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DISTANT JOURNEY

One of the first films to confront the horrors of the Holocaust remains one of the most powerful. Suffused with the visceral dread of a waking nightmare, *Distant Journey* draws from director and Holocaust survivor Alfréd Radok's own experiences to tell the story of a Czechoslovak Jewish family—including a young doctor (Blanka Waleská) and her gentile husband (Otomar Krejča)—whose lives are torn apart by the terrors of the Nazi occupation, leading them inexorably to a grim fight for survival in the Theresienstadt concentration camp. Blending expressionistic cinematography with archival documentary footage (some drawn from *Triumph of the Will*) to potent effect, this harrowing vision of human atrocities was banned in its home country for more than forty years, only to reemerge as urgent and impactful as ever.

Czechoslovakia | 1949 | 103 minutes | Black & White | In Czech and German with English subtitles | 1.37:1 aspect ratio

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PRODUCTION HISTORY

Even were it not an artistic tour de force, Alfréd Radok's *Distant Journey* (*Daleká cesta*, 1949) would still possess significance as one of the earliest Czechoslovak fiction films to depict the Holocaust. Yet for *Journey*, Radok not only represented the Nazis' systematic murder of Czechoslovakia's Jewish population, he did so at the highest levels of dramatic skill and power. Radok paid a heavy price for his bravery, however: released just as the Soviet Union established control over Czechoslovakia, *Distant Journey* was banned in its native land by Stalinist authorities, who subsequently inflicted professional hardship on Radok. Thankfully, since the fall of communism, the rediscovery of *Distant Journey* has allowed recent generations of critics and audiences to appreciate the film as a cinematic landmark.

For Radok, *Distant Journey* was more than a movie—it was a testament to the convulsive tragedy that engulfed his family during the Second World War. Erik Kolár—a survivor of Theresienstadt, a combination concentration camp and ghetto located in the former fortress town of Terezín, about forty miles northwest of Prague—conceptualized the film's story; Radok's father and grandfather had died in Theresienstadt, while Radok himself survived the Klettendorf labor camp. Radok, Kolár, and Mojmír Drvota sought to depict the persecution Jews had suffered at the hands of their fellow Czechoslovakians as well as the Nazis: in their original screenplay, for instance, a scene in which German students observe the execution of Jewish professors is paralleled by another scene in which nationalistic Czech students terrorize Jewish sympathizers. In its final form, *Distant Journey* placed greater emphasis on the Nazi persecution of Jews, but elements of this initial idea were retained in various Czechoslovakian characters who exhibit anti-Semitic attitudes and actions.

While Kolár incorporated his experience of Theresienstadt into the script, Radok lent it his experience as a man with both Jewish and Christian roots. The product of a Jewish father and a Catholic mother, Radok understood what it was like for a mixed-religious family to be torn apart under Nazi oppression, a trauma represented in *Distant Journey* by the forced separation of Hana (Blanka Waleská), a Jewish doctor, and her gentile husband, Antonín (Otomar Krejča), during the German occupation of Czechoslovakia.

To make the production even more personal, Radok shot much of *Distant Journey* at Theresienstadt, where his father and grandfather had perished; other scenes were shot in Prague's Barrandov Studios. The real location lent the film's exterior scenes a degree of authenticity, while the controlled environment at Barrandov allowed Radok to evoke—through expressionistic set design, lighting, camera angles, and compositions—the nightmarish labyrinth he imagined those confined to Theresienstadt would have navigated inside its walls. This wasn't necessarily Theresienstadt as it had actually looked. Radok's previous experience in the theater was as a director who distorted reality in order to convey intense moods and atmospheres. The claustrophobic density and overwhelming disorder of *Distant Journey*'s interiors—captured



CAST

Dr. Hana Kaufmannová	Blanka Waleská
Dr. Antonín Bureš	Otomar Krejča
Oskar Kaufmann	Viktor Očásek
Hedvika Kaufmannová	Zdeňka Baldová
Honzík Kaufmann	Jiří Spirit

CREDITS

Director	Alfréd Radok
Screenplay by	Alfréd Radok Mojmír Drvota Erik Kolár
Director of photography	Josef Střecha
Edited by	Jiřina Lukešová
Music by	Jiří Sternwald

in rich, deep-focus photography by Josef Střecha—were meant to impart the surreal and paradoxical world of Theresienstadt, where the Nazis had constructed a ghetto to present to the international community a falsely compassionate picture of their treatment of Jews.

Distant Journey's other unusual stylistic strategy was its incorporation of documentary footage. At several moments in the movie's fictional narrative, Radok inserts images from German propaganda newsreels as well as footage from *Triumph of the Will*, Leni Riefenstahl's infamous 1935 state-sponsored film of Hitler's Nuremberg rallies. (Radok shot some of the film's other postwar documentary footage himself.) In employing this strategy, Radok contrasts with disturbing clarity the Nazis' glamorization of totalitarianism and anti-Semitism with its real-life consequences. This fulfilled the director's understanding of cinema as an "artistic report" that could juxtapose different points of view by using various modes of representation to arrive at an overall portrait of historical reality, an approach he employed throughout his theatrical career. In both its expressionism and mixture of fiction and documentary, *Distant Journey* shows the influence of *Citizen Kane*, Orson Welles's 1941 masterpiece—for a questionnaire in Czech newspaper *Mladá fronta*, Radok cited *Kane* as the most significant cultural event of 1947, the year the film arrived in Czechoslovakia.

Yet precisely due to this expressionism and experimental blending of documentary and fictional footage, *Distant Journey* fell far outside the conventional socialist-realist style of Soviet-sanctioned art. The film was thus doomed to a limited release in Czechoslovakia—even as it received positive notices in the United States and France—before being banned altogether. Increasingly marginalized within the Czechoslovak film industry, Radok made just two more films after *Distant Journey*: the 1952 musical farce *The Magic Hat* (for which he was again criticized for stylized direction) and the 1956 comedy *The Vintage Car*.

After 1991's Velvet Revolution, *Distant Journey* began to be shown in the Czech Republic, its reemergence proving a revelation among critics and the public. ●

FILM FACTS

Bosley Crowther named *Distant Journey* the best foreign-language film of 1950 in a *New York Times* year-end poll.

Radok described a disturbing propaganda photograph of Adolf Hitler as one of his inspirations for making *Distant Journey*. "The name Hitler evokes a picture in my mind," he told film scholar Antonin J. Liehm in an interview. "A little girl, all sugar and spice, is handing Hitler a bunch of wildflowers. Hitler bends over her and smiles a benevolent smile. To me, this image is linked with the awareness of what National Socialism meant, just because the image conceals something . . . And that brings us to my first film, *Distant Journey*. I wanted to stress the paradox that so many people—and this was true later of many in Communist Czechoslovakia—simply don't see things, don't want to see them, or see only the picture of Hitler with the little girl. And that is the horror of it. Everything that they wrote about in the newspapers was depicted as the best. The most beautiful. Hitler promised Czechoslovakia the only possible salvation. They kept repeating, over and over again, that everything was great, everything was the best. If you really want to get a picture of that period, you have to see the one and the other, not one but two, both sides. And that is what I call matter-of-factness."

Radok said he "didn't discover the fundamental importance and secret of film editing and cutting until late." Radok learned about this process by observing *Distant Journey* editor Jiřina Lukešová at work for "hours and hours" at Barrandov Studios.

Distant Journey cowriter Mojmír Drvota also served as assistant director for the film's production. Drvota was younger than Radok but possessed more filmmaking experience. He later went on to teach cinema at Columbia University and Ohio State University.



FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHY

Alfréd Radok was born on December 17, 1914, to a Jewish father and Catholic mother in Koloděje nad Lužnicí, in southern Bohemia, Czechoslovakia. The culture in which Radok was raised honored both Jewish and Christian traditions. “At that time, my perception of rural life was intense: both Christian and Jewish holidays were celebrated rigorously,” Radok told Czech film scholar Antonín J. Liehm. “At Christmas, the Christ child brought the Christmas tree, and a servant blew the horn on the village green; at Easter, we followed the Resurrection service by going to my grandfather’s for the Seder.” *Distant Journey*, Radok’s best-known film, depicts a similar case of mutual religious respect: when Jewish doctor Hana (Blanka Waleská) marries her gentile colleague Antonín (Otomar Krejča), the latter never demands she convert, even when Nazi persecution endangers her life.

While studying in his late teens and early twenties at the Commercial Academy at Písek, Radok became involved in Czechoslovakia’s theater scene with what he described to Liehm as a “strong, specific, and indomitable” passion, often taking unauthorized excursions to Prague to watch productions by influential companies like Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich’s Liberated Theater and E. F. Burian’s Theatre D. In the late thirties, the German occupation of Czechoslovakia forced Radok to assume pseudonyms to continue his work. With his brother Emil, he founded the Mladá Scéna Theater, and in 1940 Alfred worked with Theatre D, first as a student and later as an assistant to Burian. With the Nazi roundup and deportation of Jewish Czechoslovaks, Radok lost several family members, including his father and grandfather, both of whom died at the Theresienstadt concentration camp and ghetto, where much of *Distant Journey*’s action takes place (and where some of the film was shot). During the final months of the war, Nazi forces captured Radok and placed him in the Klettendorf labor camp (near the Polish city of Wrocław), from which he eventually escaped.

After the liberation of Czechoslovakia, Radok returned to the theater and directed “production after production” between 1945 and 1948, building a name for himself through his uniquely expressionistic

directorial style. “The operatic performances I directed were especially noticed,” Radok told Liehm. “I didn’t illustrate the stories: I tried to find what was ‘operatic’ in the visual transformation of the music.” Radok received an opportunity to work in the movie industry after being fired from the National Theater for directing a play that, as he put it, showed “the nobility in beautiful clothes, the People in rags,” foreshadowing his later difficulties with state authorities. His first film project was *Distant Journey*, which he directed from a screenplay he wrote with Erik Kolár and Mojmír Drvota in 1947. Upon its release, *Distant Journey* became a success abroad, but at home the film went against the grain of socialist realism, the conventional cinematic style prescribed by the Communist authorities then in control of Czechoslovakia. The film was given only a limited release, in the rural districts of its native land, and was soon banned outright.

The post-*Distant Journey* years were difficult ones for Radok, who found himself a political and cultural dissident. As Radok explained to Liehm: “At a certain point in the early fifties, when I began to become dangerous—or rather, undesirable—I had to move to the itinerant Village Theater, or I spent time at the old Operetta Theater in Prague’s Karlín district. At that time, I was labeled either a ‘cosmopolitan,’ a ‘formalist,’



or—as I was characterized by the Stalinist cultural watchdog Ladislav Štoll—‘a person who is standing on the other side.’” Radok directed two films, *The Magic Hat* (1952) and *The Vintage Car* (1956), during this period.

The Vintage Car was Radok’s final theatrical film, after which he created—along with Miloš Forman, Jan Roháč, Vladimír Svitáček, and Josef Svoboda—the multimedia experience *Laterna Magika*, the centerpiece of the Czechoslovakian exhibition at Expo 58, the 1958 Brussels World’s Fair. During the next several years, Radok was able to work for only short stretches at various companies because of his antiauthoritarian reputation, although he also directed several televised plays. Radok often worked with his wife, Marie Radoková, whom he described as “my closest collaborator, my critic, my historian, theoretician, and coauthor.”

Radok moved to Göteborg, Sweden, three days after the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia in August 1968. He directed European theater and television (including several adaptations of Fyodor Dostoyevsky) before he died of a heart attack in Vienna in 1976. Radok had planned, but unfortunately never realized, a documentary that would have depicted the innocence of the people forced by the Communist “show trials” to implicate themselves as well as their friends, family, and colleagues. ●

LINKS

Jiří Cieslar, “Living with the Long Journey: Alfréd Radok’s Daleká cesta,” *Central Europe Review* (June 4, 2001)

J. Hoberman, “Czech, Please,” *Village Voice* (November 21, 2006)