

The Third Generation: Hungarian Jews on Screen ¹
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Abstract

The post-Cold War era, with its redrawn European topographies and renegotiated political and cultural alliances, has witnessed the return of Central European Jews to the screen in fiction features, documentary and experimental films, and new media. A younger generation of filmmakers devoted to speaking out on the Holocaust and its aftermath is opening vibrant new spaces of dialogue among historians, literary and scholars, as well as within the framework of families and audiences. By articulating unresolved questions of Jewish identity, memory and history, their work both extends and interrogates prior narratives and visual representations.

My presentation compares recent films by several filmmakers with regard to the contested meanings of Jewish identity; issues of gender and the filmmaker's voice and subject position; the contextualization of historical evidence; and innovative modes and genres of cinematic representation.

Post-Holocaust generations have witnessed the return of the history of Central European Jews to the center of the cinematic stage through historical studies, family narratives, retrospective autobiographies, and the visual arts. By focusing on intergenerational cinematic representations of Jewish identity, primarily films produced by the “third generation” of younger filmmakers in the years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, my presentation intends to open new spaces of dialogue that interrogate unresolved questions of Jewish identity in the region.

As evidenced in many twentieth-century literary, poetic, and theoretical works, the Hungarian past is never far from the present, and the often conflicting desires to remember, describe, and reconcile them are expressed with palpable urgency. The works under consideration here focalize narrative structures through the point-of-view of a historically located, specific individual voice, rather than the more typical omniscient camera-narrator of earlier documentary modalities. I am especially interested in exploring the ways in which they may or may not promote or enhance our identification and empathy as spectators.

While second-generation studies have occupied a major space of psychoanalytic, historical and cultural examination for decades, the ways in which the legacy of the Holocaust is learned and transmitted by the grandchildren of survivors has become the subject of scholarly investigation only over the past decade or so. Growing up at least forty years after the Holocaust and hearing as much as their grandparents and parents may have deemed appropriate to confide in them—which often meant very little or indeed nothing whatsoever—members of the Third Generation must rely on what has been called ‘post-memory’² to grasp any semblance of the suffering inflicted upon those

¹ This presentation is part of a larger project, supported by a research fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities (2006-07, entitled “The Subjective Lens: Post-Holocaust Jewish Identities in Hungarian Cinema.”

² Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames* (Harvard UP, 1997). Also Joshua Hirsch, *Afterimage:*

who preceded them, or indeed of the contours of their Jewish life before the Shoah. This kind of remembrance is often the result of a combination of generational distance and subjective, emotional connection to the traumatic events that marked the lives of family members or relatives.³ It is perhaps axiomatic, then, that the ability to be moved by experience of which one has only second- or even third-hand knowledge requires what we might consider to be a deep imaginative investment and recreation.

A number of recent Hungarian films, whether fictional, documentary, or experimental, have addressed such Third Generation phenomena, in some cases deriving their plotlines from the after-memories of writers whose grandparents, other relatives, or friends were survivors in one sense or another. The protagonists of these films tend to appropriate these memories in flashback, through time travel, or by physically (re)-entering the sites where relatives perished or evaded death.⁴ Such films illustrate and exemplify a host of Third Generation responses to the Holocaust, ranging from psychological dissociation from the more disturbing aspects of their ancestor's experience, intensification or exaggeration of its influence on the present, or the '*aprils-coup*' realization that it may in fact be a relevant yet not determining factor in one's life.

In an essay of István Bibó, a leading 20th century Hungarian political philosopher and historian, written shortly after WW II, he argues that the nation must continue to discuss and confront the 'Jewish question'.⁵ We recall, to be sure, that the subject remained taboo until 1989, shortly after the dissident writer György Konrád cautioned his fellow Hungarians—in the context of a debate organized by the opposition--to be prepared for all the consequences of the *rendszerváltás*—the “system change,” meaning that freedom of speech included the rights of anti-Semites as well, as recent events in front of the Hungarian Parliament have all too clearly demonstrated. In his memoir *A Guest in My Own Country: A Hungarian Life*, Konrád notes: “Two generations after the fact, I feel prompted to preserve the memory of the Jews of Berettyóújfalu.”⁶

Such free discussion, however, is only now beginning to take place more fully, given the more than four decades during which Hungary was denied access to open discourse and exchange with western thought on this question. Consequently, it has become in some sense the self-anointed responsibility of contemporary filmmakers, writers and artists to engage it today. I begin with an extract from a film by Péter Forgács, the first Hungarian to receive the Erasmus Prize⁷ (2007), *A Bibó Reader: Private Hungary 13, the Bishop and the Philosopher* (1996, 70 min, Official selection, Quinzaine des Réalisateurs, Cannes Film Festival 2001; Best Director Prize, Short & Experimental Film, 33rd Magyar Film Szemle, Budapest). The images are from amateur

Film, Trauma, and the Holocaust (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2004)

3 cf. Dominick A. Iorio, Richard L. Libowitz, and Marcia S. Littell eds, *The Holocaust: Lessons for the Third Generation* - Volume 18 Studies in the Shoah Series, 1997.

4 Lawrence Baron, “Shoah déjB vu in American Feature Films about Third Generation” AJS 38th Annual Conference, San Diego, December 2006.

5 István Bibó, “On the Crisis of Hungarian Democracy” (1945)

6 New York: Other Press, 2007, p. 116.

7 Awarded February, 2007, by the Dutch non-profit foundation, the prize carries an award of 150,000 euros for Forgács's “original contribution to the process of cultural memory and the transmission of culture, thereby furthering and deepening our understanding of the past.”

film footage of the philosopher who was also minister during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, who was sentenced to life imprisonment and later released under amnesty; the words, those of the historian who never abandoned his faith in the principles of democracy. The filmmaker's rendering of Bibó's social and historical analysis, conveyed in meditative texts and original amateur home movie footage, punctuates and paces his reading of the philosopher from one chapter to the next.

Many of Bibó's predictions proved all too tragically accurate, and while in the intervening 18 years since the changes, questions of Jewish identity, memory and history may no longer be taboo, they continue nonetheless to remain contested terrain. Although the Holocaust was the common lot of European Jewry, each nation experiences its own particular relationship to it, and in Hungary, documentary films have carried the primary representational burden with regard to this chapter of history. The first wave of Hungarian films foregrounding the Holocaust begins to take shape around the time of the changes: one of the first of these efforts, Forgács's series, *Privát Magyarország*, uses pre-war amateur family film footage similar to the foregoing example to evoke, in his own unique idiom, the darkening and ultimate destruction of a once serenely magical bourgeois milieu. Since that time, artists have produced a growing number of films in various forms and genres, notably in 2005, when a substantial number of Holocaust-related films were screened at the Magyar Film Szemle⁸. More recently, the Nobel Prize accorded to Imre Kertész's novel *Sorstalanság*⁹ paved the way for Lajos Koltai's film adaptation, scripted by Kertész himself, which won prestigious international prizes, elicited substantial controversy, and continues to circulate in global venues.

The contribution of documentaries in conjuring up these images and events is tantamount to a gesture towards self-recognition and healing: indeed, its role in structuring social consciousness in the process of spiritual and psychological preparation for the political changes can hardly be overestimated. Among the more important yet critically overlooked films on the fate of Jews in Hungary is Miklós Jancsó's three-part documentary series, *Jelenlét (Presence)*, begun in 1965 and completed in 1985, and the half dozen pieces of the *Kövek üzenete (Message of Stones)* from the early 1990s: *L'Aube (Dawn)*, 1985, set in Palestine, and two documentaries, *Elmondták-e? (Have You Been Told?)*, 1995 and *Zsoltár (Psalm)*, 1996). Although in his eighties Jancsó is obviously not technically part of what I am calling the Third Generation, in my view he warrants inclusion here since, in more than a century of film history, few if any other major internationally renowned filmmakers have produced such a quantity of documentaries devoted so consistently to this theme. Perhaps Jancsó's commitment is due in some measure to his training as a folklorist, an ethnographer and anthropologist dedicated to preserving endangered cultures; it may also be related to the oppositional stance of a compassionate leftist artist to the right-wing movements and discourses that, in diverse modalities, at times resort to racism and anti-Semitism as a *frstcontplain lingua franca*.¹⁰

⁸ The annual review of the previous year's fiction, documentary, experimental, animation, and short film production

⁹ Imre Kertész, *Sorstalansag* (1975), translated by Tim Wilkinson as *Fatelessness* (New York: Knopf, 2004)

Jancsó's unwavering dedication is all the more remarkable given the reluctance of some filmmakers to discuss issues of Jewish identity. As recently as 1995, I encountered this kind of resistance myself when interviewing filmmakers for an article I was researching on "Jewish Identity in Post-Communist Hungarian Cinema."¹¹ To Jancsó's work I would add that of second-generation filmmakers such as Judit Elek's mid-1990s biographical films, *Mondani a mondhatatlant/ To Speak the Unspeakable: the Message of Elie Wiesel* (Hungary/France, 1996); and *Egy Szabad Ember: Fisch Ernő élete/A Free Man: Erno Fisch* (Hungary, 1998); Gyula Gazdag's pioneering 1987 documentary, *Package Tour* (Hungary), examining the pilgrimage of elder Hungarian Holocaust survivors, former deportees returning to Auschwitz; and Ágota Varga's *Porrajmos: Gypsy Holocaust* (2000) and *Fekete Lista: Gypsy Inmates in the Forced Labor Camps in 1944* (2002).

The contested meanings of Jewish identity are addressed in a number of films by younger directors: András Sálamon (*Elveszett Család*), János Szász (*Wittman Fiuk/The Wittman Brothers, 1907*), Péter Forgács (*Bibó Brevárium/A Bibó Reader, 2001*); Zsuzsanna Varga (*Szomszédok Voltak/Once They Were Neighbors* (2006) and *Zsinagogát Vegyennek/Synagogue for Sale, 2007*); and Barbara Spitzer (*Ami megmaradt belőle/Memories of a Journey*), to mention only a few examples.¹²

In *Mauthausentől a Dob utcáig (From Mauthausen to Dob utca, 2004)* László Martinidesz retraces the trajectory of a family's success story: one of the fortunate to have returned from the death camp of Mauthausen, a former baker's apprentice opens a pastry shop in the former Jewish district and wartime ghetto of Budapest¹³, subsequently nationalized in the Stalinist Rákosi era. Later, the "maszek," the abbreviated term for *magánszektor*--the private sector or second economy--was allowed to flourish under close surveillance to ease shortages, enabling the pastry cook, like the owner before him, to survive hard times. In the 1980s, his daughter takes over the Frölich *cukrázda*, which today still functions as a popular meeting place on a revitalized Dob utca where patrons enjoy Kosher delicacies.

Éva Pataki's *Herzl* uses an international context to frame the life and work of the Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism, who was born and began his education in Budapest; as a journalist in Vienna covering the Dreyfus affair, he was among the first to perceive the persistent dangers of anti-Semitism, and its effects on personality and identity. The director, a frequent collaborator of Márta Mészáros as screenwriter on such films as *A Temetetlen Hallott/The Unburied Man*, the recent feature film on Imre Nagy

cf. György Baron, "The rooster is crowing: 'Jewish themes' in the films of Miklós Jancsó", *Kinoeye* vol 3 #3 17 Feb 2003 <http://www.kinoeye.org/03/03/baron03.php>] A version of this article originally appeared in Hungarian under the title "Szól a kakas már...: Jancsó Miklós "zsidó tárgyú" filmjei," *Szombat*, September 1996.

11 in *Assaph- Studies in the Cinema & Visual Media*, Tel Aviv.

12 It is worth noting that a significant proportion of these documentaries are the work of women directors.

13 Erzsébet Bori, "The Second Wave: Speaking Out on the Holocaust" *Hungarian Quarterly* # 177, spring 2005.

(screened for this conference in Budapest), told me she feels compelled to continue working on films that bring to light repressed or neglected aspects of Hungarian history.¹⁴

Miracle in Krakow (2004) is a fiction feature by the third-generation director Diana Gróo, who shot this mystical tale of time travel in the old Jewish quarters of Budapest and Cracow. The film follows Eszter, a young Hungarian art historian, on her journey through the Polish city in search of ancient Jewish artifacts. Through significant barriers of language and culture, she in turn follows a young Polish man, who steals a sacred book of hers that had been willed to her by her grandmother. Gróo's short feature, *Urlicht* (2005), screened at the opening of the Hungarian Film Szemle three years ago, also suggests something of her approach.¹⁵

In one of the interviews I made with her in Budapest, the 30-year-old filmmaker had this to say: "We are the third generation after World War II. Our parents' generation could talk about communism and they were closer to their parents' war experience. For us to talk about the past is very unusual. As a result, our generation is not just searching for money, but also for an identity and for topics that will appeal to a broad audience. We no longer have a common landscape. Everybody is searching to express him or herself. The style of a 1990s director has to be completely different from [that of a] Szabó, Makk, Jancsó, Elek or Rózsa." In 1999, she wrote and directed a short documentary *Melody of the Street*, set in her old neighborhood, Kazinczy Street, where memories of the past and the present come together as she listens to a Mahler symphony. Her current projects include a romantic feature comparing the bonds of heritage discovered by a Jewish girl from Budapest and a Jewish New Yorker, and a documentary about young Hungarian Jews who, like herself, emigrated to Israel after the changes, only to return to Hungary: "Here," she says, meaning Budapest, "life is more interesting: you have to fight for your identity as a Jew."¹⁶

In *Szomszédok Voltak (Once They were Neighbors, 2005)*, another Third Generation filmmaker, Zsuzsanna Geller Varga, questions neighbors of Jews deported from Kőszeg, a picturesque small town surrounded by mountains on the Austrian border of Hungary, 60 years later: what do they remember, she asks, of the town's ghetto, its brick factory, the train station, the mass graves, right in the very community in which they continued to live? What did they do and what could have been done? What did the bystanders see and what do they believe they saw in their small community during the last days of World War II? Geller Varga continues her investigation of the shadow cast by the failure to face the past in *Zsinagógát Vegyenek/Synagogue for Sale, (2005)* querying the citizens of Kőszeg where the 150-year-old dilapidated synagogue--abandoned, overgrown by weeds, its gates locked--officially under landmark protection, occupies the town center. As it continues to crumble, the Cultural Heritage professionals do nothing, while the Jewish community in a neighboring town joins the local government in setting up a foundation. A married couple roll up their sleeves and attempt to save the building. In both films, similar phrases recur: Nem szívesen beszélek

¹⁴ I thank Eva Pataki for sharing these thoughts with me in Budapest in the context of the 38th Magyar Film Szemle, February, 2007.

¹⁵ *Urlicht/Primal Light*, Hungary, 2005.

¹⁶ Special thanks to Diana Groo for speaking in depth of issues of Jewish identity with me in Budapest in February 2006 and 2007.

róla, mert rossz emlék. Ők nem mondták, én nem kérdeztem.¹⁷ An old man stops in front of the synagogue complaining: "The Jews don't restore it! Those Jews, they have so much money!" A former lager-guard and the man who lived near the brick factory as a teenager; the woman who brought food to the ghetto as a young girl, all have similar memories, speaking admiringly of their former neighbors' business talent, blaming the Germans for everything. Sixty years ago they were neighbors, but today - as elsewhere in the countryside - there are few or no Jewish inhabitants. Concerning the present as much as the past, the film raises difficult questions regarding the actions of average non-Jewish Hungarians while their Jewish neighbors were deported and sent to death.

I conclude with an observation on contemporary Budapest, of an extra-filmic nature: For decades, through the Holocaust and Communist rule, the streets of the former Budapest ghetto were largely devoid of Jewish presence. Today, however, the tide of history is turning, a leading indicator being the new three-level bar, library, book-store, theater and movie house known as Sirály, or Seagull, whose grand opening on Király utca took place on the eve of the 50th anniversary of the Hungarian uprising. Sirály aims to be a showcase for a trendy yet conscious Jewish culture, not unlike parts of the East Village of New York or Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where the ultra-orthodox community of North Bedford Street gradually becomes the counter-cultural haven of South Bedford, a version of 1960s Cambridge or Berkeley for young artists, merchants and their families. During the past few years, the abandoned buildings of Budapest's 7th district have been revitalized by a number of new clubs, bars and restaurants created by a multigenerational group returning to Dohány utca, Wesselényi utca, Klauzál tér --the former neighborhood of their ancestors, a historically Jewish area transformed by Hitler's storm troopers into the Jewish ghetto. Most of these locales bear no outward indicators yet have nonetheless become known for a young clientele, a sampling of Budapest's 80-100,000-person Jewish community. Through its programming—klezmer bands, a Hebrew rapper in its downstairs theater space, paintings by a young Hungarian Jew in the second-floor gallery--and with Hebrew lettering and a *mezuzah* on the front door, Sirály and other venues are making explicit what has been implicit with the success of similar locations. These inhabitants of the seventh district, like the filmmakers of the Third Generation, are recovering their Jewish heritage, but on their own, new terms.

17 "I don't like to talk about it because it's an unhappy memory" "They don't explain, and I don't ask."