

PRESS KIT

Shalom Puitti

A LONG WAY TO JERUSALEM

A FILM BY TAMÁS WORMSER

artesian  films



SYNOPSIS

Shalom Putti

A LONG WAY TO JERUSALEM

SHORT SYNOPSIS:

When a little-known Jewish community in rural Uganda comes into contact with a group of Orthodox Israeli rabbis, everyone is destined to be transformed. Director Tamás Wormser documents the extraordinary encounter over seven years, crafting a nuanced and visually arresting documentary reflection on identity, religion and the long shadow of colonialism.

LONG SYNOPSIS:

Largely unknown to the outside world, the people of Putti, a village at the foot of Mount Elgon, are part of the Abayudaya community, Ugandans who've practised Judaism for over a century. Outliers within the Diaspora, they've developed their own vibrant religious life, a syncretic expression of Judaism that finds room for African cultural practices and a rich musical tradition.

Although targeted by anti-Semitic violence under the regime of Idi Amin, the Jews of Putti now live in harmony with their Muslim and Christian neighbours. But they live in extreme poverty, without electricity

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or running water, with limited access to education or healthcare, surviving on subsistence farming. And far too many die of preventable disease.

Enter Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, a dedicated Zionist and one of the founding fathers of the West Bank settlement of Efrat. While mainstream Judaism discourages proselytizing, Riskin is intent on spreading the global reach of Orthodox Judaism. His team offers official recognition to Putti's Jews – raising the prospect of a prosperous new life in a new land.

Guided by Enosh Keki Mainah and Shira Musenero, a prominent local couple, the people of Putti embrace Riskin's offer, agreeing to formally convert in the hope of making *aliyah*, thereby acquiring the right to claim Israel as one's homeland. But the prospect of this actually happening is uncertain, and earlier waves of African immigration to Israel faced discrimination.

Employing his own poetic brand of *cinéma vérité*, Tamás Wormser chronicles their complex interaction over seven eventful years. While Rabbi Riskin oversees a lengthy conversion process – one culminating in a collective mikveh, a ritual bath through which one is reborn as a Jew – Enosh and Shira provide leadership to a community navigating uncharted waters.

Displaying empathy towards all his subjects, Wormser acknowledges the complex factors that shape their relationship – wealth inequity, Israel's uneasy position within the Diaspora, Uganda's tradition of communalism, and the 'white saviour' complex that so often underpins western charitable intervention in Africa.

Disrupting expectations, **Shalom Putti** leaves us wondering who's transformed the most by this unusual encounter between African Jews and Israeli rabbis, granting the Abayudaya of Putti their own unique place among the far flung 'tribes' of the Jewish Diaspora. Putti's extraordinary musical culture, woven tightly into the fabric of daily life, provides the film with its beating heart.





DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I first encountered the Abayudaya, as the Jews of Uganda call themselves, in January 2013. I was in production on a separate film project, a feature documentary called **The Wandering Muse** that explored diverse aspects of Jewish identity through the music of the Diaspora. Inhabitants of an isolated community in eastern Uganda, the Jews of Putti were outliers within the Diaspora and had developed an extraordinary musical tradition all their own, integrating Hebrew prayers with African musical idioms. I ended up spending three weeks in their company and they bring a unique voice to that film.

Two weeks into my first visit a group of foreign rabbis arrived in the village, led by Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, a charismatic figure who played an influential role in establishing the Israeli settlement of Efrat, now one of the largest settlements on the West Bank. I quickly learned of Rabbi Riskin's plans to formally convert the villagers to Orthodox Judaism – and since Judaism is the only faith that also confers a nationality, this meant that Putti's converts might one day be able to emigrate to Israel.

Although secular myself, I was impressed by the devout nature of Putti's Jews. But with the arrival of Rabbi Riskin and his team, I was confronted with a perplexing irony. Here was I, a non-observant atheist Jew,

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deeply ambivalent about the Zionist project, yet Rabbi Riskin's team was prepared to accept me as one of theirs. Meanwhile the people of Putti, who'd identified as Jews for a century, faithfully observing Shabbat and the Jewish holidays, had never been recognized as legitimate members of the so-called 'Chosen People.'

I realized that I'd come upon an unsettling and remarkable story - and that I'd found the subject of my next film. I would return to Putti four more times over the next seven years, observing and often participating in the daily life of the community, documenting their evolving relationship with Rabbi Riskin and his followers. The result is this film, **Shalom Putti**.

It has not been an easy project to make. The issues it touches upon - wealth inequity, colonialism, and the uneasy place of Israel within the Jewish Diaspora - are complicated and often divisive. My intent is not so much to pronounce or engage in argument, but rather to raise questions, reveal contradictions and evoke individual responses from viewers. My hope is that **Shalom Putti** might nurture new awareness and dialogue about these important issues.

I choose to avoid narration, wishing to create space for my protagonists to tell their own stories, voice their own hopes and aspirations, and present their own dilemmas. I acknowledge that I am an outsider, to both Putti and Riskin's world, and that my point-of-view inevitably reflects that fact. I'm also aware of how the western gaze on Africa is often shaped by colonial attitudes and cultural obliviousness, and I recognize that **Shalom Putti** is just one of many possible stories that one could tell about the community.

Finally, I feel honoured to have been welcomed in Putti, one of the world's least known Jewish communities, and I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who participated in making this film.





BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

The people of Putti are members of Uganda's small Jewish minority, a population of roughly 2500 who inhabit several villages in the eastern part of the country, near the town of Mbale. They refer to themselves as the Abayudaya –a Luganda term that translates as 'Children of Judah.'

The community was established in 1919 by Semei Kakungulu (1869-1928), an influential figure among the Buganda, the largest of several ethnic groups in the country. A youthful convert to Christianity, Kakungulu played a key role in the early years of British colonial rule, helping the British secure control over a territory that became known as the Ugandan Protectorate.

But Kakungulu would grow disenchanted with both Christianity and colonial rule. In 1913, denied leadership positions he'd been promised by the British, he joined forces with the Malakites, a breakaway Christian group critical of British rule. And in 1919, in a further gesture of anti-colonial defiance, he declared himself a Jew, establishing the first Abayudaya community near Mount Elgon.

In 1920 a visiting European Jew, remembered simply as Yosef, spent time with Kakungulu and his fledgling Jewish community, introducing formal aspects of Jewish practice and belief. When Kakungulu died in 1928, one of his main disciples, Samson Mugombe Israeli, replaced him as the community's spiritual leader. Mugombe remained in this position for over thirty years. In 1962 he was interviewed by Arye Oded, an Israeli scholar and diplomat who was studying at Kampala's Makerere University.

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During the 1970s the Abayudaya were persecuted under the brutal regime of Idi Amin. Some fled the country and others converted to Christianity or Islam. But a core group continued to practice their faith, surviving largely on subsistence farming, living in isolation from mainstream Jewish life. Outliers within the Diaspora, they have developed their own expression of Judaism, a syncretic blend of Jewish and local practices, incorporating aspects of African communalism and an extraordinary musical tradition.

In the early years of the 21st century the Abayudaya were 'rediscovered' by the outside Jewish world. Rabbi Shlomo Riskin and his team first visited Putti in 2011. A leading proponent of Modern Orthodox Judaism, Riskin is the founder of New York's Lincoln Square Synagogue, a congregation founded in 1964 that became known for its outreach programs and liberal attitudes towards women. In 1965 Riskin was among Jewish clergy who marched alongside Martin Luther King Jr in the struggle to attain equal rights for Black Americans. A Zionist, committed to the notion of a Greater Israel, Riskin later became the founding rabbi of Efrat, one of the oldest and largest settlements on the Israeli-occupied West Bank.



In a departure from standard Jewish practice, Rabbi Riskin engages in proselytizing, intent on extending the global reach of Orthodox Judaism. He is the one of the driving forces behind Ohr Torah Stone, the most influential movement within Modern Orthodox Judaism, promoting Jewish life and scholarship around the world.

Shalom Putti begins in 2011 as Rabbi Riskin and his team initiate the process of formally converting the people of Putti to Orthodox Judaism – a move questioned by some adherents of mainstream Judaism as well as by certain members of the community itself, who saw no need for outside recognition of their Jewish identity. Since then, hundreds of Ugandan Jews have undergone conversion under Rabbi Riskin's supervision, immersing themselves in the ritual mikveh, and the process is ongoing.

The film ends in 2019 as the Abayudaya host a centenary anniversary celebration in Putti. Rabbi Riskin and members of his team along with numerous Ugandan dignitaries were present at this event.

DIRECTOR'S BIO



Tamás Wormser was born and raised in Budapest, Hungary. In 1986 he moved to Canada where he completed the Film Production program at Concordia University.

In 1989 Wormser founded Artesian Films. His first professional work was **THE THREEMARIAS** (1993), a series of seven feminist-themed dance films, shown on Canadian and Hungarian TV. His next film, the documentary **FACES OF THE HAND** (1996), was broadcasted in over 40 countries and received widespread critical acclaim.

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His first fiction film **THE RING** (1998) screened and nominated at several international festivals, and **STEP UP!** (2003), which featured Jacques Poulain-Denis, a dancer who overcame devastating injuries to perform alongside Baryshnikov, also did well on the festival circuit, winning top honours at Worldfest Houston and the Moscow International Disability Film Festival along with a 2003 Freddie Award. It was seen on CBC's *Magazine*, Canada's most watched documentary program, ZDF ARTE and other international broadcasters.

In 2003 he completed **THE BALL OF THEIR LIVES**, exploring the world of Hungarian-Canadian galas, North America's largest debutante balls, and in 2006 he released **TOUCHED BY WATER**, a film shot in 13 countries that explores bathing traditions and water-rituals. The film circulated widely on the festival circuit and was shown on ARTV, the Documentary Channel and other international broadcasters.

His 2008 production, the feature-length theatrical documentary **TRAVELLING LIGHT**, featured a cast of modern-day nomadic artists. Montreal's *La Presse* praised it as "charming and intoxicating," and the *McGill Tribune* called it "captivating... blurs the distinction between art and life." It went on to win a Gold Award from the AmericanPixel Academy and other awards. Later the same year his short film **HAND TO HAND**, commissioned by the Vancouver Cultural Olympiad, was viewed by millions around the planet.

In 2014 Wormser completed **THE WANDERING MUSE**, a feature documentary and associated website exploring Jewish identity through the music of the diaspora. "A fascinating eye-opener," said the *Montreal Gazette*, "filled to the brim with good songs." The film opened theatrically in Canada and screened at numerous international festivals, winning the Context Award at the Moscow Jewish Film Fest 2016 and the Gold Remi Award at the Houston Int'l Film Fest.

FILMOGRAPHY

YEAR	TITLE
2014	The Wandering Muse
2010	Hand to Hand
2008	Travelling Light
2007	Believe in Me!
2006	Touched by Water
2003	Step Up!
2003	The Ball of Their Lives
1998	The Ring
1996	Faces of the Hand
1993	The Three Marias

TECHNICAL INFO



YEAR: **2022**

LENGTH: **90:30 and 52 minutes**

COUNTRY OF PRODUCTION: **Canada**

FILMING LOCATION: **Putti, Uganda**

LANGUAGES: **Luganda, Lugwere, English, Hebrew**

FEATURED

Enosh Keki Mainah

Shira Musenero

Rabbi Moshe Madoi Yashiirah

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Rabbi Menachem Kuchar

Jillian Kuchar

Ros Eisen

CREW

WRITER / DIRECTOR: **Tamás Wormser**

CINEMATOGRAPHY: **Clark Ferguson, Van Royko, Thomas Szacka-Marier, Tamás Wormser**

SOUND RECORDING: **Julia Innes, Kyle Stanfield, Sylvain Vary**

SOUND DESIGN: **Catherine Van Der Donckt, Benoît Dame**

FEATURING MUSIC BY: **Enosh Keki Mainah**

ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK: **Erich Kory**

EDITOR: **Boban Chaldovich**

LINE PRODUCER: **Amy Miller**

PRODUCER: **Tamás Wormser | Artesian Films**



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