

# THE LONG ROAD FROM HELL

A history professor who teaches courses on 20th-century Europe, Gabor Vermes knows his subject cold. Hitler and Stalin changed his life. • BY BILL GLOVIN

**G**abor Vermes, an associate professor of history at Rutgers University, is lecturing on the events leading up to the Russian army's 1944 assault on Budapest. Outside, the gray clouds filling the sky are a gloomy reminder of the siege. It's early in the semester, and the students don't yet realize that their professor is a Jew who went into hiding in the hills above Buda when he was 10. Nor do they know that one night, with the city under ferocious attack, he was among a group of children who had to flee a basement on their bellies and crawl two miles to safety, bullets whizzing by their ears.

"I try to relate to my students more as a historian than a participant," says Vermes. "Historians have to be very careful about using their pasts in a way where it seems like they have a personal ax to grind." Still, Vermes, MA '61, PhD '66, says he sometimes finds it useful to weave a firsthand observation into a lecture or seminar, especially when he talks about events leading up to World War II, his life behind the Iron Curtain and the circumstances surrounding the Hungarian Revolution of 1956.

Many of his students come from the rough-and-tumble neighborhoods that surround Rutgers's Newark, N.J., campus, and they can identify with parts of his experience. Some of their families—from Asia, Africa, Latin America—fled countries in violent political turmoil. Immigrant students tend to view Vermes as a role model: a guy with an accent who came to the United States with nothing and, through determination and hard work, earned a doctorate and went on to a distinguished career that includes citation as the Newark campus 1998 teacher of the year.

**VOICE OF EXPERIENCE:** Immigrant students see Vermes as a role model for refugees.

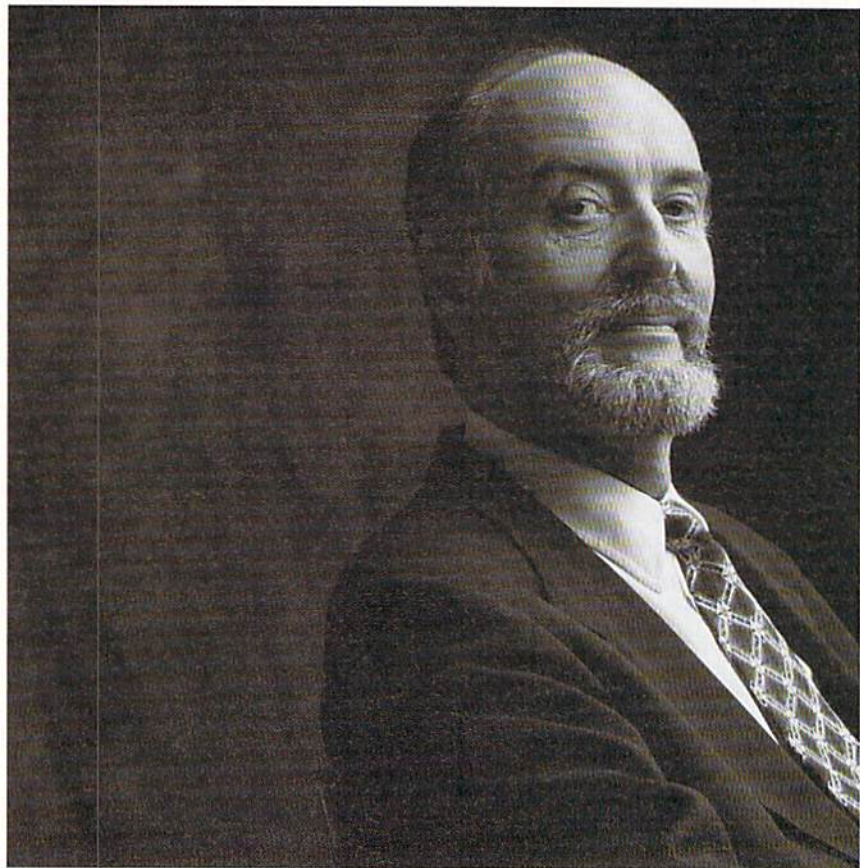
Vermes says it was his tumultuous youth, lived in a momentous period, that led him to his true calling—history. But, he acknowledges, he took a few detours. Vermes was one of about a thousand Jewish children harbored in the Budapest hills during the war by a Lutheran pastor. With the city under siege in the winter of 1944-45, food supplies were cut, and the children were slowly starving. By the time Vermes was reunited with his mother, he says, "I was 11 years old but I might as well have been 30. No one understood the impact of trauma."

After the war, Stalinist authorities demanded that high school students decide on a career. Vermes shunned the

humanities to avoid studying Marxist-Leninist ideology. He chose geology—and earned a degree from the University of Budapest in 1956. That was the year the Soviets quashed the anti-Communist uprising, killing 2,700 Hungarians in two weeks.

After Soviet tanks ravaged their capital city, Hungarians braced themselves: the Communists would not soon forget the public denouncement of their tyrannical rule. If life had been hard and oppressive before, it would now be worse. Vermes's mother, like the parents of almost all his friends, encouraged him to leave.

With false papers in hand, Vermes and a friend made their way to the western



BILL BALLEBERG

border by train and spent two days walking through the woods into Austria. For several months, Vermes lived on a meager allowance in a refugee camp outside Salzburg. He obtained the 1957 equivalent of a green card when the United States relaxed its immigration laws for well-educated Hungarian refugees. Vermes came to America on a military transport

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plane, was housed in a crowded shelter on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and started working as a delivery boy for a hardware store.

With the help of a social worker, he eventually landed a job with a small oil-exploration company in Houston that knew a bargain when it saw one—a refugee with a geology degree. “Suddenly I was in Texas, the land of cowboys,” says Vermes. “But there were no cowboys at this oil company, only rednecks who had never met a European before.” The work was hard: long days spent dragging heavy cable in the brutal desert sun.

The company moved him from Houston to Louisiana, where Vermes worked on a quarterboat on the Bayou. “It was a case of mutual intrigue. They were intrigued by a Hungarian Jew, and I was intrigued by Cajuns and hillbillies,” he recalls. Here he had his epiphany. “Something suddenly told me that I should be doing something else with my life. Looking back, I think it finally hit me that I was in a free country, where anything was possible.”

Back in Houston visiting friends, Vermes made his way to Rice Institute (now Rice University), where a history professor befriended him. He encouraged Vermes to apply for graduate scholarships from colleges and universities that might be sympathetic to his unusual circumstances.

One day, while he was working at another oil company outpost in the New

Mexican desert, a letter arrived from Stanford with news of his acceptance into the University Division, a master’s program for students changing disciplines. More good news: Stanford was offering a \$1,500 scholarship. So Vermes set out in a beat-up jalopy, making his way through the Southwest and up the coast to Palo Alto. He still remembers the culture shock

that he and a classmate from India experienced within days of arrival—watching their first football game, complete with pom-pom girls.

Professor Wayne Vucinich, an expert on Balkan history, accepted the newcomer into his inner circle of graduate students. When Vermes became a teaching assistant, he knew at once he wanted to inspire students as much as Vucinich inspired him. Former Stanford president Richard Lyman and professors Gordon Wright and Lewis Spitz were part of a history department that, to Vermes, offered the best of both worlds: a highly competitive yet collegial environment. Their distinguished reputations didn’t prevent these professors from holding parties and socializing with students. “It was such a great atmosphere that I think it hurt me later when I left the nest and wasn’t prepared for some of the politics and cruelties of academia.”

Stanford was a turning point for Vermes. He earned his doctoral degree in history in 1966 and found a job teaching at San Francisco State College. In 1972, after a stint at UCLA and a failed marriage, he landed a permanent position at Rutgers and a blind date with Ann Fagan, an assistant professor of history at Barnard College. They married in 1975. With no children of his own, Vermes has forged lasting relationships with many of his students.

Student course evaluations testify to

Vermes’s ability to inspire. “I often found myself transported to where he was talking about,” wrote one student. “You can see his passion for the subject matter in his eyes,” said another. “More professors should relate their personal experiences and not be afraid to give their opinions,” said a third.

Clearly, his life story is part of his effectiveness. “Gabor has a fairly pronounced Eastern European accent, but it hardly got in the way because we would be hanging on every word,” says Eric Hausker, a former student who often visited Vermes during office hours to hear his compelling stories. A former Rutgers colleague, Richard M. Shain, says: “Gabor’s stories are full of ironic twists and turns and are often very humorous, but he’s also thought a lot about the question of whether they are self-indulgent or a useful teaching tool. The right mix of personal anecdotes helps his students relate to the subject.”

Vermes still attends meetings of Hungarian Hidden Children, a national self-help group with a New York chapter. “It’s foolish to think that we can put the Holocaust aside; it will remain with me until the day I die,” he says. And yet, he believes surviving the Holocaust has given him a depth of knowledge he would not have gained otherwise.

On his occasional visits to Budapest, Vermes often thinks of the hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews who perished. The run-down, nearly empty synagogues and the Soviet bullet holes still visible on buildings around the Parliament are an everyday reminder of the difficult past. Still, Vermes is mesmerized by the political and social changes that have followed the breakup of the Soviet bloc.

“At first, I was euphoric, which is always very dangerous for a historian. The Golden Age that I hoped would follow is, I’m afraid, very far off. But can you blame me if I’m optimistic?” □

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