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# ‘The Traitor,’ Premiering at Zurich Film Festival, Reveals True Spy Story From World War II-Era Switzerland

By Ed Meza ▾



Courtesy of Contrast Film

[Michael Krummenacher](#)’s World War II drama “The Traitor” (“Landesverräter”) tells the true story of a young man in Switzerland who, seeking to escape the repression of militarization during World War II, falls into the hands of a manipulative German spy.

The film, which world premieres at the [Zurich Film Festival](#), follows Ernst Schrämlı (played by newcomer Dimitri Krebs), a poor but talented young singer and non-conformist in St. Gallen who regularly clashes with authority. Despising having to serve in the military for neutral Switzerland during the war, he dreams of becoming a famous crooner in Berlin.

When a charismatic Nazi spy (Fabian Hinrichs) takes a liking to him, the vulnerable Ernst not only finds the fatherly security he's been missing, but also an opportunity he never imagined. For quick money and the prospect of a German visa, Ernst begins to supply his new acquaintance with military information.

The story of the naive young conspirator, who was eventually convicted of espionage and treason and sentenced to death, has fascinated Krummenacher for years. The filmmaker wrote an early treatment of the story in 2006 while still in film school.

"I've never had a project that was with me for such a long time," Krummenacher tells *Variety*.

He returned to the story in 2015, deepening his research. Having gained access to military court records and legal documents, Krummenacher also came across many of Schrämlı's personal letters that offered "deep insights into his highly sensitive soul."

Krummenacher ended up co-writing the script with Silvia Wolkan.

“I always wanted to make a movie about this character,” the director says, stressing that he was touched by the young man’s tragic fate.

“I think Ernst was a free spirit, born in the wrong time, wrong place. If he had lived now or during peacetime, he might have gone to Berlin and become an artist, or do whatever. But he didn’t have the chance for that.”

“He was young and trying to find his way. I don’t think, from what I read in his letters, that he was fully aware of what the result would be of what he was doing. I think he saw an opportunity for himself to make something better out of his life, but didn’t think about the consequences too much.”

Krummenacher sought to reflect aspects of Schrämli’s own writings, his search for freedom and longing for a better life. “It’s a movie about a dreamer in a society that doesn’t allow dreams.”

As a result of Schrämli’s actions and his eventual fate, “he basically disappeared completely,” Krummenacher notes. “He was erased – there’s nothing in school books about him or about that case. I was touched by that, and the fact he had to die that young.”

Krummenacher found his ideal lead in Dimitri Krebs, a Zurich-based musician and non-professional actor making an impressive movie debut.

“When we started out, Dimitri wasn’t an actor at all,” the director explains. “He never had anything to do with film or with acting in general.”

Krummenacher worked closely with casting directors Nina Moser and Dana Grünenfelder in selecting the right actors for the film, but finding the perfect lead proved elusive.

“We had over the years so many rounds of castings for that role and we looked at almost everybody who can speak Swiss German, young actors, acting students, and the farther we got, the more I had the feeling that I wanted to see someone fresh, someone I’ve never seen before.”

“That character is special; he didn’t fit in in that time, in that society. So I wanted to see somebody who doesn’t quite fit in society or the movie business, you know?”

Krummenacher then set out to find unknowns. On the advice of his old friend and the film’s composer, Björn Magnusson, Krummenacher met with Krebs, a local drummer, who was open to the idea.

“He looked completely different than in the movie. He’s a punk, basically – he came to the first casting with blue hair, so you really had to think about it abstractly, thinking of him in the clothes and with other haircuts and stuff. But he did well. He had the kind of aura I was looking for.”

Indeed, Krebs’ performance improved rapidly in rehearsals. “In advance of the filming we did a lot of work together, supported by the acting coaches Barbara Fischer and Giles Foreman, and Dimitri got better and better. He’s a fast learner, and he got into it very, very quickly. Of course it was still a big risk because he is in almost every scene, and it’s not an easy role for any young actor as acting with experienced older colleagues can be very challenging. But I’m still very glad about that decision.”

The film’s cast also includes Luna Wedler, Stefan Gubser, Flurin Giger and Robert Hunger-Bühler.

The sensitive subject matter and the fact that few people in Switzerland were aware of the events that transpired during the war made the project difficult to finance, the filmmaker adds.

While Switzerland was officially neutral and not involved directly in the war, the circumstances of Ernst Schräfli’s story puts the country’s historical narrative in harsh light, such as the fact that some 90% of Swiss arms exports at the time went to the Axis powers – a point made by one of the main characters in the film.

The fact that Schrämli was eventually convicted of espionage and treason for assisting the Germans in their war effort may smack of hypocrisy today. It's not without reason that the film's original German title, "Landesverräter," can be read both singularly and plurally, Krummenacher notes.

It's nevertheless difficult to criticize something that occurred years ago under a very different climate, he adds. "I mean, it was a small country that was threatened from all sides, basically. So I can get the point that you do deals to survive. On the other hand, those deals were very one-sided. And although Switzerland was very poor before and during the war, it became quite wealthy afterward, so they kept their profit from that."

Schrämli was the first of 17 Swiss nationals convicted of espionage and treason and executed as "traitors" by firing squad – the only fatal shots fired by Swiss soldiers during the war.

A Swiss-German production, "The Traitor" is produced by Zurich-based [Contrast Film](#); Hamburg's Letterbox Filmproduktion; Amalia Film in Munich; Swiss Radio and Television; Swisscom's Blue Entertainment; ZDF/Arte and the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation.

Krummenacher, who is based in Munich, is currently working with his wife, producer Gwendolin Stolz, on setting up their new independent production company, Lanigiro Hot Club, which they will launch later this year.

The company will produce or co-produce both Krummenacher's projects as well as works from other filmmakers.

“We want to work with people we like, whose ideas we like, and also try to make movies that are not that common in Germany. We both have a big love for genre cinema, and that is something that is just missing in Germany.”

Krummenacher, who enjoys working in a variety of genres, is currently developing and writing a number of projects, including a horror movie and a family entertainment feature.

His previous credits include the 2015 mystery-thriller and [Berlinale](#) screener “Like a Cast Shadow” and the 2022 hit children’s film “The Robber Hotzenplotz,” based on the classic novel by Otfried Preußler.

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