

## 'Walking with the Enemy' shines light on little-known World War II story

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Apr. 25, 2014 NCR Today

In Budapest, Hungary, head of state Regent Miklós Horthy (Ben Kingsley) was trapped between the Russians on the east and the Nazis from Germany on the west. He was forced to join the Axis in 1941. The first massacre of Hungarian Jews occurred in August that year. After a defeat on the Russian front in 1943, Hitler demanded that the regent punish the 800,000 still living in Hungary and insisted that 10,000 Jews be for supplied for slave labor. This is where "Walking with the Enemy" begins.

When the Nazi presence and anti-Semite law increase in Budapest, Jewish radio repair shop owner Jozsef (Simon Kunz) sends home the two young men who work for him, Elek Cohen (Jonas Armstrong) and Ferenc Jacobson (Mark Wells). They obtain forged baptismal certificates from a Catholic priest and urge their families to use them to escape Hungary when they are forced to join the Hungarian Nazi Arrow Cross labor forces.

Meanwhile, Carl Lutz (William Hope) runs the Swiss diplomatic office at the Glass House in Budapest. Supposedly, anyone with a Swiss passport can safely leave Hungary for Switzerland. He was given permission to issue 8,000 passes to individual Jews, but he interpreted this to mean families, so he printed and numbered the passes accordingly.

When Elek and Ferenc escape from the labor forces, they find their way back home and discover their families have been sent away. Elek's home has been ransacked, and he finds the baptismal certificates taped to the back of a family photo that he saves.

On instinct, Elek and Ferenc start to do anything to save Jewish families and eventually begin to work with Lutz. One evening before all the drama had begun, Elek met a Jewish girl, Hannah (Hannah Tointon). One evening, Nazi officers follow her to where many Jews, including Elek, are hiding. Elek kills them before they can rape Hannah. Later, Elek, who speaks fluent German, and Ferenc dig up the bodies of the Nazi officers and take their uniforms. For months, their fearless impersonation of Nazi officers allows them to pretend to round up Jews for transport while saving thousands by redirecting them to safe houses. Once there, in care of the Swiss and in at least one case, a convent of nuns, the Jews begin their journey to freedom.

"Walking with the Enemy" is based on the true story of [Pinchas Tibor Rosenbaum](#) [1] (1923-1980), the son of a rabbi who was ordained a rabbi himself at the age of 18. I had never heard of Pinchas Rosenbaum before seeing director and co-writer Mark Schmidt's historical drama, and the actual story is even more intense than the film allows. Pinchas became so heavily involved in the Hungarian Jewish youth organization dedicated to saving Jews from the Nazis that by age 22, he was risking his life every hour of the day for the sake of his people.

"Walking with the Enemy" is a romanticized version of Rosenbaum's life but is very moving just the same. Jonas Armstrong, who plays the lead role of Elek, is from Ireland, and he looks it. In reality, Rosenbaum was able to get away with impersonating a Nazi because of his fair complexion. It is no easy feat to film a historical drama about war with high production values and make us care about the characters, too. Most studios stay

away from period dramas because they are difficult and expensive to produce.

Ben Kingsley is the most well-known of the cast members, many of whom have extensive credits for Irish and British television and in some films. Kingsley's sad portrayal of Regent Horthy illustrates once again how difficult it was for Europe's leaders to fend off the Nazis and the Soviets. Horthy surrendered to the Soviets, but the Nazis blocked it. Horthy's move only made the Nazis increase their horrific activity in Hungary.

The war violence and crimes against humanity are portrayed powerfully in the film, but "Walking with the Enemy" only carries a PG-13 rating. This is because while extremely violent (the reality was most certainly worse than depicted), blood does not flow. This odd and unbalanced way that the MPAA rates movies is based, they say, on the content parents like or don't like their children to see rather than the context of the story. Unfortunately, when viewers don't see the consequences of such tyranny and violence (as they do in "Schindler's List," for example), these important films can seem sanitized, much like battles in a video game. Then again, a PG-13 rating will allow the film to be shown in high schools, leaving the task of adding historical fact to the teachers.

"Walking with the Enemy" is an intense and stirring war film that reveals several heroes heretofore unknown to most of us, and this is a good thing. But I think the Jewishness of the people could have been portrayed more realistically. I don't recall ever seeing a synagogue, for example, but perhaps I missed it.

It is often said that the Jews did not do enough to defend themselves during World War II, but the Jewish resistance was inventive and strong against the bulwark of organized and precise genocide perpetrated by the Nazis. "Walking with the Enemy" tells the Hungarian part of the story.

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[1] <http://www.shalom-magazine.com/Article.php?id=420311>