

Jewry as a Subject of Documentary Films in Post-Socialist Countries

REPORT OF THE RESEARCH, CONDUCTED BY ESZTER HADJU, WITH THE SUPPORT OF VISEGRAD SCHOLARSHIP AT OSA ARCHIVUM

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Jewishness is an oft-recurring subject of documentary films. The regime change in 1989-1990 created new circumstances in the post-socialist countries: the restrictions which earlier limited the free and open discussion of Judaism disappeared. Today, documentary films can address the subject of Jewishness using frameworks that are no longer limited to anti-fascism or to those of official socialist cultural politics, including hostility toward religion and middle-class values.

Many new tasks await the documentary films in the era since 1990. Documentaries must break down old taboos and seek genuine answers to questions such as:

- Is a new Jewish community emerging which is openly active in larger society?
- Will the Jewish minority living in Diaspora develop a genuine, modern Jewish culture and identity?
- Does the majority population accept responsibility for its crimes committed during the Holocaust?
- Do the sons face up to the sins of their fathers? And do the fathers who are still living face up to their own?
- Are documentary films reacting to the increasing strength of extreme right-wing groups, to eruptions of anti-Semitism, and – in the case of Hungary – to the presence of a far-right party in Parliament?
- Is the role played by Jews in the Communist system being explored?

By examining the documentary films created in the former socialist countries since 1990, and with a focus on Hungarian films, I will explore the issue of whether these films are carrying out their role in breaking down taboos and providing answers to important social questions.

As a comparison, I will examine a number of German documentaries made in a country about which Imre Kertész, among others, has stated that “the skeleton is no longer in the closet.”

In my report I discuss 3 periods. The first is before the '80's, the second is from the 80's, and in most details I will talk about the third period, which is after the change of the regime. I will show the main directions of the documentaries made about Jews in the former socialist countries, and I will illustrate these categories with film extracts, which are available on a DVD attachment.

(For my research I used the archive of the Free Europe Radio, the Jewish newspaper, Új Élet, the archive of the MTI (Hungarian News Agency), the Filmvilág and Filmkultúra, and the film library of OSA archive, with approximately 100 films connecting to my subject, and several books, essays, articles, etc.)

UNDER SOCIALISM

The First Era: Totally Taboo

The situation of documentary films under Socialism was aptly summarized by János Kádár, General Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party, in a speech at the Ninth Party Congress in 1966 (quoted in “Film és Politika” (Film and Politics), *Filmvilág* (Film World), Issue 23, December 1, 1966).

“The Central Committee is well aware that literature and the arts are not merely an illustrative tool of politics. But I do emphasize the importance of one political requirement: partiality – in the correct sense.”

This directive naturally determined the nature of films made about the Jewish community. Film director Tamás Almási, one of Hungary's most well-known and active documentary filmmakers, recalls this era: "If you wanted to make a movie about Jews, your editor would always dissuade you for one reason or another. The usual warning was, Let's not rock this boat."

Under Communism, the situation of the Jews and public discourse about them were always characterized by ambivalence. While the majority of Jews viewed the Communist system with gratitude, the system also crippled their community in many respects.

At some point after the war, Béla Zsolt wrote: "Uttering the phrase "Jewish culture" is impossible nowadays, for two reasons. One: you will be accused of anti-Semitism; and two: you will be accused of being an extremist Zionist."

The socialist political regime was from the beginning, not completely positive, from the point of view of taking on the Jewish identity. The Jewish community suffered a lot from the anti-religious and anti-bourgeois attitude of the system. They could not be proud of or at least bear naturally their identity, and their trauma during the holocaust was not recognized and out-spoken. They even did not have the chance to remember with honour to their murdered family-members. From a communist point a view, the importance of the Soah was always minimized. Some communist politicians refused the thought of the special suffering of the Jewry, that in the "old regime the entire working-class suffered". The Jews were expected to show a hostile attitude towards Israel, where probably some of their relatives lived.

Official Jewish opinion was, naturally, deeply supportive of the regime, since the one-party system countenanced only complete loyalty. This loyalty was expressed several times through statements and oaths issued by the "official" Jewish community, especially when called upon to react to contentions by the Western press that the life of Jews behind the Iron Curtain was "not exactly easy street."

In 1951, the representatives of Hungarian Jews issued the following statement: **"As we roundly reject the false press reports about the situation of the Hungarian Jews, we**

would like to make it clear: Hungarian Jewry loyally stands behind our people's democracy, which has secured a peaceful and free life for us after many decades of oppression and persecution.”

In 1959, an official oath of allegiance was published in the newspaper *Új Élet* [New Life], in which the representatives of the Jewish community state that they are united in their support for the leaders of socialism, and their central goal is to build socialism. In 1960, the Hungarian Jewish community did not take part in the World Jewish Congress, in protest against the Congress's plans to raise the issue of Soviet Jewry.

While the Hungarian Jews routinely stressed their satisfaction with the system in the domestic media, articles continued to appear in the international press about the difficulties faced by Jews behind the Iron Curtain, about religious persecution and the masked anti-Semitism of the Socialist system. (“Jews behind the Iron Curtain,” *The Economist*, June 21, 1952). For example, in May 1973, the *New York Times* reported that at a university theater production of *The Fiddler on the Roof* in Budapest, the audience marched out of the show, shouting anti-Semitic slogans. Naturally, the content of Western press reports may well have been skewed by the context of the Cold War.

The Hungarian media consistently condemned Israel. In 1967, Hungary broke off diplomatic relations with Israel. Anti-Israeli sentiment was so pronounced that several prominent figures went so far as to draw a parallel between Zionism and Nazism (for example, the pronouncement by Professor V. Rabinovics that Zionism is equivalent to Nazism, in *Csongrád megyei hírlap* [Csongrád County News], March 12, 1969).

Until the early 1980's, not a single film portrayed the Jews as an independent cultural, religious, sovereign community – not even in the typical anti-fascist films of the era.

In the beginning of this period there are some reports in the cinema-news about the trials of infamous nazi criminals, but without mentioning the existence of Jews or Jewish suffering. And the style of the presentation is extremely naive and populist.

1. extract of a cinema-news about the trial of Endre László, Hungarian nazi war-criminal

The Second Era: The Beginnings of Change

Parallel to a loosening of the political atmosphere of the 1980's, the discourse about the Jews also began to change, and a new reformist Jewish group emerged, called Shalom (The Independent Peace Group of Hungarian Jews), representing an alternative viewpoint to the official Jewish pro-regime loyalism. On December 25, 1983, Shalom published an open letter in *Új Élet* (the official mouthpiece of the Hungarian Jewish community).

The open letter was a response to *Új Élet's* anti-American standpoint, and called upon the newspaper to "see clearly" and to think outside the constraints of official national policy. In its argument, the open letter cited U.S. aid to Israel and the flourishing Jewish cultural institutions in the United States.

In 1983, the film "The Revolt of Job" won an Oscar, but the press response was muted.

1984 saw the creation of "Package Tour," the first significant documentary about the Holocaust. Directed by Gyula Gazdag, the film records a journey by four busloads of middle-aged and elderly tourists who sign up for a seemingly morbid package tour organized by Coopturist, Hungary's official tourist agency: a trip to the former death camps. Most of the participants are return visitors, since they were deported during the Holocaust. And as they approach Auschwitz-Birkenau, the tourists begin to tell their stories...

Several reviews of the film appeared in the press. In *Új Élet*, Péter Kardos reacts vehemently to a critique by László Bodó which appeared earlier in *Dunántúli Napló* [Western Hungarian Daily]. Bodó had contended, in connection with the film, that Jews are coopting the Holocaust. Kardos responded by noting that Jews would be happy to hand over this privilege to Bodó and those of his ilk.

In 1984, postage stamps were issued featuring Judaica; a kosher restaurant opened in downtown Budapest; and the first collection of Hungarian Jewish jokes was published. Articles began to be published addressing anti-Semitism and – finally –the issue of responsibility.

The Shalom group issued its second statement: an open letter to Hungarian society and to Hungarian Jewry, stating that silence and covering up are not a solution. This letter was followed a few months later by another entitled: “Why can’t we discuss the Jewish question in Hungary?”

In 1987, a series of articles was published, entitled “Is there a Jewish Question in Hungary today?”, in which Hungarian intellectual figures contributed their views on the issue.

REGIME CHANGE: Taboos disappear, but catharsis is elusive

From the poem “They’re Coming”, by writer György Spíró:

“Here they come again, the anguished Magyars of deep conviction, the poets of willow trees, fan of willows - here they come, straight out of the shit.”

From the essay “Carpathian Basin”, by Gábor T. Szántó:

“Here, I have no right to peace at home, because being a Jew is practically an act of heroism, and I can be Hungarian only to the extent they let me – because if they call me a dirty Jew, what am I supposed to retort? “Stinking Hungarian”? – it’s like stabbing myself with the knife.”

My research has focused on the post-1989 period, which has included repeated resurgences of anti-Semitism in Europe, particularly in the newly established democracies of East Central Europe. At the same time, new forms of Jewish identity have emerged here. In the former Socialist countries, taboos which earlier kept these emotions in check have fallen. To some extent, the past is now being re-examined. The change of regime in 1989 could have made it possible for the abuses against the Jews and the question of responsibility to be „talked out.”

In Hungary, the highly assimilated Jewish community of Budapest (due to the Holocaust, the Hungary's remaining Jews nearly all live in Budapest) began to „breathe” again. Patterns of cultural identity have been revived, and the community has increasingly felt the need, possibility and necessity to openly embrace their identity and culture.

At the same time, however, anti-Semitic passions emerged which were earlier kept in check by the one-Party state. Anti-Semitic writings, speeches and political groups came on the scene. Emotions, tensions and passions raged in Hungarian society: a situation which naturally „demanded” treatment in documentary films.

In the last 2 decades a huge number of documentaries have been made about the Jewish community and its relation to the majority society. In Hungary we can say, that one of the most usual subject of documentaries are Jews, and feeling towards Jews.

Based my research on documentaries made in the post-socialist countries since 1989, I have divided the films into the following categories:

1. Historical documentaries

These films depict the events of the past without confronting the problems and tensions in current society. They relate well-known or lesser-known historical events in a style that is, as far as possible, objective.

2. Films that seek to involve today's society and to encourage social dialogue

These films raise the issue of responsibility and facing up to the past. For example, the 2005 film “They were Neighbors,” directed by Zsuzsanna Varga.

The neighbours of the Jewish inhabitants of the small Hungarian town of Kőszeg take us along the streets of their town, into the houses and shops, passing by the shut down synagogue that all bear witness to the fates of its former owners. What did the Hungarians of Kőszeg do

while their neighbours were rounded up for deportation, forced labour at the local brick factory and eventual death? How and what do they remember and say today about that time? What did the bystanders see and what do they believe they saw happening in their community during the last days of WWII? And why do they feel compelled to dispel allusions to their complicity?

2. extracts from Zsuzsanna Varga: We were neighbours

The one-time neighbors agree that the population of Kőszeg is by no means responsible for anything at all, since they couldn't do anything about what occurred, and had no way of helping the victims.

The former neighbors do remember some things. They remember that some people looted the empty houses of the deported Jews, and that some would give the Jews water only if they paid for it. Some neighbors relate without emotion how the Jews were killed, yet break down when describing how their horse was confiscated by the state. Another neighbor is touched by her own family's charity: they donated a few of the potatoes destined for pig feed to the starving Jews.

Their reminiscences are contradictory. On the one hand, they say they didn't know what was going on; on the other, they tell about how the corpses piled up. Some are indignant about how the Jews behaved.

"The Jews would remove the gold fillings from the teeth of the corpses. That's outrageous, I'd never do that to a comrade!" says one citizen of Kőszeg.

When some of the Jews returned home after being deported, the neighbors did not ask them where they'd been.

A typical sentence: "We were quite close friends but still, they never told me anything about what had happened to them over there. I did not ask, they did not say..."

In the film, *Descendants*, the director meets and talks to the son of László Endre. László Endre held the position of the Secretary of State of Internal Affairs during the last years of the WWII and was responsible for the deportation of the Hungarian Jews to concentration camps in 1944. After the war László Endre was sentenced to death. His son, Zsigmond Endre, continues to see his father as a politician who served his nation.

Ágota Varga's film "Descendants" is a more extreme example of rejection of responsibility. More precisely, the son of war criminal László Endre does accept responsibility, but does so while completely identifying with his father. The son, too, sees the Jews as a dangerous force, and can only approve of what his father did on behalf of the Hungarian nation.

3. film extract: Ágota Varga: Descendants

It is interesting, that the third generation, the grandchildren, who live in Latin America, prefer to suppress the family memory. They do not want to meet the director or participate in the film; they feel a shame because of the past of the family.

3. Films intended to provoke viewers

These films attempt to discuss Jewish questions from a non-conventional standpoint. In the film "The Fidesz Jew, the mother with no sense of nation, and mediation", a right-wing Jew (a rarity in Hungary) faces off against the Hungarian Jewish community.

The film is a pioneering effort to disclose the underlying mechanisms of the political conflict that has divided Hungary since the change of regime in 1989. It is the story of a broken friendship and a family that has completely fallen apart under the strain of differing political convictions. Two Jewish friends were separated when one of them became a right-wing party (Fidesz) representative. A right-wing Jew!

This problem was discussed in Bálint house, in the Hungarian Jewish Cultural Centre.

4. film extract: Eszter Hajdu: The Fidesz Jew, the mother with no sense of nation, and mediation

4. Films based on archival material

These films consist of original archive material and are presented according to a well-defined dramaturgy, occasionally accompanied by narration.

(for ex. Péter Forgách's films)

5. Portrait films that include the Holocaust as part of the life story but do not focus on the Holocaust

Pianist Livia Rév (Dir: János Mácsei 2006)

A sensitive and intimate portrait of Livia Rév (born in 1916), a worldwide celebrated pianist, in the 50s and 60s. Through a life-history interview, and with extensive use of archival material, the film gives an insight into the life of an artist, who was born in a Jewish family in Budapest, survived the Holocaust thanks to Raoul Wallenberg, and immigrated to Paris after the Communist takeover in Hungary.

6. Films about anti-Semitism (in these films, Jews are portrayed only as the targets of hate)

Borbala Kriza's film, *Rocking the Nation* (2007) belongs to this category. A concert tour with "Romantic Violence", the cult band of "national rock", and its fans

from December 2005 till the fall of 2006. Folk musicians and skinheads, football fans and college students speak of their radical nationalistic views. They travel tirelessly, for their music is their mission, “to strengthen national identity”, “to shake people up”, “to make people think” at home and abroad. Their concerts are much more than a party for the fans: they have created a community, and a way of life.

This film presents, with stunning honesty, young people who openly and proudly announce their antipathy toward Jews. Well-dressed, attractive young people present the entire gamut of anti-Semitic theories. “The Jews killed Jesus, who was an innocent and good person; a Christian would never do such a thing,” declares a pretty young blond woman passionately.

5. film extract: Borbala Kriza's film, Rocking the Nation

7. Films depicting the emerging Jewish culture in the years since the regime change, featuring a Jewish identity that is not formed by the Holocaust

Very few such films have been made. Perhaps the most significant of these is *Córesz* (Tsores) by Diana Groó.

Tsores is a documentary about young people – the generation who, a decade ago, were in their 20’s and 30’s, openly speaking about their Jewish identity, their roots, their past and present.

The film maintains that it is the third (postwar) generation which can most emphatically and openly declare their Jewishness – and also speak without inhibitions or fear about those things which for so long were taboo, or impossible to say. Silence or fear has induced the exact opposite reaction from them: their whole lives are determined by their Jewishness. Many of them have gone on to live in Israel.

“It was a process of becoming ingrained into Jewishness,” says one interview subject. In many cases, the parents and grandparents viewed this process with despair, mostly out of fear or out of their own convictions, formed by a socialist-era ideology. Some even sent their children, having openly declared themselves as belonging to the Jewish people, to the psychologist.

6. film extract: C6rez (Tsores) by Diana Gro6.

8. The second generation’s search for identity, in which the filmmaker often presents his/her own story

This is a highly personal type of documentary, one which is very rare in Hungary, and in East Europe in general. Among films I have researched, it is telling that the only one that falls in this category is “Anya” (Mother), directed by Mikl6s Gimes, who grew up in Switzerland.

Portrait of Alice Gimes, Lucy, the filmmaker's mother. Raised in a comfortable assimilated Jewish home in southern Hungary, Lucy escaped being deported to Auschwitz and later committed herself to the communist movement. It was there she met Miklos Gimes, a journalist who grew disenchanted with the communist government. After the Soviets invaded Hungary in 1956, Miklos sent his wife and six-year-old son abroad. While in Vienna, Alice learned that her husband had been executed; eventually, she and her son settled in Switzerland. After the fall of communism, Miklos Gimes was to be given an official burial as a national hero - Lucy however hesitated to become the "official widow." This is the point of departure for the director who undergoes the painful exploration of his parents' personal relationship while creating an insightful meditation on the legacy of their politics for his own life.

7. film extract: “Anyá” (Mother), directed by Miklós Gimes

It is a very complex film, about relation between son and mother, about communism and Jewishness, and a love affair. It tells a lot about the 20th century on a very emotional way.

9. Outreach and dialogue between perpetrators (and their descedents) and the victims

Interestingly, not a single film made in Hungary falls into this category. However, a Czech film does (but with a German main character) : a German woman who once lived in Liberec, Czechoslovakia, seeks to made amends for what “her people” committed – despite that fact that neither she nor her family participated in any crime. Nevertheless, she feels that she owes the Jewish people this much; she writes a book about the victims and comes to befriend one of the former deportees, a Jewish woman.

8. film extract: This is the House with the Green Roof by Blanka Zavitkovska.

10. Documentaries about the responsibility of Jews during the Second World War

(for ex. about Kasztner)

11. Documentary films about Jews under Communism. Victims or Beneficiaries?

This kinds of debates are very usual in the Hungarian society. There is a strong stereotype that Jews were communist, and they had benefit a lot in the former regime. Which idea is far from reality, as I mentioned before. Meanwhile there are not too many films dealing with this

subject. One of them is the already mentioned, the Mother by Miklós Gimes. In other former socialist countries, for example Czech Republic and Russia, there are several documentaries about the suffering of Jews during the communist regimes.

(Hitler, Stalin, and I / Hitler, Stalin a ja -Czech Republic, 2001

GREAT COMMUNIST BANK ROBBERY- Romanian film, 2004)

Stalin's personal enemy. 1948 Russian film, 1997

Episode about Solomon Mikhoels, a famous Jewish actor and the head of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee during the Second World War. Solomon Mikhoels was murdered by the Soviet secret services, who presented it as an accident. A year later a large-scale anti-Semitic campaign unfolded in the Soviet Union.)

12. Romantic films

In these films, a love story – generally tragic - is part of a Jewish fate.

Three Missing Pages / Három hiányzó oldal 2007

At the age of 86, Vera sets out to find three missing pages of a book, the last chapter of her tragic love story. Albert Csillag is an illustrator of children's books, one of the most gifted graphic artists of his time. On 19th December 1937 he meets 16 year-old Veronika Benisch at a lawyer's ball. It is love at first sight, but Albert, a Jew, is drafted into a forced labour unit, from where he secretly sends Vera love letters with drawings and poems as well as an engagement ring. Albert never returns from the camp. Many years later Vera finds a book about the Bor labour camp, but three "dreadful" pages – the story of Albert – have been torn out by her sister. Vera searches for those three pages to find the last chapter of the great love of her life. For sixty years she kept silent; now, at the request of her grandson – the cameraman of the documentary – she tells her story.

Tell Me Why? / Powiedz mi, dlaczego?

THE GERMAN ATTITUDE

My research includes a comparative analysis of documentary films that focus on Jews in German society. We often hear that German society has done everything possible to face up to its past and to take responsibility for its sins, which has made Germany today a liveable place for the country's minorities. German documentaries by the dozens have focused on the „sons” facing up to the sins of their fathers. This approach, involving a personal encounter with the past, is rare and sometimes non-existent among the documentaries of the former Socialist countries.

We saw in films about the Holocaust in Hungary, the majority population generally rejects any responsibility. It wasn't us, and anyway the Hungarians helped the Jews.

(According to a Medián research made in 2002, approximately one third of the population believes, that for the Hungarian Holocaust, only the Nazi Germany is responsible, and the majority of the people believe that most of the Hungarian families helped and hid the persecuted Jews.¹)

In Hungary there was no considerable rescuing, not even in comparison with Poland or Slovakia known as anti-Semite (as resistance to the Germans was also minor). The society apparently took the yellow-star without resistance, which brought complete outcry everywhere else.

István Bibó looks at the behaviour in the Holocaust as the fail of the morality of the Hungarian society.² In his essay he explains: "...the persecuted did not feel, and could not feel, that the country and the community were standing beside them, at least feels with them.

¹ The researches were done by the MTA-ELTE, Communicational Theoretical Research-group, the Strategic Research Centre, and Medián

² István Bibó: Jewish Problem in Hungary after 1944, Gondolat, Budapest 1984 (editor: P. Hantik)

In Hungary, if an escaped even dared to knock on an alien door he found indifference, rejection and refusal as a normal probability, or even denunciation which was less likely, but also possible, or help as completely surprising, and unexpected.”

In Hungary it seems that the attitude of the majority society has not changed so much. As we saw in the documentaries, the most typical is the denial of the responsibility, or even worse, to support the nazi ideology.

In Germany, the situation is very different: the political will and the cultural policies do everything possible to encourage an examination of conscience. One after another, films are being created which address the issue of reparation for the sins of the past.

Such initiatives are not only state-funded; they also come from individual actions.

A German film from 2010 introduces us to a unique project. The names of 17,000 Jews killed by the Nazis have been engraved onto the pavement in front of the victims' former houses. Passers-by express their appreciation and are pleased that such a memorial has been created to the murdered Jews. Teams of volunteers are organized to keep up the memorial tablets, so that the names of the victims continue to shine.

We learn that some of them, through this symbolic effort, are trying to compensate for the sins of their fathers.

9. film extract: The Stumbling Stone(2007) by Dörte Franke tells the story of this project.

(more example: 2 or 3 Things I Know About Him

(2 or 3 Things I Know About Him / 2 oder 3 Dinge, die ich von ihm weiss [FL 686]

The family of a Nazi war criminal, sixty years after the end of the War. Hanns After the war, the Americans handed Ludin over to the Czechoslovakian authorities; he was sentenced to death and hanged. Ludin's youngest son, director Malte Ludin, presents a 'documentary

debate' with the three generations of his large family, now scattered all over the world. Although the truth about the father's role in the war has long been on record, his widow, children and children's children argue about their family history, struggling to reconcile private memories with public knowledge.

It is also very interesting to see, that for example in Hungary, the directors who do films about Jewry and Jewish past, nearly in every case have Jewish origins. In Germany it is usual that a director who comes from a nazi family feels the urge of making this kind of films.

Imre Kertész, the Nobel-price winner Jewish writer performed a speech in Magdeburg on the German jubilee of reunification as a guest of honour. He concluded his speech by that: **“The question rises: what is the reason of my presence, someone who has been through German concentration-camps, at the celebration of the reunification? Approximately 60 years after, when a new generation needs to fight with the past I don't think the answer is paradox: mutual work. I always wanted that that irreparable reality would give birth to the catharsis. Everything I ever created was for this reason.”**