

## Hollywood on the Danube: Hungarian Filmmakers in a Transnational Context

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**Abstract:** *Exile, emigration and displacement have marked the trajectories of Hungarian filmmakers over the past century. Michael Curtiz, the Korda brothers—Alexander, Vincent and Zoltán—André de Toth, Emeric Pressburger, Vilmos Zsigmond, Miklós Rózsa, Peter Lorre, Géza von Radvány and other talented artists have crossed borders, cultures and languages, creating such classics as Casablanca, Somewhere in Europe, The Red Shoes and The Lost One. The legendary sign posted in Hollywood studios read: "It is not enough to be Hungarian, you have to have talent, too!" Accompanied by film extracts, rare footage, personal interviews, archive photographs, and documentary materials, my presentation explores the transnational odysseys of these Hungarian directors, producers, cinematographers, composers, actors and screenwriters whose artistic contributions became an indispensable part of international cinema, suggesting that the challenges of emigration may also offer opportunities for critique, self-examination and artistic creativity.*

**Keywords:** Hungary, exile, Hollywood, filmmakers

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Cinema's exiles and refugees have long been a touchstone for theories of collective and personal memory, homeland, nation, and diaspora; their encounter with the American "culture industry" has prompted a corpus of film scholarship investigating the nexus of film style, culture and politics. While "classic" exile studies (by Eisner, Kracauer, and others) were situated in a "national," centralized framework, examining continuities between "Weimar," Hitler and Hollywood, revisionist approaches (by Kaes, Koepenick, and others) have opened new perspectives on the historical context of their cinematic projects and on questions of mutual influence across temporal and national boundaries. The transnational migration of three Austro-Hungarian Jews, Sir Alexander Korda (1883-1956), Michael Curtiz (1886-1962) and Peter Lorre (1904-1964), offers an opportunity to compare the trajectories of these major artists and to revisit the daunting challenges faced by other émigrés, expatriates, and exiles working in small or 'minor' cinema contexts.

Born Sándor Kellner in Pusztatúrpasszító, a remote farming village on the Great Hungarian Plain during the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy, the British-Hungarian director, producer impresario Alexander Korda became one of the world's most important and charismatic movie moguls, with an *oeuvre* in Britain that encompassed such classics as *The Four Feathers* (1940) and *The Third Man* (1949). By the end of the First World War he was in charge of Hungary's largest film studio, ultimately losing his position in the 1919 revolution and counter-revolution that followed. Forced into exile, he set out on an odyssey of the world's movie capitals that included Berlin, Hollywood, and Paris where, with Marcel Pagnol, he made

*Marius* (1931), one of the first great sound classics of French cinema. The scale, glamour and sophistication of his productions equaled those of Hollywood, and he worked closely with such studio executives as Samuel Goldwyn, David O. Selznick and Louis B. Mayer, while mentoring the early careers of Laurence Olivier, Vivien Leigh and Charles Laughton.

Korda enjoyed a prolific if tumultuous career as producer, director and mogul in Hungary, Austria, Germany, the U.S., and France before settling in London in the early 1930s, quickly carving out a place for himself at the heart of British culture and society. But behind the public façade of flamboyant film impresario, he played a hidden and largely undocumented role as one of Britain's most important intelligence agents. A staunch ally of Winston Churchill, he used his studios, London Films, as a front for the ultra-secret "Z" organization, and later played a key role in Britain's vital propaganda battle to bring the United States into WWII. According to Charles Drazin: "Manipulative and secretive and with a taste for intrigue, Alex was born to be a spy. So many of his films from *The Prince and the Pauper* onwards suggest a yearning for such a double life....[his] chief role in the two organizations was to provide cover, and several other Z members trained at Denham...The refugees André de Toth had noticed waiting outside his office were an example. Alex actively encouraged contacts who had fled Nazism in Central Europe to turn to him for help. He would then assess their value as sources of useful information and pass the most promising candidates on to the Z organization." (Drazin, 217-18)

Perhaps not surprisingly, given his propensity for self-reinvention, the impact of anti-semitism and cultural prejudice on Korda's self-presentation and artistic production repays closer scrutiny, suggesting that, like his compatriot Michael Curtiz, he may well have been a more consistently and seriously engaged political filmmaker than is usually assumed. Taking account of the abiding interests of Korda's early life and the films he produced and/or directed from 1933-42 including *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933), *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1934), *Things to Come* (1936), or *That Hamilton Woman* (1941), recurrent themes of anti-fascism, British rearmament, a call to end US isolationism, and unwavering concern for the plight of the refugee are consistently discernible (Walker). Issues of cultural identity, the challenges of assimilation, national belonging, the complicated status and perspective of the 'outsider' played a primordial role in his life as well as his work. His reputation as extravagant if creative tycoon is, I think, closely linked to his experience as an émigré and to his Jewish identity. Korda's ideas about filmmaking also resonate uncannily with contemporary explorations of transnationality in his conception of what he called the 'international film,' rooted in British national culture and identity and marketable throughout the world, as elaborated in his 1933 statement that: "To be fully international, a film must first be truly and intensely national." Like Michael Curtiz, Korda had an extensive career in his own country and Germany before he was invited to Hollywood by First National Pictures in 1927 where he directed the first of his "private life" films. He soon returned to Europe where he directed *Marius* (France, 1931), the first of the trilogy written by Marcel Pagnol, subsequently working in London for Paramount's British division. One might argue that, despite his disappointment in Hollywood, the difficult lessons he learned there nonetheless informed practice when he founded his own studio, London Films, where his goal was to release Hollywood-scale productions using international stars to make international films for an international audience. In this sense, one might suggest that Korda's perspective and practice were indeed what today we would consider to be 'transnational,' incorporating a vision of cinema that transcended geopolitical, linguistic and cultural borders.

Having failed to realize his ambitions in the Hollywood of the 1920s and early 30s, once he had settled in London, Korda attempted to mount a challenge to its epic productions by creating entertaining blockbusters. His success with *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933) enabled him to found Denham Studios, known as 'Hollywood on the Thames.' Korda's emphasis on aristocratic and royal *milieux* reflected the tenor of the wartime refugee community in Britain, suggesting that, while the Frankfurt School, Brecht and radical intellectuals flocked to the United States, Britain welcomed a cohort of so-called White Revolutionaries, émigrés devoted to aristocracy and the *ancien régime* (Trumpbour, 2002). By the late 1930s, Korda's extravagances and overexpansion had led to a 'boom and bust cycle' that left him bankrupt. Yet despite such financial excesses, he was ultimately able to return to Hollywood to direct *The Thief of Bagdad* in 1940.

Not unlike many of his counterparts, Korda ostensibly sought to downplay and perhaps even conceal his Jewish roots, adopting a personal biography that, while not overtly denying his background, did everything possible to elide and obfuscate it, setting about becoming more British than the British. Nonetheless, his private and professional lives were facilitated and sustained by a deeply Jewish milieu: as a village child, he attended a Jewish primary school and was brought up in a Jewish cultural environment. After the death of his father, in the early 1900s the family moved to Budapest, a city he considered "profoundly Jewish in character." Yet despite these influences, he tended to deny or adjust his ethnic origins according to what was expedient at the time. For Korda as for many of his fellow refugees and exiles, assimilation was at once an aspiration and a strategic move, perhaps especially so in an industry such as cinema in which image-making—for creators as well as actors—is a primary consideration.

In 1931 Korda arrived in London, having apparently left all his Jewishness behind him. Perhaps in Britain there was too ready an acceptance of his downgrading his former religious identity. Yet Korda always remained generous to his fellow Hungarian refugees.

Ironically, although a state-of-the-art film studio in Budapest now bears his name, Korda was never able to produce another film in Hungary following his exile in the 1920s, and ultimately considered himself to be an adoptive son of Great Britain. Among the group of Hungarian refugees who found work in England in the 1930's, Korda's influence continued until his death in 1956. *The Private Life of Henry VIII* won an Academy Award nomination as best picture and an Oscar for its star, Charles Laughton. Assisted by his brothers Zoltán as director and Vincent as art director, as well as other expatriate Hungarians, London Films produced extraordinary work, often in collaboration with Hollywood. In 1942, Korda helped produce the controversial film *To Be or Not to Be*, a masterpiece of satire adapted by director Ernst Lubitsch from a story by Melchior Lengyel, with Jack Benny and Carole Lombard in the principal roles. In Warsaw before and during the Nazi occupation, a Polish theater company becomes embroiled in a Polish soldier's efforts to track down a German spy, use their theatrical talents to outwit the occupying troops. Lubitsch, himself of German Jewish origin, used caution in making overt references to "Jewishness" (including avoiding use of the words Jewish or Jew). Alexander Korda's penchant for bold experimentation encouraged the flowering of talent such as Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (*The Red Shoes*, 1948) and provided early opportunities to David Lean and Carol Reed, no doubt leading to his distinction as the first British film producer to receive a knighthood.

Korda's compatriot, the Hungarian Jewish film director Michael Curtiz, one of the most enigmatic of film directors, often dismissed or underrated despite—or, for that matter, on account of—his craftsmanship and versatility, became one of early Hollywood's most prolific and colorful directors. Born Mihály Kaminer Kertész, 1888-1962 to an Orthodox Jewish Hungarian family Budapest, he studied at the Budapest Royal Academy of Theater and Art before beginning his career as an actor and director at the Hungarian National Theater in 1912 as Mihály Kertész, where he performed in leading roles before directing stage plays. His debut feature, *Az útolsó bohém/The Last Bohemian*, (1912), was one of the first feature-length films produced in Hungary. Curtiz moved on to the more progressive Danish film industry, returning to Hungary in 1914 to serve in the Austro-Hungarian infantry before resuming his directing career. Although his emigration from Hungary preceded the Holocaust, his pre-Hollywood life remains marginalized in film history, notwithstanding a voluminous filmography that includes his 1942 masterpiece, *Casablanca*. Renowned for its portrayal of the triumph of anti-fascist resistance and solidarity over cynicism and isolationism, its cast and crew represented 35 different countries of origin, many of whom were Jewish refugees, émigré(e)s, and exiles from Nazi persecution who had been banned from the European film industries by Hitler's laws. With a screenplay by Julius Epstein and Philip Epstein and an Oscar-nominated score by an Austrian Jew, Max Steiner, the film's official promotional poster read: "Casablanca: it's more than a town in Africa, and more than a Warner Bros. Picture—we of Warner are happy to offer this production as a symbol of the American way of life to those who battle here and abroad for the good life." Set in the week preceding the bombing of Pearl Harbor and filmed during the darkest days of World War II in less than three months, with a budget under \$1 million, *Casablanca* is also a fable of citizenship and idealism, of the struggle between the private self and the public world—a representation of the realities of refugee life in scenes and dialogue that resonate in today's world of migration, immigration and exile. The most international of productions, a film about European anti-fascism, directed by a Hungarian, with a cast composed of Austrian, German,

Hungarian, Swedish, French, English, and US-American actors, most of whom speak accented English, it is also a trenchant critique of nationalism.

Thanks to the extraordinary length and breadth of his career, Curtiz has proved an elusive target for film historians who tend to elide references to the first two decades of his career in Hungary when Budapest's 1910s thriving cultural life was centered in café culture and where many Jews, then no fewer than 25% of the city's population, were deeply involved in creative activity. In 1918 alone, Curtiz directed a dozen films, a prodigious record that foreshadows the immense versatility characteristic of his later Hollywood career directing comedies and swashbucklers, women's pictures, horror films, lavish epics, musicals, westerns, biblical spectaculars, and propaganda films with equal authority. If indeed he was "merely" a contract director, his reputedly explosive temperament on the set hardly bespoke a malleable nature, nor were his indefatigable conquests of young actresses indicative of a submissive temperament. Curtiz's somber vision of an unstable universe helped establish the mood of Warner Brothers' harsh, energetic narratives of protagonists who had suffered hardship and were later caught up in the turmoil of World War II, expecting little aid or comfort. The triumphant pessimism—to some, a typically Hungarian attitude—of Curtiz's 1940s films is discernible in the *mise-en-scène* of desolate streets or dim spaces and cinematography in which the camera appears to glide through shifting, dissolving shadows.

Many of Curtiz's films explore the complexities of a heroic figure who must prove his ability to negotiate an alien environment in order to overcome his or her own weakness or disadvantage. The majority of his protagonists must struggle for the "winner's" role and few are born to a life destined for success, suggesting a latent moral ambiguity that deprives viewers of the typically cheerful close-up favored by directors less marked by a Central European cultural heritage. Inviting spectatorial engagement with the protagonists' anxieties and doubts, such films may be read as gesturing toward the filmmakers' often suppressed ethnic and religious identities.

The third member of this trio, Peter Lorre, was born László Löwenstein in Rózsahegy, Hungary (now Slovakia) in June 1904. Trained by Jacob Moreno in Vienna's Stegreiftheater, Lorre's theatrical debut took place in Zurich in the early 1920s, leading to his early career as an itinerant actor in Switzerland, Austria and Germany. His cinematic career began in 1929 with a brief appearance alongside Ivan Mosjoukine in *The White Devil*. In 1930, working with Berthold Brecht on the Berlin stage, Fritz Lang engaged him for the role of the psychopathic child murderer in *M*, leading to future UFA productions. As a Jew fleeing the Nazis in 1933, he made *High and Low* (1934) with Pabst in Paris. After a brief passage in London where he was cast in Hitchcock's *The Man who Knew Too Much* (1934), he arrived in Hollywood in 1935, working in supporting roles until 1937 when he received the first of eight title roles as secret agent Mister Moto in Norman Foster's detective series.

In the 1940s Peter Lorre's face was familiar in genre films—thrillers, war stories and espionage dramas. His round face, protruding eyes and nasal voice won him roles in *The Maltese Falcon* (1940, John Huston), *Casablanca* (1942, Michael Curtiz), *The Cross of Lorraine* (1943, Tay Garnett, in which he played a Nazi officer), Jean Negulesco's American film noir, *The Mask of Dimitrios* (1944) and *The Beast with Five Fingers* (1947, Robert Florey).

The star of Fritz Lang's masterpiece, *M* (1931), fled Vienna in 1933 on the same train as fellow actor Oskar Homolka, director Josef von Sternberg and violinist Jascha Heifetz. During his post-exile international stardom, Lorre appeared in some fifty films, including classics such as *Casablanca* (1942) and *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1944). Having performed in films produced in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, Lorre returned to Germany (after an absence of 18 years) as writer, director and star of the postwar psychological drama *Der Verlorene/The Lost One* (1951). His first and only project as a director was undertaken as an attempt to return home from the U.S. (where he had worked since the mid-1930s) to his native country to make a film based on his own novel about a doctor whose feelings of guilt about his actions during the Third Reich only intensify as he tries to adapt to postwar Europe.

For his 1951 directorial debut, Lorre could hardly have chosen a more relevant subject – a film that probes deeply into the German psyche and seeks an explanation for the madness that had overtaken his fellow countrymen in the previous decade. This was hardly an attractive subject for a contemporary German public anxious to avoid a film in the serial killer genre, perhaps too painful a reminder of the country's descent into fascism and subsequent postwar deterioration. *The Lost One* was, perhaps not

surprisingly, a commercial disaster for Lorre and put a definitive end to his filmmaking ambitions, compelling him to return to the Hollywood that had now become his home to resume his acting career. The film disappeared into oblivion, resurfacing only in the mid-1980s when it became available for release for the first time in the United States, twenty years after Lorre's death. *Der Verlorene* was recently restored in Germany in observance of the film's 50th anniversary and, although it played in European festivals, the film remained curiously absent from U.S. outlets. For his remarkable yet brief 1951 return to Germany, Lorre received the award for best first feature from the German Academy of Cinema, which was not sufficient to prevent him from returning to the US, devastated by the film's box-office failure. His health deteriorated, forcing him to limit the pace of his filmmaking, yet during this period he made *Beat the Devil* (1952) with Humphrey Bogart and *20,000 Leagues under the sea* (1954) with Kirk Douglas, also working with Boris Karloff, Béla Lugosi and Vincent Price. Depressive and addicted to morphine, Peter Lorre was found dead of a pulmonary embolism in his Hollywood home on March 23, 1964.

Lorre's directorial style was heavily influenced by his work in the prewar expressionist cinema, especially Fritz Lang's first sound film, *M*. In a *mise-en-scène* characterized by half-light and shadow, the spectator viscerally senses the protagonist's growing, murderous rage in this compelling expressionist exploration based on the true story of a Nazi research scientist who ended up a murderer and suicide in a post-war refugee camp.

Many of Lorre's memorable Hollywood roles embodied the grotesque, the perverse, the pathological. Associated more broadly with foreignness if not specifically with Jewish identity, his performance of these roles evokes the profound ambiguity with which Hollywood characterized the 'other' and the 'foreign.' Today, these films may be read among other things as a critique of Hollywood's disavowal of its own founders' ethnic, religious and cultural origins and identities.

Eager to build a company in Germany after the war, Bertold Brecht, whose own unhappy stint in Hollywood is well documented, begged his friend Peter Lorre to join him in East Berlin. Considering Lorre to be the finest reader of prose and poetry in the German language, he was planning for Lorre a production of *Hamlet* and a performance of *The Good Soldier Schweik*, from which the young Brecht had drawn in evolving his own outwardly cynical attitude and verbal style. The collaboration they both apparently ardently desired would never come to pass, prompting Brecht to write this poem for his friend:

To the actor P.L. in exile  
 Listen, we are calling you back  
 Driven out, you must now return. The country  
 Out of which you were driven flowed once  
 With milk and honey. You are being called back  
 To a country that has been destroyed  
 And we have nothing more  
 To offer you than the fact that you are needed  
 Poor or rich  
 Sick or healthy  
 Forget everything  
 And come.

Evoking the complexities of living in transit, working in multiple languages and under different political systems, these narratives expands the frame of inquiry in a trans-national context that raises questions of multi-directional influence and exchange in exilic spaces.

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