely), upon which are loaded two wooden crates, resembling coffins. Solemnly walking behind the cart, the Sámuels and their cargo proceed to make their way to the village, now in the throes of preparations for a socially significant wedding.

Consternation and panic grip the villagers when they get wind of the arrival of the Jews. The wealthy magistrate István Szentes (Péter Rudolf), whose son Árpád (Bence Tasnádi) is getting married, wonders what the two are up to. "We can't start a wedding like this. We can't. They'll bring trouble to us," cries one woman.

It soon comes to light that certain townspeople had a hand in the deportation of Jews from the village to German concentration camps and benefited from the confiscation of their property. Will more Jews follow the Sámuels? Do they want what was stolen from them returned?

István now possesses the drugstore once owned by a Jewish family named Pollak. With boorish bluster, the magistrate defends himself and tries to calm those now hiding rugs, silver and other objects, all the while vociferously proclaiming their collective right to dwellings that belonged to those carted off to Auschwitz. At one point, some of the hysterical villagers are prepared to attack the Sámuels with pitchforks.

István's wife Anna (Eszter Nagy-Kálózy), drug-addicted due in part to her revulsion with her spouse, accuses him of being "a murderer" and "disgusting worm." "You watched from there," she says venomously, "you stood at the window, didn't even wait for them to take him away with the rest. Your best friend [Pollak], you made [András] Kustar sign the accusation … You think I don't know? Everybody knows."

Nor can István's son reconcile himself to his father's sins. As well, the remorseful Kustar (József Szarvas), now a drunkard, is overcome with guilt and commits suicide. The town's priest (Béla Gados) also took part in the treacherous betrayal.

But stolen property is not what motivates the dignified Sámuels. They are there merely to bury "what's left of our dead," personal items, shoes, toys and so forth. The items achingly hint at the people to whom they belonged, the victims of fascism.

Török has created a sincere, gripping drama. The movie's haunting cinematography, with composed long shots of the Sámuels and their mysterious payload walking by foot through the countryside, and atmospheric score embellish the extraordinary performances of the Hungarian cast. It is brutally honest in its depiction of a cowardly, grasping petty bourgeois layer that is pro-fascist by either ideology or economic opportunism, or both.

The filmmakers are clearly adopting an oppositional stance towards the present-day reactionary Hungarian regime led by Viktor Orbán that seeks to rehabilitate

the venal, ferociously anti-Semitic regime of Miklós Horthy (1920-1944).

The facts of the Holocaust in Hungary are horrific, almost unimaginable. According to *Jewish Week*: "The Holocaust was never executed more swiftly or with greater ferocity than in Hungary. In 1944, in just 57 days, 437,402 Jews were sent to Auschwitz on 147 trains, some 50 boxcars long. The Gestapo's Adolf Eichmann modestly said that he could never have done it without the Hungarians. He was 'thrilled' by their 'brutality' and cooperation. The Hungarians were thrilled to obtain the homes, bank accounts and businesses of the departed."

It may be for the best, however, that *1945* is narrowly focused. In various interviews, the filmmakers express confusion about the bigger historical processes and trends of the 20th century.

Cut off from a genuine left-wing criticism of Stalinism, Eastern European intellectuals such as director Török and scriptwriter Szántó still generally and unthinkingly lump fascism and Stalinism together. The filmmakers in this case fantasize, in their words, that in the "transition between Nazism and Communism [Stalinism]," a "'missing chain' in our history"—the possibility of a peaceful, benign, democratic Hungary—was obliterated. In the movie, states Török, "we see a shop on fire—it's the end of capitalism and the end of this period."

The harsh reality of Hungarian history is at odds with this chimera.

In a May 2005 article on the WSWS headlined "Bush denounces the Yalta Treaty of 1945," David North might well have been directly answering the filmmakers' illusions when he pointed to these important historical facts:

"The American people are left with the impression that Soviet occupation of Eastern European countries cruelly trampled on flowering democracies.

"The truth is very different. The regimes of Eastern Europe were cesspools of political reaction. Prior to the outbreak of World War II, Poland was ruled by a quasi-military dictatorship run by the successors of the late Marshal Pilsudski. Fanatically anti-Soviet, the Pilsudski regime was the first European government to conclude a treaty with Hitler, signing a non-aggression pact with the Nazi government in 1934 that was directed against the USSR. The regimes of Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania had all been part of the Nazi-directed Axis of World War II. In Hungary, the dictatorship of Admiral Miklós Horthy had aligned his government with the Third Reich even before the war, and participated with Bulgaria in the Nazi invasion of Yugoslavia in May 1941. Just one month later, Hungary joined Hitler in the invasion of the Soviet Union."

The current trajectory of the Hungarian ruling elite, once again toward authoritarianism and the most profound reaction, including the revival of anti-Semitism, demonstrates the impossibility of any flourishing of democracy and social progress in Eastern Europe except through the working class taking power and establishing genuine socialism.