

Edit Rózsavölgyi: The Holocaust in Hungary

1. Introduction

„The destruction of the Jews of Hungary constitutes one of the most perplexing chapters in the history of the Holocaust... The Jewish community of Hungary, which enjoyed an unparalleled level of development after its legal [and political] emancipation in 1867 [by the Act number XVII sanctioned by the king Francis Joseph at the end of December], was the first to be subjected to discriminatory legislation in post-World War I Europe. Conversely, when the Jewish communities of German-occupied Europe were being systematically destroyed during the first four and half years of World War II, the Jewish community of Hungary, though subjected to harsh legal and economic measures and to a series of violent actions, continued to be relatively well off. But ... with the German invasion of the country on March 19, 1944, it was this community that was subjected to the most ruthless and concentrated destruction process of the war. This took place on the very eve of Allied victory, when the grisly details of the Final Solution - the Nazi drive for the liquidation of European Jewry - were already known to the leaders of the world“ (R. L. Braham, 1981, I, p. xxv).

This study aims to describe and analyze the Holocaust in Hungary in the context of some Hungarian films (first of all István Szabó, *A napfény íze* 'Sunshine' and *Apa* 'Dad', but also Miklós Jancsó, *Így jöttem* 'This is how I came', Sándor Sára, *A vád* 'The prosecution' and Géza Radványi - Béla Balázs, *Valahol Európában* 'Somewhere in Europe'). It attempts to explain some of the historical, political and socio-economic factors that contributed to a greater or lesser extent to this tragedy and shows the allusions to these in our films.

2. The rise of Anti-Semitism. The Hungarian situation

Research on the development of the consciousness of being a nation among the peoples of Central-Eastern Europe and the comparison of national literatures dealing with this argument show that at the beginning of the 19th century the so-called national myths and legends had a strong intellectual influence. One of the most influential myths examines which people were the first to occupy the Carpathian Basin and consequently who has more right to rule the others. In other words the question is who in the distant past had a dominating power in this region, sovereigns, who had a more ancient and profound culture and therefore the right to dominate. Johann Gottfried von Herder, for example, in a historical-philosophical treatise of great importance, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* ('Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Mankind') between 1784-1791 writes about the Hungarians as follows: „In some centuries it will not even be possible to discover the language of the Hungarians so few in number and wedged in among other peoples“ (quotation by László Dobossy in his article entitled *A nemzeti tudatot torzító mítoszok* 'Myths Distorting the Consciousness of Nationality' in P. Tamási 1993, p. 48). The Panslavic theory regards the Hungarians as a people who unfortunately, and by force remained wedged between the others. In Hungarian public opinion, too, these myths have had an important role. The Mongol invasion of Hungary in 1241 and the Turkish conquest of the 16th century decimated the Hungarian population and this reduction

in number further strengthened aspiration towards an assimilation of the type „one is the nation, Hungarians united“. Béla Grünwald wrote in his study entitled *Felvidék* „Upper Province“ in 1878 (quotation as above, p. 53): „the mission and the highest purpose of the Hungarian nation is to show itself as a ruling element in the independent Hungarian state ... The Hungarian nation when assimilating smaller nations unable to evolve independently and when incorporating them in a superior nation, serves humanity as a champion of civilisation.“ Theories like this which despise other nations, this almost paranoid state have characterised anti-Semitism for centuries. The anti-Semitic movement, too, has been based on suppositions and attitudes like these in the past and have attracted followers.

The 19th century 'scientific theory of races' which created a hierarchy among peoples and the European states of the era had given way to the connected religious anti-Semitism, which propounded 'Aryan Christianity' and denied Christ's Jewish origin, and to racial anti-Semitism. This prevailing atmosphere of concern about Magyars, because 'the nation is decaying', led to a homogeneous awareness of national identity, which was guided by fear – there could only be one type of Hungarian, because this was the only way of survival for them. Assimilation was offered by 19th century liberalism with the temptation of making Hungarians homogeneous; it did not even consider regions, it only thought in terms of unity: there was only one type of Hungarian which existed. Jewish people had to assimilate to this; and most of them were in the market for this offer, which was given in grandiose style in that situation. From the Jewish point of view the most successful assimilation of the area or, what is more, of the world took place in the second half of the 19th century in Hungary, and created several successful people. Earlier, under the feudal concept of the world Jews had not been allowed to study or to carry on certain types of economic activities, and were subjected to various restrictions and prohibitions. By the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, however, a new situation had arisen. Hungarian culture, economy and trade were practically unimaginable without the contribution of the Jewish people. The unbelievably dynamic development which took place in Hungary at that time would not have been possible without the Jews. On the other hand, the offer of dissimilation also sprang from the same homogeneous awareness of national identity, which was guided by fear. The success of the Jewish people was frightening, and also the thought that 'the Jews' would become 'the Hungarians' if things continued in that way. It was stated that Hungarian culture could not be learnt, and that the Hungarian ethnic group and Hungarian culture had to be protected. Another grandiose-style offer was born: Győző Istóczy's anti-Semitic party appealed to the government to contribute to the creating of an independent state for the Jews in Palestine in the late 1880's when Zionism did not yet exist! Thus two offers came into being: a liberal one, guided by a homogeneous awareness of national identity and an anti-Semitic one, stimulating assimilation and dissimilation, respectively. If a Jew rejected the offer of assimilation, he or she handed an argument to the anti-Semites. Those who accepted the offer of assimilation also accepted the homogeneous Hungarian awareness of national identity. What followed was that a process, which evidently did exist and does exist today: namely, that there are not only assimilation and dissimilation but there is also integration, cannot be articulated because the Hungarian awareness of national identity is not receptive to this. The Hungarian awareness of national identity has never been integrative. To become integrative it would have to get rid of its being driven by fear, and then it could be acknowledged that there are many kinds of Hungarians and that this does not mean that the nation is decaying.

From the sociological point of view, seven steps of assimilation are distinguished, and sociologists think that if the first three have taken place, the next four are automatically accomplished:

The first three are the following:

1. cultural assimilation – an ethnic group takes over the language and the culture of the majority society
2. structural assimilation – social interactions between the different ethnic groups are increasingly carried out
3. fusion – mixed marriages come into being.

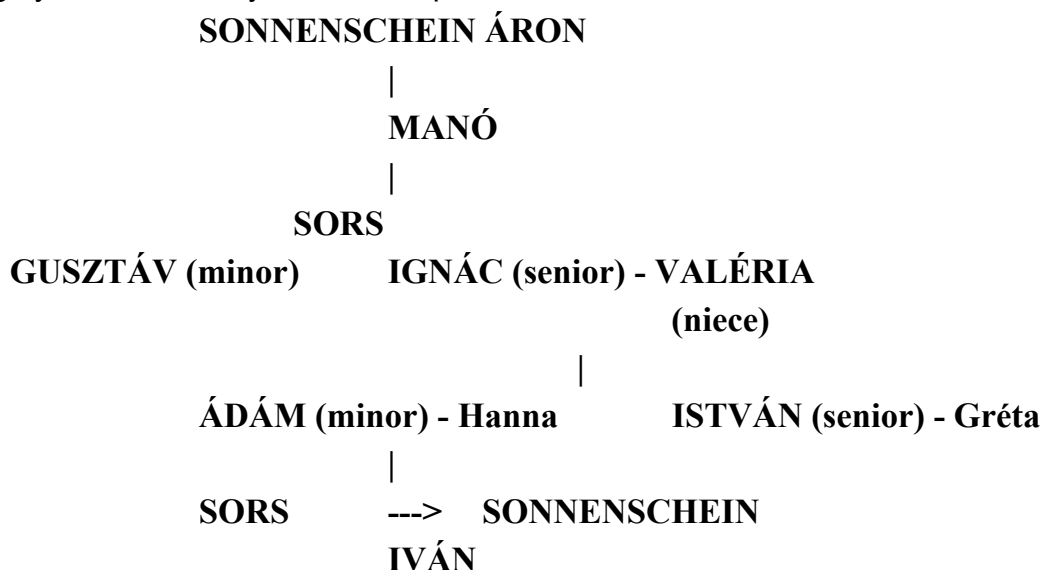
After that, according to the theory of the process of assimilation,

4. prejudices,
 5. discrimination,
 6. the sense of belonging to different ethnic groups,
 7. and conflicts of values and interests between the given groups
- cease to exist.

Jewish assimilation in Hungary is a particular question which is well worth examining because its first three steps were accomplished between the time of the Jewish emancipation from the middle of the 19th century until the 1930's and 1940's when the anti-Jewish laws were passed. 35 to 50% of Jews lived in mixed marriages, i.e. they had become assimilated. Thus the following question must be discussed from the historical–sociological point of view: why did the process of assimilation not continue? The concept of assimilation which became accepted in Hungarian political and intellectual life at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries is not a concept which expressly concerns social and historical facts, but it is an ideological one, a concept of assimilation that was born of an ideological notion of nation, as described above. Hungarian Jews had to realise that anti-Semitism did not spring from the fact that they had not become assimilated.

2.1. 'Sunshine'

This process is described in István Szabó's newest film, *A napfény íze* 'Sunshine' (1999). The film follows the story of a Hungarian Jewish family, the Sonnenschein family, through several generations, from the end of the 19th century until the 1960's. A roughly outlined family tree will help us to better follow the order of events:



The Jewish great-grandfather Sonnenschein Manó, accepting his Jewish-Hungarian identity, runs a successful business. Following an ancient and secret recipe inherited from his father Áron he produces an alcoholic drink called *A napfény íze* 'the taste of sunshine' - from here the title of the film. He warns his two children Ignác and Gusztáv and his niece Valéria adopted by him after the death of his brother, Valéria's father, to be always only the second ones, to be modest, and not to attract attention so that they could avoid trouble. However, the two brothers and Valéria, who becomes Ignác' wife, are not satisfied with this inheritance, they have greater ambitions, and they Magyarise their names for a Hungarian one, *Sors* (which means 'fate') in the spirit of assimilation, believing that in this way they will be more successful. This seems to work, until the rise of Nazism and the implementation of the Final Solution program. The grandson Iván, who is the son of Ignác' younger son, and some thousand others have to watch how the father Ádám, who has become entirely assimilated and is an Olympic fencing champion, is beaten to death by the Nazis in a concentration camp because he refuses to call himself a Jew. The great uncle Gusztáv, who fought as a Communist partisan in the French Resistance, at the end of the war asks his great-nephew Iván, who had to watch his father's death, this question: „You were standing there, a couple of thousand people against some who were armed, and did you not do anything?” The answer given was, „This is how it happened.” Iván then becomes a member of the *ÁVO (Államvédelmi Osztály)*, the state security department during the communist regime, that is, he joins the communists in order to take his revenge until finally he realises, after being himself imprisoned, that as a Jew he has become a strange toy, an instrument of the powers. After his release from prison he applies for permission to change his name back to his great-grandfather's original name Sonnenschein. This historical family tableau, although approximate and dramatised, reflects the problems faced in our study.

István Szabó has said about his work as a film director: „I consider the value of a film to be the reaching of such depths in the analysis of human relationships as can enlighten me about things, can give me some experience, can resolve certain complexes, can help me in life...

In my films I would like to tell stories about people, stories which I believe can give the audience some experience, or if you like, some help in their own lives.

While watching the film we find ourselves face to face with our own prejudices, we have to think over our opinions about certain things, we have to change them; other things become clearer: that is to say, when we come out of the cinema, we will be different people than when we went in“ (*Filmvilág*, 1973. n. 6).

The film entitled „Sunshine“ shows the progress Hungarian Jews had made during the so-called „Golden Era“ of their history (1867-1918), the close ties that their leaders developed with the Hungarian ruling conservative-aristocratic elite. Many Hungarian Jews being grateful to the Hungarian political leadership for the possibilities and the security they enjoyed in the country, were filled by fervent patriotism and full of loyalty to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and to the sovereign. This is the position represented by Ignác. He developed a false sense of security that he continued to keep alive. On this basis his sons István and Ádám even during World War II deluded themselves to the very end that they would survive relatively intact. They did not really believe that what happened in Poland could possibly happen in a civilized Hungary where the destiny of the Jews and Magyars had been intertwined for over a thousand years. In the hope of being totally assimilated and accepted in Hungarian society the two brothers István and Ádám and Valéria converted to Christianity.

There was a natural tendency of many Hungarian Jews to avoid persecution by conversion which culminated in 1938 when about 2% of the Jewish population converted. Then from June 1941 when Hungary entered the war till March 1944 when Hungary was invaded by Germany most of the converted were more or less treated like devout Jews (for example they were obliged to labor service), so it was not worth converting. Conversion became a means of escape and had a new impetus in the second half of the year 1944 when, after Christian churches had exerted a pressure on the government, it decided that in case of deportation the converts would be exempted and the Association of Christian Jews of Hungary could be constituted. The question of converting „... aroused great controversy in both the Jewish and non-Jewish communities... Ironically, the anti-conversion position of devout Jews was as vociferous as that of the anti-Semites, if for different reasons. Whereas the former wanted to retain the unity of the Jewish community, the anti-Semites agitated against conversions in order to assure the total success of the Final Solution program. ... Following the Szálasi coup on October 15, the Nyilas [the extreme right Arrow-Cross Hungarian Nazis] went on a rampage without distinguishing between devout, converted, exempted, or protected Jews. The embracement of Christianity now took on a new, informal form. Many of the Jews managed to acquire falsified Christian (non conversion) certificates or identity papers with which they survived the ordeal. It was one of the many forms of resistance at the time against the Názi design to effectuate the Final Solution program.“ (R. L. Braham II, pp.780-781)

Szabó shows the terror the Jews felt for the deportation threat through the character of István's wife Gréta. The other members of the Sors family remain quite optimistic till the end also because of the exemption system regarding them. Valéria is the widow, István and Ádám are the sons of a highly decorated war hero, Ignác. The system of exempting certain categories of Jews from the general anti-Jewish measures was originally introduced during the late 1930's, when the first major anti-Jewish laws were adopted with the aim to drastically reduce the Jews' influence and proportion in the professions, business and industry. On May 10, 1944 a general decree relating exclusively the exemptions was adopted by the Council of Ministers proposed by István Antal, the Minister of justice. „Aside from the relatively few highly decorated war heroes, the most frequently exempted Jews were those who were classified as *bona fide* Christian under existing legislation [those who had converted to Christianity before August 1, 1919]. These were even entitled to have their confiscated apartments and property returned. ... Decree 2.040/1944 M.E. authorized the Governor [Miklós Horthy] to provide, on the recommendation of the Council of Ministers, special exemption to persons who had made great contributions to the nation in various fields, including the arts, the sciences, and the economy. The decree stipulated that the Jews so exempted would still be subject to the provisions of the racial Third Anti-Jewish Act of 1941 and that their property rights would be spelled out in the individual exemption certificates.“ (R. L. Braham, 1981, II, p.783). In the Sors family Ádám, who was killed by the Nazis in a concentration camp, should have been exempted for two reasons: his father was a highly decorated war hero in World War I and he himself was an Olympic fencing champion who had made a great contribution to the nation. When the coup organized by the German and the Nyilas brought about the fall of Horthy's regime in October 1944 the new government headed by Szálasi decided to reconsider the exemption system. Only few Jews could maintain their exemption certificates.

The younger brother Gusztáv symbolizes the smaller part of Hungarian Jewry that, recognizing in time the danger, escaped. When returning to Hungary after World War

It is he who raises the question about a direct responsibility of the Jews for the catastrophe, that is to say they failed to escape or resist. Such opinions that occasionally have been expressed concerning the problem who must bear the historical responsibility for the Holocaust are of course gratuitous. The Hungarian Jews had no concrete knowledge about the gas chambers and the mass murders committed in many of the concentration camps. Their reaction to the information joined to them about these horrors was shock and disbelief: they considered it as anti-Nazi propaganda. Their most prevalent psychological defense mechanism was retreat from reality. The masses of Hungarian Jewry, the victims, must of course be absolved from any direct responsibility.

3. The implementation of the Holocaust in Hungary

The objectives of the de-Jewification authorities were:

- The demoralization of the Jewish masses to prevent the possibility of resistance.
- The „unearthing“ and confiscation of „hidden Jewish wealth“.
- The finalization of the deportation plans.
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The deportation plans were carried out on the basis of a two-pronged approach:

1. The exploitation of the agreement involving Horthy and the Hungarian and German governments relating to the delivery of several hundred thousand Hungarian Jews „for war production purposes“
2. The „removal of the danger“ represented by the large concentration of Jews in the northeastern parts of the country, which were declared to have become military operational zones (cf. R. L. Braham 1981, II, p. 595-6)

By means of the various anti-Jewish measures (May 28, 1938 - First Anti-Jewish Act, May 4, 1939 - Second Anti-Jewish Act, August 2, 1941 - Third (Racial) Anti-Jewish Act) the masses of Hungarian Jewry had already been considerably impoverished and discriminated against by March 1944, the time of the German occupation. Between March 29 and December 6, 1944 107 further major anti-Jewish measures were adopted which deprived the Jews not only of their livelihood, but also of their dignity. They were ordered into the ghettos beginning with the Jews in Carpatho-Ruthenia on April 16. In the ghettos and the concentration camps the Jews were overcrowded and many of them were forced to live outdoors without sanitary facilities, those suspected of having any property were subjected to a cruel interrogation. The possibilities of escape within Hungary were minimal as there were no partisan forces to join. Only a few provincial Jews were able to reach the capital and hide by acquiring false Aryan identification papers.

The final written instructions for the mayors of the ghetto centres were worked out at Munkács. The removal of the Jews had to begin on May 14. Lévai Jenő, an expert in the Hungarian holocaust, described the entrainment and deportation of the Jews of Munkács as follows: „On May 22, ... most of Munkács' 12,000 Jews were driven on the route from the ghetto to the brickyard by guards using whips, machine-guns, and rifle butts. There they were compelled to lay down their baggage and undress - men, women and children alike. Stark naked, they were then ordered to move back a few steps, and the women, who were called in specially, together with Gestapo men, policemen, and gendarmes went through their baggage and clothing, even opening stitches to discover whether the Jews had hidden anything. Those who did not undress or step back fast enough were beaten. Most of the people were bleeding and stood silently, naked and numbed. The searchers, however, were all the more

loud. The clothes were then returned, the personal documents were torn, and everybody became a non-person. They were then driven by night sticks and rifle butts to get dressed. The crush of the desperate crowd and the frenzied confusion were terrible. Here, 90 persons were crowded in to a freight car: *obviously there were too few cars and too many Jews!* The cars were then chained and padlocked. Each got a bucket full of water and an empty one for the excrements. The train, however, was left standing in the station during the hot May day and was allowed to leave only the following day. By that time many became mad and even more died, since the Jewish hospital patients were also included. The doors were not opened the day of departure. The corpses were removed three days later at Csap, where also the mad were clubbed or shot.“ (quotation by R. L. Braham 1981, II, p. 605)

By the end of June 1944 deportations from the countryside were practically finished, and then it was the turn of the Jews living in Budapest. The ghetto in Budapest consisted of 288 buildings which were assigned in today's Klauzál square and its neighbourhood. Nearly 70 thousand people were crammed into 4513 flats. On average 4050 people shared one bathroom or toilet. There were operations carried out by candlelight. At first the dead were buried in the garden of the synagogue in Dohány street and the sandy playground in Klauzál square, but when there was no more room for them in these places, they lay in the streets unburied.

While initially only occasional references to the ghettoization and deportation activities were provided by the world press, at the end of June a campaign was launched against the persecutions of the Jews in Hungary when an abbreviated version of the so-called Auschwitz Protocols and a summary of the deportation processes in the provinces were sent by Miklós Krausz of the Budapest Palestine Office (*Palesztina Hivatal*) to Switzerland. An increasing domestic and international pressure on the Governor Horthy was exerted with specific demands for the cessation of all anti-Jewish measures. The newspapers provided gruesome details about the barbarities associated with the deportation of the Jews emphasizing the incompatibility of these atrocities both with the previous reputation of Hungary and the fundamental laws of humanity and Christianity. The Pope addressed a personal plea to Horthy on June 25, President Roosevelt followed suit on June 26, and the King of Sweden on June 30. The President of the United States threatened that „Hungary's fate will not be like that of any other civilized nation ... unless the deportations are stopped.“ On July 2 an unusually heavy air-raid on Budapest was carried out to reinforce the demand for the cessation of all anti-Jewish measures. On July 7, 1944 Horthy decided to halt the deportations. By that time however only the Jews of Budapest and those at labor service remained in the country.

The swiftly deteriorating military situation (the approaching of the Red Army, Budapest and other strategic Hungarian cities under almost constant bombardment) threatened the collapse of Hungary with its Nazi allies. The Lakatos government (August 29 - September 16) tried to find „an honorable way out of the war“. Horthy convened a Crown Council meeting for September 10, 1944 under his chairmanship where he announced his intention to conclude an armistice with the Soviet Union. The Germans, who were aware of all the supposedly secret moves and were annoyed both by the failure to complete the Final Solution program and by the Hungarians' almost overt attempts to extricate themselves from the war, made all the necessary preparations not only to forestall the Hungarian desertation from the Allies, but also to replace the Lakatos government by an exclusively *Nyilas* one. „The ill-fated attempt by Horthy for a *volte-face* on October 15, which was as naïve politically as it was unprepared militarily (Horthy, out of a misplaced sense of honor, told Veessenmayer [Edmund Veessenmayer was the Nazi expert on questions regarding

Southeastern-Europe and the German representative in Hungary invested with full powers] of his intentions without taking any viable military contingency measures), put an end to an important chapter in Hungarian history. It not only brought about the downfall of the Lakatos regime and the abandonment of Hungary's traditional social and political system, but it also began a new tragic chapter in the history of Hungarian Jewry.“ (R. L. Braham 1981, II, p. 809)

Under Szálasi's leadership the extreme right Arrow-Cross Hungarian Nazis took power with a coup d'etat on October 15. They incited against the Jews who remained alive.

On December 22 the Provisional National Assembly elected the Provisional National Government in Debrecen. On December 24, 1944 the Soviet troops begin the siege of Budapest. Adolf Eichmann, the German responsible leader for the implementation of the Final Solution program in Hungary, and his collaborators escape from Budapest together with several Hungarian Nazis. In his book *The Politics of Genocide. The Holocaust in Hungary* R. L. Braham considers the role of the Soviet Union in the elimination of the Holocaust in the following way:

„While the Red Army played a determining role in saving the Jews of Budapest and thousands of Jews in the labor service companies, the USSR was not particularly involved in the political-diplomatic campaign for the rescue of Hungarian Jewry. The liberation of Jews was the consequence of the military operations of the Soviet forces against the Axis rather than the result of a conscious policy of rescue or considerations of humanitarianism. ... Fearful of a possible rapprochement between the Western Allies and the Third Reich that might lead to an anti-Communist capitalist coalition, the Soviet leaders were highly suspicious of any attempt to deal with the Nazis on matters of rescue. Therefore, they ignored almost completely the plight of Nazi-oppressed groups and minorities. Jewish labor servicemen who escaped to the Soviet lines or who were captured as ordinary POWs [prisoner of war] were poorly treated;... no official public declaration condemning the extermination of the Jews were ever issued. All this reflected the Soviet leaders' suspicions and political interests. Such attitudes were exacerbated after the war ...“ (R. L. Braham 1981, II, pp. 1119-1120)

The total loss of Hungarian Jews during the Second World War was 564,507 people, – not including those who escaped abroad –: 297,621 from post-Trianon Hungary, 100,803 from Budapest and 266,886 from the territories which were annexed back to Hungary during the Second World War. According to the census of 1941, the total number of Jewish inhabitants was 725,005.

Other victims of the Holocaust in Hungary were gypsies. The Romany Holocaust Committee was established in 1993-94. The number of the Romany victims is still being counted, and films, memoirs, and documents are being created about the era. Miklós Jancsó has also made a documentary film about the Romany Holocaust. The number of gypsy victims in Hungary was approximately 25,000. Apart from the Jews, the victims of the Holocaust throughout Europe were gypsies, homosexuals and all kinds of political enemies of Nazism.

3.1. 'This is How I Came'

Miklós Jancsó's film, entitled *Így jöttem* 'This is How I Came' (1964) and Sándor Sára's film entitled *A vád* 'The Prosecution' (1995), recall the historical period when the Russian troops were gradually moving forward in the country and trying to drive out the Nazi forces.

The film 'This is how I came', highly respected and prize-winning at the first Hungarian film festival (1964), shows us schizophrenic, horrible conditions when everybody is afraid and terrified of everything. It shows us how the Russian soldier, who catches a fugitive and keeps him in custody as a prisoner of war and who is the fugitive's enemy at the given moment, and at the same time the 'liberator' of the country, becomes a friend and how the fugitive's own people become his enemies. All this can happen only because a man is trying to act in the name of humanity, which ranks above ideologies – although at this time and in this place it does not; ideology ranks above humanity.

Jancsó said of his work in an interview, in which he showed us Central-East European fate giving his own life as a characteristic example (details of interviews from the review *Filmvilág* 1966. n.1 and 1981. n. 9):

„We came into the film industry from various places around '45. A certain intellectual opposition before the liberation was followed by an intensively political start to an artistic career – almost all of us belonged to the people's college – we started work with world-redeeming political desires and plans. Daily politics and private life were closely connected for us at that time.

It was a characteristic episode of the peculiar Transylvanian fate [Jancsó is of Transylvanian origin] that, after the Romanians marched in, my uncle on my mother's side, who had been my father's friend and schoolmate, became the mayor of Fogaras. My mother came from an old Romanian family; my great-grandfather on my mother's side was a well-known orthodox priest at the turn of the century. There were ten children in my father's family and twelve in my mother's; and coexistence over the centuries sometimes lessened and sometimes heightened national contradictions. My father and my uncle had been friends ever since they went to school together – according to a certain family rumour that was why my father married his friend's sister; later my uncle became one of the local leaders of the Romanian National Peasant Party, whereas my father became a Hungarian civil servant, and while they were friends and relatives in private life, they were antagonists in politics and according to family legends they almost assaulted each other on several occasions; but when they grew old, they drank together as old friends again ... What I have learnt from all this as a lifelong lesson, as early as in my adolescence, was that these national problems which had been muddled throughout the centuries cannot be resolved with strong antagonism, let alone with violence if one wants to arrive at a sensible and valid solution.

The problem which I have always concerned myself with was how an individual can find or lose his or her way in history; what role a novelty or a revolutionary innovation can play in history and what its effect may be, and what consequences it brings if the individual or the innovation falls into the hands of a manipulative force.

And why did we turn to historical topics? It is always easier to take a position on a historical topic or conflict than on a contemporary one.

Our films are never about one concrete thing.

Since my childhood I have always concerned myself with this question: what are Hungarians like? You have this small nation in Europe with its strange and

contradictory history and the silly nostalgia and unreal dreams which affected crowds in my childhood. Our people has been 'rural', living in seclusion, requiring to be attended upon, often leaving alone those who want more and better, rarely undertaking sensible struggles – though, when doing so, doing it with all their heart – apathetically resigning themselves to senseless sacrifices such as for example, the two world wars. I have been trying to investigate in each of my films what is needed in order for the people of this country to really grow up at last, for the 'Hungarian wasteland' to really become a part of Europe.

This is the question which excites me even now, though not in such a narrow way; because since then I have realised that it is not only Hungarians who are of this kind.“

3.2. 'The Prosecution'

Sándor Sára gave the following interview to *Filmvilág* (1991. n. 2):

„I have been troubled by the fact for a long time that we have known nothing, or hardly anything, about the second World War. By the word 'we' I mean my generation, which passed through it with the adolescent's half-conscious mind; people younger than us know even less, but even our elders do not know much more.

... In 1987 ...I succeeded in getting an opportunity ... to continue the historical investigation which I had started with the series on the Don bend [in 1983]. It is today a well-known fact that after being suppressed before its release, *Pergőtűz* 'Barrage' could only be shown in a small cinema in secret for a couple of days; its TV-version, *Krónika* 'Chronicle', a series consisting of 25 episodes was banned from the screen after the 17th episode. Naturally, I wanted to continue this work in spite of all this. Then we seemed to be trying to attack strong walls which were as firm as a rock; I think that nobody – including myself – believed that they would collapse in an instant...

I am convinced that people have a false picture in their mind about the things which happened during the captivity....

I am interested in the fates of all those people who became prisoners of war from January 1943 onwards. Let us not forget: there were about 600 thousand people in captivity – including the people carried off to the so-called *malenkij robot* – and at least 200 thousand of them lost their lives. And this approximate number does not count the victims of hostilities!

I simply felt that I cannot refuse to take on this task. I considered it to be my duty to fix everything on film which I got to know about that era.“

After a long sequence of documentaries Sára directed his feature film in 1995, entitled *A vád* 'The Prosecution', of which he was also one of the screenwriters. 'The Prosecution' takes place at Christmas, 1944. The Pásztor family have withdrawn to a hidden farmstead hoping that they will be able to survive while the army is marching through. The Soviet troops are arriving. Here, a long way from people, the family is exposed to harassment on the part of the Soviet soldiers, and when they are trying to defend themselves, a series of events begin which eventually lead to tragedy. They

are robbed, the three adult daughters are raped, they are prosecuted for violence and murder on the basis of false charges after the father and the son have undergone a crude interrogation, and have been blackmailed and deceived. During the show trial the mother, the father and the son are sentenced to death and the three girls are sentenced to 10 years in a labour camp. Only one of the girls survived the time spent in the labour camp. The 1992 decision of the military court rehabilitated the three girls but upheld the sentences passed on the parents and the son.

The film shows the inhuman cruelty which is produced in people by a war situation, and the endless injustice in which people who happen to be exposed to it become so defenceless that the representatives of power can do as they will with them.

3.3. 'Somewhere in Europe'

Géza Radványi's film, entitled *Valahol Európában* 'Somewhere in Europe' (1947), is one of the most successful Hungarian feature films. It has been shown in almost every city world-wide and the UN undertook the patronage of it. One of the secrets of its success is the deep humanism and pacifism of its topic.

In 1942 Géza Radványi went to work in Italy because he was not allowed to film his favourite topics in Hungary. After the German occupation of Italy he returned home and in 1947 he shot his film, 'Somewhere in Europe', which takes place during the immediate post-war period. The scenario was written by Béla Balázs, one of the creators of literature on the aesthetics of world cinema, who had also returned from the Soviet Union to Hungary after a long absence. The Hungarian author was inspired by Nikolai Ekk's work entitled *Út az életbe* 'The way into life', written in 1931.

The opening shots of the film are based on the principles of the classic antithetical montage. We have pictures of war, bombing, deportations and children appearing from beneath a collapsing wall, from behind the fence of an approved school, which has been bombed, from among the cracks of the floor-board of a death train; they loiter on the road, they try to find food, they steal, they live as they can. All this is shown without dialogue and explanatory text; these could also be the first frames of a silent film.

These children form a band; they are pursued; they try to defend themselves, they steal and loot because they want to live. The film is concentrated on the world of children. We see them living according to the ancient laws of nature: they let the stronger ones lead and they share the little they have; they plan dirty tricks and a desire for destruction springs up in them in order to survive. Finally they arrive at an old half-ruined castle, just in the nick of time because the authorities of the neighbourhood in charge of maintaining public order are preparing to fight against them. This is where they become acquainted with an eccentric musician, who has withdrawn into this deserted castle in order to escape from the horrors of the war. This misanthropic musician will then lead them to the paths of a sensible life, with love and patience. While strolling about in the old castle they suddenly realise there is some deeper culture than the one they have met before and they are ready to change. But it becomes clear that society does not need them even when they are organised for good; at this point they defend themselves in an almost real battle as the new world of the future against the ancient, old-fashioned order of society, which is doomed to destruction.

The world of the adults in the film is more unfamiliar, more remote, less comprehensible, especially that of Artur Somlay, the musician. Where has he come from? Why? Who is he in reality? We do not know.

The world of the vagabond children is really international, and also when adults appear, we do not really know where to imagine ourselves. And here we have this exaggerated generalisation – 'somewhere' in Europe.

The film is one of the first anti-war epics of the cinema. It condenses into one work all the incomprehensible, cruel horror – fear, defencelessness, desire for destruction, revenge, all the 'insanity' – which accompanies every kind of war, but which especially came with the Second World War and the Holocaust for several millions of European people .

4. After the Holocaust. 'Dad'

Apa 'Dad' (1966) is one of István Szabó's first films (together with *Álmodozások kora* „Age of day-dreamings“ (1964) and *Szerelmesfilm* „Love-film“ (1970)) and has been appreciated by Hungarian and foreign critics as a subjective, lyrical autobiography of the author's generation.

The story is set in the frame of a cemetery sequence, the only real representation of Dad in the whole film: at the beginning he is being buried, at the end he is being visited. Dad was a doctor and died of a heart-attack unexpectedly in 1945 after having lived through the hard times of World War II. He continues to live in the imagination of his son Takó Bence, who is a boy of about 8 years old at the time, and becomes of great importance throughout the film. As the dividing lines between reality and imagination grow indistinct, neither Bence nor the spectator is able to get their bearings with the three frozen visions of memory linked with Dad, the many events born of Bence's imagination, the impression suggested by his father's objects and the experiences reported by others about the doctor. Bence is accompanied until his manhood, when he is at the university in the 60's and in every important moment of his life we can see that he gets strength from his father's memory, from his own day-dreamings about him. His father appears as strong, courageous, generous, willing to help others, a kind person who is respected and loved by everybody. This is how Bence imagines him and relates to him, and how Bence himself would like to be. Although he feels ashamed when he creates and maintains this idyllic image of his father by deceiving himself, he can't get rid of the mechanism which almost automatically makes him brag of his father. Bence feels as if he and his father were one when he says or does something that his father would have said or done. He feels as though he is the centre of attention, is loved, trusted and believed in. In this way he expects he can make people think and act as he would like them to. Without his father he feels lost, weak and helpless, unable to do what he ought. As a university student he realises this and understands that he must trust his own strength and capacities, his own perseverance in order to get along in life. He must be able to face situations alone. He is sure if he can do so it will be a beautiful sensation. We leave a young man conscious and confident of himself who is ready to put himself to the test and we are hopeful that he will resist.

Thus, the main message of the film is the story of a character or rather the forming of a character, the process of becoming self-conscious. It is natural to feel good and secure when being loved and respected and that one wishes to feel good and secure. But how can one be acquainted with this in the absence of an adult identificational model?

István Szabó declares in an interview (*Filmvilág* 1981. n.1):

„... I would like to be engaged in public therapy. And the way to do it is showing the character's illness, calling one's attention to its forms of appearance: making certain features of the hero appealing the spectators can identify themselves with him and when their feelings regarding the hero, with whom they have become one, have changed, when they face their previous feelings and prejudices, if they have found similar features in their own character - then this may help... Although the phenomenon is set on the ground of high politics ... it can be detected throughout small communities ...

At the beginning of the 60's when I started to film until about the beginning of the 70's we ... were excited by the human aspects of great historical changes ... because we had personal experiences of enormous historical shocks. These experiences were the same as those of the audience, so we might well feel that we had much to say about these common experiences. Until the mid 70's we considered our most important task to be that of drawing conclusions and mapping the thoughts deriving from them ... I believe that every really successfully done work involves the mysteries of the spheres of great historical movements besides the small quivering worlds and the greatest ambition of those of us who make films is always to approach integrity in this sense.“

In the film entitled *Apa „Dad“* the hero's acquisition of self-consciousness is set on a historical background. As already mentioned, the story moves on between 1945 and the 1960's. The most determining experience of this period was the conclusion of the horrors of World War II including the monstrosities of the Holocaust. It is not easy for the survivors to elaborate these traumatic experiences. In the film we have many direct and indirect references to it.

At the very beginning of the film there are some original intercuts giving the chronology of the destroyed city of Budapest: bombed buildings and bridges, dead horses from which people are cutting meat, people queuing for water... Among them are some with a yellow arm band, the distinguishing sign Jewish labor servicemen had to wear during the war.

On the day of Bence's birthday he goes to the movies with his mother and the newsreel speaks about the showdown with the leaders of Nyilas terror. Bence's mother says that the Nyilas, the Hungarian Nazis also wanted to take away his father who escaped by jumping off the tram. Bence imagines his father's escape and his fighting with the Nyilas.

One of the episodes of the film which is set at Bence's school refers to the xenophobia which is the basis of anti-Semitism. The teacher, a priest at the time, tells the story of Petőfi to the pupils. In his story the Magyarité of one of the most important Hungarian poets is doubted because his father was of Serbian origin:

„At the inn Petőfi is telling about the beauty of the Hungarian Alföld region.

- Hurrah Sándor Petőfi! - is heard from everywhere.

When he sits down somebody gets up and says to Petőfi:

- You are an impostor! I know your father, he is Petrovics, the Serbian innkeeper. Whatever you say, you are Serbian not Hungarian.

There is dead silence at the inn. But Petőfi says laughing:

- You are right, my father is Petrovics, the Serbian innkeeper, but allow me , I am still Sándor Petőfi, the Hungarian poet.“

This case, that of national minorities reflects what has happened and what happens to Jews. Even the perfectly assimilated are considered aliens.

The great human losses and the hope that many people still alive just after the end of World War II nurtured that their loved ones may perhaps return, are referred to in the part of the film when Bence's school gets a gift-parcel. As there is not enough for everybody, the teacher first calls those whose fathers have died. Most of the class stands up. On the other hand, one of the boys does not want to come forward when the teacher asks, saying that his father has only disappeared and he is sure that he is still being held in captivity. It is difficult for Bence, too, to acknowledge that his father has died and when his class-mates want to beat him after school because he didn't want to admit the fact Bence tells a lie affirming that his father was a friend of their teacher's and they were partisans during the war.

As a university student talking to his mother, Bence asks if they had wanted to go abroad. His mother relates that Bence's father was a great Hungarian and so did not want to leave his country and then in 1940-42 when they would have liked to emigrate to Australia it was no longer possible.

Bence and a group of friends do some crowd work in a film to earn some extra money. The film is about Jewish deportation. A yellow star is sewn on their clothes which was a way of marking Jews from April 5, 1944 onwards. They are part of the masses of Jews to be deported. Bence is dressed as an arrow-cross Hungarian nazi and is asked to be cruel with the crowd. The scene is to be repeated many times and everybody is asked to enter into the tragedy of the situation. During the practise runs they joke and smile, and it seems as if they do not want to think about the destruction of the Jews. After the rehearsal the company sits down at a bar, they become pensive and one of the young men declares without any introduction as it is obvious that everybody has been thinking of the Holocaust:

„We were left out of it. It was better to be born later. I have no idea what my father did in 1944. He was a soldier. I trust he did not know anything. And what if he had acted to save his hide? Even that must not have been easy...”

When the company dissolves Bence and Anni, his girlfriend, go for a walk on the banks of the Danube. Anni comes out in her true colours:

„Do you know what is terrible? For a long time I denied that my father died in Auschwitz. I invented something about him for the sole reason that it did not oblige me to admit that I am a Jew. Then when I realised that everything was in vain, I started to accept it. I even went to Auschwitz by bus as a tourist and I photographed everything so that I could show it at home. But in the photos are well-dressed tourists. Shall I show them? ... Mostly I feel ashamed even now and I act as if I did not belong there. I am Hungarian, am I not? Simply Hungarian. I have already decided it a hundred times. And there is no past and there is nothing. Then something comes over me and again I want to belong there in a way that everybody should see it; everybody can know that my father and my mother died of it. Then again I feel ashamed. I 'm unable to behave properly and I don't know where I really belong or where I want to belong or where I should belong to. The Pope absolved the Jews because they had already suffered enough for sin. My God, after all they are sinful because 2000 years ago they let Jesus be crucified. But when will those who permitted 6 million other people to be gassed or burned 20 years ago be absolved from

their sin? When? You see, I fire up in a moment. What an idiocy this Auschwitz is! Auschwitz! My past. That my father and my relatives were killed. But I can't continually refer to the fact that I must be believed because all my relatives were killed and I have already suffered enough. At the end it's me who feels ashamed because I am one of those whose family was killed and I must continually admit it. I always want to prove something, I always feel as if I have to show something. My grandma once suggested that I have an operation to change the shape of my nose a bit. What do you say to it? I have talked casually with you, haven't I... Have I managed to make myself compassionate enough for you? ...“

In this monologue Anni's Jewish-Hungarian identity problem is sketched. The problem is the one referred to in the introduction, that is the homogeneous Hungarian consciousness of being a nation does not give free play to an integrative model where people, together with their Jewish identity may feel themselves Hungarian. Anni comes from a completely assimilated Jewish family, her family were victims of the Holocaust during World War II. She feels, in fact realises, and is able to give voice to the reality that in spite of everything, despite all their suffering, the Jews appear as aliens in Hungarian society as if they wanted to mask themselves as Hungarian in order to corrode from the inside. This is the same problem on which the whole homogeneous Hungarian consciousness of being a nation is based and within a closed logic it gives argument for the leading idea of fear. Anni feels that she should choose: she can be either Jewish or Hungarian but not both in an integral way.

Bence, in his manner, declares his solidarity with Anni, he condemns anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. He talks about his father and again in a way that it seems he himself was part of the story:

„From the autumn of 1944 on he [=Dad] hid many people in the hospital. He plastered up their arms and legs and indicated the sorts of wounds on their charts that would not give rise to suspicion from the Nyilas and Germans. He and his friends went to the ghetto with Nyilas arm bands and got everybody out that they could to then hide them in the hospital. The cellar of the hospital was already overcrowded in the last weeks. When finally it was possible for them to come out even the garden was full. They threw their bandages in a heap.“

In Bence's mind further images come to life: he and his father put an old tram into motion on a side-track towards the inner town. They are joined by more and more people who fix slips of paper onto the tram. In this way they evoke their loved ones, their acquaintances. They read: „Does anyone know anything about him/her?“ Almost everybody has some loved one who has died or disappeared and this common destiny is taken over collectively and publicly.

5. Conclusion

The history of Hungary through the 20th century was a succession of fears and anxieties. There was a period when the Jews were targeted, then others and later others again and before the Holocaust yet others. Although the destruction of Hungarian Jews was no doubt as Winston Churchill stated „probably the greatest and most horrible crime ever committed in the history of the world“, Hungarian history of the 20th century cannot be viewed as the Jewish tragedy nor can it be viewed as the tragedy of those struck in 1956 or the tragedy of the churches, nor one of the many other tragedies, otherwise the country would be torn into small fragments and each

part would speak only of its own injuries. So when discussing the Holocaust it cannot be considered as the Holocaust alone but it must be considered as part of Hungarian history. The succession of fears and anxieties has to be interrupted in some way. If this process can be broken and you can live in a country without fear, then you can face the Holocaust.

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Így jöttem 'This is How I Came' (1964), 99'. Directed by Miklós Jancsó, screen-play by Gyula Hernádi from a short story of Imre Vadász, cameraman: Tamás Somló, music by Zoltán Jenei, produced by József Györffy; chief characters: Szergej Nyikonyenko, Jurij Bodovszkij, András Kozák, József Madaras

A vád 'The Prosecution' (1995), 82'. Directed by Sándor Sára, screen-play by Nándor Gion and Sándor Sára, cameraman: Balázs Sára, music by: Zoltán Jeney, produced by János Rózsa; chief characters: Kati Lázár (mother), Sándor Szakácsi (father), Zoltán Anger (Péter), Júlia Fazekas (Anna), Kitty Kéri (Eszter), Ágnes Kovács (Mária), Zoltán Varga (Russian officer)

Valahol Európában 'Somewhere in Europe' (1947). Directed by Géza Radványi, screen-play by Béla Balázs and Géza Radványi, cameraman: Barnabás Hegyi, music by Dénes Buday, produced by László Szirtes; chief characters: Artur Somlay, Miklós Gábor, Zsuzsa Bánky, György Bárdy and 25 children

Apa (Egy hit naplója) 'Dad (Diary of a faith)' (1966). Directed by István Szabó, screen-play by István Szabó, cameraman: Sándor Sára, music by János Gonda, produced by Tibor Hramitzky; chief characters: András Bálint, Miklós Gábor, Dániel Erdély, Kati Sólyom, Klári Tolnai, Zsuzsa Ráthonyi