

Global Village

Torn from the Flag: Laszlo Kovacs, ASC Takes a Final Bow

by **Bob Fisher**



Left: Budapest's Corvin Circle, the site of a major battle of the 1956 Hungarian uprising, is shown during a lull in the fighting. The flag with the hole in the center became the emblem of the revolution. Right: A Soviet tank dumped into a Budapest public toilet entrance during the fighting.

Legendary cinematographer Laszlo Kovacs, ASC earned his final credit for the documentary *Torn from the Flag*, which revisits a subject close to his heart: the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, when citizens rose up against the Communist regime but were crushed by the Soviet Army. (The title refers to the Communist hammer-and-sickle insignia that was ripped from Hungarian flags during the uprising.) As very young men, Kovacs and fellow Hungarian Vilmos Zsigmond (future ASC) shot much of the footage of the rebellion featured in "Torn from the Flag," which also includes interviews with "freedom fighters," politicians and historians.

At the time of the uprising, Zsigmond had graduated from the Academy of Drama and Film in Budapest, and Kovacs was in his final year of study



there. The young cameramen borrowed a 35mm Arri camera, took some film stock from the school and documented civilians battling the Soviet Army with small arms, Molotov cocktails and their bare hands. Bullets were flying, and the Soviets were arresting and executing people caught with cameras or film. After the revolt was crushed, Kovacs and Zsigmond made a perilous trek on foot across the border into Austria, smuggling out their exposed film.

Torn from the Flag was conceived by Klaudia Kovacs (no relation) and co-directed by her and Endre Hules, who spent six months on the project. Although Klaudia hails from Hungary, she says she "knew absolutely nothing about the revolution while I was growing up." She met Zsigmond at an exhibition of his still photography in Los Angeles around 1999. "I just walked up to him and introduced myself; we have a mutual friend, still photographer Peter Sorel [SMPSP], who is also a Hungarian expatriate. Vilmos and other Hungarians

he introduced me to started telling me about their experiences during the revolution."

In 1998, a Hungarian TV network asked Klaudia to produce a short segment about the uprising. She conducted interviews with expatriates living in Los Angeles. "Hearing their stories was a cathartic experience," she recalls, "but the TV station withdrew its offer at the last moment." She turned to George Adams, a producer with whom she had collaborated on plays and short films. He encouraged her to make her own film and agreed to contribute as associate producer. "George was with me during the entire nine-year process of making this film," she says. "He is a fantastic collaborator."

In 1999, Klaudia and Adams wrote a letter to Zsigmond describing her intentions for the film and asking if he would agree to be interviewed on camera. When they met, he volunteered to film the interviews; later, when he took a feature-film assignment, he intro-

Right: Laszlo Kovacs, ASC, shown on location with writer-director Klaudia Kovacs as the two filmed interviews for the documentary. Below: Vilmos Zsigmond, ASC confers with Kovacs.



duced Klaudia to Laszlo Kovacs, who stepped into the breach. Both cinematographers also agreed to larger roles as executive producers on the project. "Laszlo and Vilmos and I were on a journey together," says Klaudia.

In addition to providing insight, the veteran cinematographers helped to give the project credibility, she adds. They introduced her to people at Panavision in Los Angeles, who selected her for the company's New Filmmaker Program, which provided free camera gear. She got additional support from Sparks, Ltd., a rental house in Hungary partially owned by Zsigmond. They also introduced her to people at Technicolor, which provided postproduction support, including the digital intermediate (DI).

The filmmakers researched and gathered footage and still photographs from archives in the United States, Hungary and Russia. Joseph Miko, another cinematographer who filmed in Hungary during the uprising, arranged to have the Hungarian National Film Archive provide his footage at no charge. (Miko died in May 2008 at the age of 87.) Scenes of the uprising came in a range of formats, including Beta-cam, DigiBeta and VHS; that material was color-corrected and up-rezzed to 16x9 high-definition video in the DI. The filmmakers are currently seeking funding to make a 35mm print.

The archival material is intercut with footage from about 30 interviews, which were done in the U.S., Hungary,



Russia and Italy. In discussing the right look for the interviews, Laszlo and Klaudia watched the drama *Reds*, shot by Vittorio Storaro, ASC, AIC, and the documentary *The Fog of War*, shot by Peter Donahue and Robert Chappell (*AC March '04*). According to Adams, they agreed that the subject called for a strong, dramatic look. "Laszlo chose black backgrounds for the interviews," says Adams. "He wanted the audience totally focused on the person talking. He lit half of the subject's face and left the other half in shadows, and he used an eyelight to make intimate contact with the audience."

Interviews were shot with a Panavised Sony HDW-F900, mostly with an 8-72mm T1.9 Primo Digital zoom lens. When Laszlo's failing health made his participation impossible, his assistant, Zoltan Honti, stepped up to cinematographer. "I'd ask myself what Laszlo would have done with each person," he says. "Then I'd put a face partially in shadows and put a sparkle in the eyes."

Zsigmond says *Torn from the Flag* carries an important message: "People were incredibly brave during the uprising, and that shouldn't be forgotten." Klaudia recalls, "Laszlo was very proud of his contribution to this movie; he often said, 'I owe it to my country. Generations have grown up with little or no knowledge of the Hungarian Revolution, and we have an obligation to tell them what it was like.'"

"Many people told me I'd never make this film," she continues, "but Laszlo never questioned whether I could. For that, I'm very grateful to him."

Torn from the Flag was given its world premiere at AFI Fest 2007. It has since screened at a number of other festivals, including one in Tiburon, Calif., where it won the Golden Reel Award for Best Cinematography. ■

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