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visions of europe

john cunningham

the cinema of ISTVÁN SZABÓ

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the cinema of
ISTVÁN SZABÓ

visions of Europe

John Cunningham



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I dedicate this book to the memory of my parents;
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and Simon Frearson, theatre director and artist.

Take my hand, let us dance in your beautiful blue.

All are sorely missed.

FOR LESLEY

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It only remains for the author to make the usual obligatory but absolutely necessary mea culpa: all the errors, stupidities and the other, no doubt, myriad shortcomings of the text are his copyright and his alone.

INTRODUCTION

Beginnings

In my earlier book, *Hungarian Cinema: From Coffeehouse to Multiplex* (2004), also published by Wallflower Press, I stated my intention to follow-up the broad brush work of this historical overview with more specific, focused works on aspects of Hungarian cinema, not quite realising at the time that I may well have made myself a hostage to fortune with such a rash promise. The present work is an attempt, in part at least, to fulfil this pledge and in doing so not only focus on a director whose work I admire immensely but one who is central to the perception and understanding of Hungarian cinema and its place in the wider world.

István Szabó is, without doubt, one of the giants of world cinema, an artist who has successfully taken his filmmaking onto the international stage, while retaining a cultural and historical sensibility rooted in the turbulent twentieth-century history of his native Hungary and Central Europe. From the keenly-drawn portraits of life in Hungary, particularly of his beloved Budapest, with films such as *Father (Apa)* and *25 Fireman's Street (Tűzoltó utca 25)*, to the much larger canvasses of his so-called Mittel-europa trilogy, *Sunshine* or *Taking Sides*, Szabó has demonstrated time and again the power and vision of a filmmaker immersed in and critically engaged with a particular culture and history but also, crucially, not limited by it.

I first became acquainted with the films of Szabó when I saw *Mephisto*, his Academy Award-winner and the first of his three films set in early twentieth-century Central Europe, many years ago and not long after it was first shown in the UK. At that time, probably in the early 1980s, Szabó's earlier work was unknown to me. I was not then an academic, nor even a student and no more than a regular, if somewhat eclectic and dilettantish cinema-goer, certainly not immersed in the manner which I am now. An acquaintance with his other films, particularly his early works, would have to wait until I had entered, like the main protagonist of *Mephisto*, into my own Faustian pact. Fortunately, I have yet to be consumed in the fires of Hell. In 1983, a little late in life perhaps, I entered academia and, with a TUC (Trades Union Congress) scholarship under my belt, enrolled as a student at Ruskin College, Oxford. Leaving the 'dreaming spires' I then graduated from Bristol University and spent almost the whole of the

1990s living and working in Hungary. There I attempted to develop my appreciation and understanding of Hungarian cinema and, although my first major focus was the work of Zoltán Fábri, anyone in a such a position could not help but be struck by the towering presence of István Szabó, and, of course, his contemporaries Miklós Jancsó and Marta Mészáros. It is only in recent years that these illustrious names have been joined and eclipsed by the genius of Béla Tarr.

Given all this it was therefore really quite surprising for me to discover that, in a career spanning more than fifty years (and still going), awards too numerous to mention and much critical acclaim, there is still no major English-language study of Szabó's work as was noted by Peter Hames in his characteristically generous review of my earlier book in the *Slavic and East European Journal*. There are some fine studies to be found in various edited collections, for example, David Robinson and Peter Hames' excellent essay on *Colonel Redl* (2004) or David Paul's insightful chapter on Szabó in the collection edited by Daniel J. Goulding (1998). Zoltán Dragon has more recently added to this body of literature with the translation of his work *The Spectral Body: Aspects of the Cinematic Oeuvre of István Szabó* (2006) which examines four films: *Father, Lovefilm* (*Szerelmesfilm*), *Mephisto* and *Sunshine*, from a Lacanian-psychoanalytical perspective (which I must confess I do not share, although reading Dragon's work has proved stimulating and rewarding). Unfortunately, other works such as József Marx's (2002) detailed biographical contribution remain accessible only to those with a comprehensive understanding of Hungarian.

Szabó himself has been generous with his time and numerous interviews can be found by trawling through the available literature; I too have benefitted from this generosity of spirit. Despite the richness of much of this material the present work is, I think, really the first to try and bring together most of the various strands of his life and work into one coherent whole and make it available to the English-language reader. The major omissions are any in-depth consideration of his TV work (which is not easily accessible and rarely, if ever, seen outside the country of its production) and his occasional ventures into the world of opera. Although a lover of opera I have not seen any of the performances and, just as important, have absolutely no competence in the field and, in venturing even the most cursory comments, I am fully aware of entering a minefield. As for the scope of the book, I cover Szabó's work from his very earliest days at the Budapest Film Academy up to and including his 2012 release, *The Door* (*Az Ajtó*).

To repeat some of what I said in my earlier book on Hungarian cinema, I am critical, in varying degrees, of much of contemporary film theory, particularly the 'brand' often referred to as 'Continental theory' and have attempted not to place my analysis within any particular theoretical framework. I have found the writings of Emanuel Levinas interesting and thought-provoking when considering notions of 'otherness' and its representation in some of Szabó's films, and on a more general level Raymond Williams remains as inspirational today as he has been throughout most of my adult life. The work of my former colleague at Sheffield Hallam University, Professor Emeritus Tom Ryall, has provided a model of how to write about an individual director and place him/her within the history of their time; as to whether or not I have succeeded in emulating him is, of course, another question. My numerous debts to other scholars

have already been noted. What is attempted in the present work is an overview of Szabó's work, contextualising this in a historical perspective along with analysis of the films. For all artists, but particularly those from Eastern Europe, I believe contextualisation is absolutely essential, even if sometimes this is achieved, given space considerations, at the expense of more detailed formal analysis. Further, I have attempted to write in a style which is open, easy to read and non-academic (however that term may be interpreted). I hope, therefore, that the text is accessible to specialist and non-specialist alike. I believe passionately in the existence of a broad readership and audience for serious writing on film beyond the boundaries of academia and its often deadening prose, a readership which academics ignore at their peril. Ultimately, I leave it up to the reader, the final judge and jury but I hope not in this case, the executioner, as to whether or not I have been, at least, partially successful in these aims.

Before closing this introduction it is necessary to make the following observations. Certain aspects of Szabó's career have, without doubt, evoked controversy, in particular the revelation, in early 2006, that he had been an informer for the Hungarian Secret Police after 1956. Although this book is not a biography (I abandoned this idea in the very earliest stages of the project) to ignore this seems wrong, particularly when it became such a public issue, and I have attempted to discuss this aspect of his life in Chapter 10. During the course of my research I spoke to a number of people, mainly from within the Hungarian film industry, seeking their responses, thoughts and opinions on this topic. A number of them did not wish to be quoted or named and I have, of course, respected their wishes. There is no doubt that some of what was told to me is speculative, quite possibly even wrong and I have tried to exclude from my account those comments that I am convinced are erroneous. Personally, I felt no desire to go into any more detail than I have, therefore this part of my book should only be regarded as a bare-bones account of what happened and an attempt, in the most general terms, to weigh up and assess a complex situation. I leave it to other writers, better equipped than me, to deal with this topic in more depth, should they feel so inclined.

On a final, more cheerful note, allow me to recount a small personal experience. On a trip to Turkey a few years ago I found myself in a busy street in Istanbul trying to locate a DVD shop where I could buy some Turkish films that friends had recommended that I ought to see. After quite some time spent in fruitless search under a glaring sun, I eventually stumbled across an emporium which turned out to be a cornucopia of delights. After spending far more than I could afford, loaded up with DVDs, I exited the shop and looked up to see what its name was. It seems entirely appropriate that this cineaste's goldmine is called 'Mephisto'.

Translation and other notes

Hungarian is a very difficult language and despite all my efforts I have never attained the degree of proficiency that I desire. Nevertheless, most of the translations from Hungarian are my own and where this is not the case it is noted in the usual manner. As is common practice I have reversed the Hungarian name order for the English-language reader. Hungarian capitalisation practice differs somewhat from English but as this creates few problems I have retained the original. A small problem exists with

the names of married women where the Hungarian practice is to give the name of the husband with the suffix 'né' (the equivalent of 'Mrs'). Thus, taking a fictional example, Nagy Jánosné is the wife of János Nagy. As this practice renders the woman almost anonymous I have tried to avoid it but in those cases where this has not been possible I have simply used the Hungarian form.

I interviewed István Szabó on a number of occasions but I have also used records of interviews by others. Where I use material from interviews Szabó conducted with other writers I have referenced these in the customary manner. In an attempt to reduce the number of references in the text, where I use my own interview material I have not followed this practice. On the whole Szabó speaks good English and this was the language we used throughout our discussions. However, in the few places where there is a lack of clarity in his use of certain expressions I have occasionally substituted my own interpretation and these are indicated in square parentheses. Also, a problem on one of the interview tapes was the background noise in the Europa Café in Budapest where we usually met. This has rendered some of his words impossible to follow; again this is indicated by the use of square parentheses.

In a part of the world where national boundaries have been, to put it mildly, somewhat changeable over the years, it is not unknown for a city or a town to have dual or even triple language names. In all cases I have tried to use the name by which the place is best known. Hungarian film titles can pose a problem when a particular film is distributed abroad. Film titles are sometimes changed for overseas distribution; likewise titles might also be changed when foreign films are distributed in Hungary and the changed title can bear very little resemblance to the original. Where this happens I have, again, tried to choose the title by which the film is best known. Following standard practice, films are dated from their year of release. Again, following standard practice, when a Hungarian film is first mentioned I use the English-language title followed by the Hungarian title in parentheses; any subsequent repetition uses only the English language. For non-Hungarian films I simply use the English title, unless its foreign language title is better known, for example, *Hiroshima mon amour*. I also use this practice in the case of some periodicals and newspapers. There seems no point, for example, in using *People's Freedom* for the daily newspaper *Népszabadság* when the Hungarian name is almost universally employed.

Anyone wishing to venture into the terrain of the Hungarian language will find no shortage of teaching books and guides on the shelves of bookshops. Alas, there is no linguistic magic wand readily available, just a lot of hard work. Personally, I have always found the Routledge book and tape *Colloquial Hungarian* by Jerry Paine very useful.

CHAPTER ONE

Born into the Storm

Oh, Europe, how many borders
And in each of them some murderers
– Atilla József, untitled poem, 1927

After watching a number of István Szabó's films from whichever period in his life, the viewer cannot help but notice the ongoing engagement with history, with Hungary, with Central Europe, with the larger concept of Europe and its various connotations (what might be called 'Europa') and with the struggles and plight of individuals caught within that rich but turbulent and often violent history. History is important to Szabó and only a few of his films are contemporary, although all of them are set in the twentieth century (only the opening scenes of *Sunshine* and *Colonel Redl* are an exception). The history depicted in these films is also the history that has shaped Central Europe as we find it today and, indeed, much of the rest of Europe. Central Europe was the place where the Second World War started and, if we extend our boundaries southward a little, also where the First World War started. It was the site of much of the Holocaust and of the various tensions of the Cold War, not least the anti-Soviet explosion in Hungary in 1956. To a large extent this is also Szabó's history and some of his films, particularly *Father* and *Sunshine*, contain numerous autobiographical elements, although Szabó has often played this down in discussions. It is therefore entirely appropriate to begin with a few biographical and historical details, for Szabó is, to borrow the title of Michael Tippets' 1944 oratorio, very much 'a child of our time'.

That turbulent history to which I have alluded struck down many millions; for the most part in Central Europe these were the 'other': the Jews, the dispossessed, the minorities, the weak and, as Leon Trotsky (also, like Szabó from an assimilated Jewish

background) asks in the opening paragraph of his autobiography, 'Life strikes the weak – and who is weaker than a child?' (1975: 1). Fortunately, weak though he may have been as a child, István Szabó, unlike many of his contemporaries, managed to survive some of the most terrible events in recorded human history, despite being thrust into the hell of war and the Holocaust at a very early age.

When Szabó was born on 18 February 1938, in the Hungarian capital Budapest, the war clouds were already forming over Europe. It is difficult to imagine a more inauspicious time to be born nor a more potentially dangerous place to be born in, particularly for someone from a Jewish background. Just four weeks after his birth, the Nazis annexed neighbouring Austria (in the movement known as the Anschluss) and Hungary's western neighbour became an openly fascist state. Alarm bells rang in some ears; just five days before Szabó's birth Hungary's most famous composer Béla Bartók wrote to a friend in Basle of 'the imminent danger that Hungary will surrender to this regime of thieves and murderers' adding that he would 'feel it my duty to emigrate, so long as that were possible' (Demény 1971: 267). One of Szabó's central protagonists, the German conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler, is forced to contemplate a similar dilemma in the film *Taking Sides* though he ultimately takes a different path to that of Bartók. In September 1938 the Nazis marched into the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia and two months later the wave of anti-semitic violence, known as Kristallnacht, swept through Germany as synagogues were attacked, Jewish shops looted and houses burned. In Hungary developments did not move with such painful and speedy momentum but all was not well.

Head of State, Regent Miklós Horthy, invited Béla Imrédy to form a new government. Previous administrations had already embarked on an alliance with Nazi Germany and Imrédy, accompanied by the Regent, visited Hitler thus affirming the pro-Axis trajectory of his government. Not content with cosying up to the Führer the new government passed the first of a series of anti-Jewish legislation. Law XV enacted on 29 May 1938, better known as the First Anti-Jewish Law, was an ominous sign for Hungary's Jewish population, but possibly one which the Szabó family felt posed no immediate threat. His family, with the exception of some of the older members, had converted to Catholicism around the time of the First World War (see Suleiman 2008: 3) and in this respect the family were part of a well-established and widespread assimilatory trend which could be found throughout Central Europe dating back to the middle and late nineteenth century and was particularly pronounced in Budapest. As the historian Paul Hanebrink points out, 'Budapest was home to one of the largest Jewish communities in Hungary, an assimilated group comprising some 20% of the city's population' (2006: 78–9). As an aside it is worth noting that, strictly speaking, Szabó was not Jewish, as both his parents, being converts themselves, were non-Jews. However, as the political situation deteriorated and the rightward drift in Hungarian society became more pronounced, such considerations became increasingly irrelevant and ultimately meaningless. As time went on the 'thieves and murderers' of Bartók's denunciation demonstrated their incapability or unwillingness to make distinctions between converts, assimilated Jews and those Jews who held on to their religious beliefs and practices.

In August 1938, French Prime Minister Edouard Daladier and his British counterpart Neville Chamberlain, signed the infamous Munich agreement with Hitler buying Europe an extra twelve months peace. There was a high price to pay, however, as first the Sudetenland, and then the rest of Czechoslovakia was thrown to the dogs. Hungary was quick to feast on the leftovers and Hungarian forces occupied much of South Slovakia (known in Hungarian as the Felvidék), an area containing a sizeable Hungarian minority, earning it a reputation, in some quarters at least, as the 'Jackal of Central Europe' (see Eby 1998: 13). In the following year the Hungarian government followed the policies of its predecessors, maintaining and deepening the alliance with the Nazis and to a lesser extent Mussolini's Italy. In February Hungary joined the Anti-Comintern Pact, then, in the following month, resigned from the League of Nations and in May, the anti-semitic screw was tightened further with the passage of the Second Anti-Jewish Law. On 1 September 1939, the Nazis invaded Poland; two days later Britain and France declared war and the Second World War had begun. This would be enough for most people to endure in a lifetime (yet worse was to come) and István Szabó was not even two years old.

Initially the war did not directly impinge on Hungary and as the Nazi tanks rolled across Europe the government maintained a formally neutral stance, even allowing Polish refugees to pass through its territory. However, it was only a matter of time before the lights went out – to use Chamberlain's famous and very apt phrase – in this small nation of around ten million, as they had already done in much of the rest of Europe. There was little at the time to indicate to the majority of the population that the nation would, within a couple of years, be plunged into war and chaos. Hungarian newsreels (*Magyar film hiradó* – Hungarian Film News) of the late 1930s show a nation at play: a hairdressing competition at Budapest's plush Gellert Hotel; the Hungarian aristocracy, accompanied by members of the government, hunting deer and wild boar; an ice-skating festival in Budapest; and, somewhat bizarrely, the latest craze to hit the USA – mud-wrestling. Only the occasional item showing German naval manoeuvres or the Italian airforce demonstrating its latest hardware, suggest that, perhaps, all is not well in the world.

For many Budapest people, at least for the middle and upper classes, life looked relatively good. Despite the shock and trauma of defeat, the post-First World War regime of Regent Horthy, a former Navy Admiral now head of state in a land-locked country, provided a degree of political stability and some prosperity, although this was accompanied by a steady rightward drift in political and social life. This situation was exacerbated by the weakness of the opposition, notably the Social Democrats, while the Communist party had been banned after the failed 1919 Workers Council Revolution and operated from exile or, precariously, as a miniscule underground grouping with very limited support from any section of the population. Hungarian governments of the inter-war years were decidedly right of centre, nationalistic, anti-semitic and authoritarian in varying degrees but never fascist, despite later Stalinist propaganda. Vehemently anti-Communist as they were, they also managed, for most of the period, to keep the more outwardly xenophobic and fascistic fringe of Hungarian politics, at least partially, in check. There was an indigenous fascist movement, consisting of a

number of often warring groups and sects. Some of these were cobbled together in March 1939 to form the Arrow Cross Party (Nyilaskeresztes Párt) under the leadership of former army officer Ferenc Szallasi. History, which often focuses on the dying months of the fascist movement in Hungary (particularly the siege of Budapest), can sometimes give the impression that the Arrow Cross were just a bunch of ill-educated, louts and psychopaths. The reality is somewhat different for the Arrow Cross had a substantial base of support, winning many votes in the former socialist-inclined working-class districts of Budapest. Overall it won 25% of the vote in the National elections in May 1939, giving it 31 seats in Parliament (see Lendvai 2003: 416). It is probably true to say that Horthy and most government ministers kept the fascists at arm's length; in fact they imprisoned Szallasi twice – for three months in 1937 and for three years from 1938 (see Romsics 1999: 185) – but in order to maintain this political distancing they had to move constantly to the right as they attempted to prevent themselves being politically outflanked.

Away from the often grubby world of Hungarian domestic politics, there was much to keep the general population occupied and to distract attention from the gathering political storm clouds. Cinema-going was the most popular leisure activity and audiences flocked to see the latest offerings from Hollywood and, depending on the gender of the spectator, to ogle at Hungarian heart throb Pál Jávor (a Magyar David Niven/Douglas Fairbanks) or pin-up girl Katalin Karady (who bore a passing resemblance to Joan Crawford). Theatre audiences saw plays by Ferenc Molnár, Kálmán Miksáth and others, while operettas also remained popular. The working class watched their favourite football teams, the formidable MTK (once coached by Englishman Jimmy Hogan), their great rivals Ferencváros, or one of the many other teams in and around Budapest. Others went to one of the many Budapest thermal baths and pools but only the wealthy could afford to travel abroad, often spending their summers at such favoured destinations as the Italian resort of Abbazia (now Opatija in Croatia). Car ownership was very limited and only a dream for most people. Solace, however, could be found at the cinema where one of the most popular films of the 1930s was *Dream Car (Meseautó)*, directed by Béla Gaál. Cars were so rare that the few owners had little trouble adjusting to a new law which ordered driving on the right-hand side of the road as Hungary fell into line with the new (Nazi introduced) policy in neighbouring Austria.

Amateur film clubs flourished and those Hungarians who could afford it purchased the latest Zeiss Movikon K8 or an Agfa Movex 8. By 1938, 419,000 radios were registered in Hungary (television would only arrive in the mid-1950s) and about one in seven of the Budapest population was paying for a radio licence (see Romsics 1999: 180), although radio ownership in the countryside was considerably lower. Those who had a radio might listen on Sunday mornings to the anti-semitic ravings of the Protestant Bishop László Ravasz (see Porter 2008: 37) but no doubt some preferred the fairly high-brow diet of classical music, drama and readings of channels Budapest I and II, the former also offering jazz and two ten-minute slots of sport per day. Reading tastes were catered for by a wide range of magazines, journals and newspapers, from the intellectual *A Toll (The Pen)* and *Nyugat (West)* – replaced in 1941 by the *Magyar Csillag [Hungarian Star]* to the more downmarket *Színhazi Magazin (Theatre*

Magazine) or *Rádió Ujság* (*Radio News*). Newspapers such as *Pesti Hírlap* (*Pest Newspaper*), *Uj Nemzedek* (*New Generation*) and *Pesti Napló* (*Pest Daily*) flourished and, in all, there were 1,934 newspapers and periodicals printed in Hungary in 1938 (see Romsics 1999: 174). Many of these publications would be read by journalists, socialites, writers and businessmen in Budapest's thriving coffee-houses, convivial places where the 'chattering classes' would thrash out the issues of the day (or at least give themselves the illusion that this was the case) and exchange gossip over a cup of coffee or a glass of one of Hungary's many excellent wines. Yet Hungary was a country of often sharp contrasts. It was only a relatively short train journey eastwards but out on the Great Hungarian Plain the prosperity and sophistication of the Budapest middle classes stood in sharp contrast to the grinding poverty and illiteracy of the countryside where impoverished smallholders and landless labourers struggled to make ends meet in a social and economic environment which still bore the traces of feudalism. This was the world described by the writer Zsigmond Móricz or the so-called Village-writers or Populists, as 'the stormy corner' where life was hard, brutal and often cheap.¹

Budapest is one of the most beautiful European capital cities. A place where peoples and cultures have met and mixed, and sometimes clashed, for hundreds of years. Officially the city came into being in 1873 when Buda, Obuda and Pest (the former two on the western bank of the Danube, the latter on the east) were amalgamated. From the late nineteenth century to the end of the First World War – the final years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire – Budapest became a major centre of industry, science, arts and culture. It was a position which declined somewhat after the First World War but even so it was and still remains the centre of Hungarian life, culture and the arts, dominating the country in a way that few other European capitals do.

It is probably true that at first the Szabó family felt no immediate threat to their livelihood and well-being. Despite being born in Budapest, István was to spend much of the first six years of his life in the mining town of Tatabánya, approximately 60km west of Budapest, where his grandfather, Dr. Emil Vita, had a medical practice. The doctor was particularly well-known in the area as their first doctor and the man responsible for establishing the public baths. It was a happy time: 'I think my childhood was very beautiful. Certainly the first five years were wonderful', he recollected in an interview (Marx 2002: 22). Szabó's father was also a doctor and the family lived in modest prosperity in Budapest and were one of a large number of assimilated professional families. Szabó has often remarked that if he had not become a filmmaker he would have been a doctor nevertheless the family tradition in medicine was to leave its mark on him, even though he chose a radically different career path. In a number of his films doctors play prominent roles and in three of his four acting appearances (some of which are relatively brief), he appears as a doctor.

Jews, assimilated or otherwise (but overwhelmingly the former), played a vital role in the life of the metropolis; they occupied positions in business, the legal profession, journalism, the arts, academia and medicine. Indeed, it is certainly the case that without Jewish input in so many varied areas of cultural, social and economic life Hungary would not have been the country it was. In particular Budapest would not have been one of the centres of art and culture in Central Europe in the early part of

the twentieth century. Some key industries were owned by Jews – the huge Manfred Weiss ironworks on Csepel Island for example – while Ferenc Korin, the head of an industrial and financial complex was the country's leading businessman. Although in the 1920s and 1930s successive Hungarian governments had not made life easy for Jews there was (with one notable exception) no outright anti-semitic legislation until 1938. Assimilation was seen by many Hungarian Jews as the passport to acceptance, security and prosperity and, as the poet Heinrich Heine once remarked, 'the baptism certificate is the admission ticket to European culture' (quoted in Lendvai 2003: 346). As a result of this widespread and apparently successful assimilation, Hungary, for many years, was considered a safe place for Jews. It is almost as if there was an informal pact between the state and its Jewish citizens. The latter would abandon many aspects of their customs and religion and assimilate while the former guaranteed their access to some of the levels of power, social status, wealth and respectability. However, the fragility and ultimately the hollowness of this assumption was to be dramatically exposed in the inter-war years and particularly during the Second World War, something which Szabó's film *Sunshine* addresses in a very direct and quite detailed manner.

Orthodox Jewry had a presence but assimilated Jews were dominant while non-mainstream forms of Judaic practice, such as Hassidism, were confined to the margins and found mainly in the more remote areas of Transylvania, the former Hungarian territory lost to Romania after the end of the First World War. Between the wars the social climate in Hungary became increasingly anti-semitic, fuelled partly by right-wing resentments against the perceived preponderance of Jews in left-wing movements and the emergence of the classic scapegoat phenomenon where the Jews were held responsible for the failure to hold on to 'Greater Hungary', dismembered by the Treaty of Trianon after the First World War.² As one of the characters in *Sunshine* remarks, anti-semitism was a 'philosophy of philistines'; alas, it was the philistines who increasingly ruled the roost.

The First Anti-Jewish Law (Law XV) was enacted in May 1938, although there had been a much earlier law – the Numerus Clausus – passed in 1920 and designed primarily to restrict Jewish entry into the Universities, something it singularly failed to do as the number of Jewish students actually increased in the 1920s and 1930s. The Numerus Clausus fell into disuse, partly due to international criticism; unfortunately the same cannot be said for the 1938 Law. The Law limited Jewish participation in business, the legal profession and the entertainment industry but overall its impact was perhaps limited, not least by the ambivalence of Horthy and a number of his cohort who knew that the Jews were important to the Hungarian economy. Horthy's attitude towards Hungarian Jewry was ambiguous. Stories abound of his friendly relations with key Jewish families, yet he appears to have done little to stem the rise of anti-semitism in this crucial period, nor did he resist the ever-growing alignment with Nazi Germany (despite his well-attested personal loathing for Hitler), and as the 1930s progressed it is true to say that the situation began to slip increasingly out of whatever control or influence he had.³ When the Nazi tanks rolled into Poland in September 1939 few realised that the Nazi-Hungarian alliance, over which Horthy, perhaps reluctantly presided, was to spell disaster for his country and the almost total destruction of a way of life.

Viewed in retrospect and at a historical distance the events that followed had an almost inexorable logic. The Hungarian government refused to allow German troops to use Hungarian territory in their attack on Poland (Hungary having now acquired, through territorial annexations, a short common border with Poland) but continued to pursue an increasingly anti-semitic policy at home. Economically Hungary was now tied to the Third Reich and was a major exporter of agricultural and other goods and raw materials, for which the Nazi government frequently did not pay. In the corridors of Budapest's elegant Parliament building diplomats and politicians were divided, admirers of the Nazis were easy to find, but Anglophilia was also a strong current both in government circles and academia. Many writers, such as Antal Szerb and Sándor Marai, were notable Anglophiles. Nevertheless, the desire to regain the territories lost at the Treaty of Trianon, particularly Transylvania, overrode most alignments and sentiments, national or international. Given that Hungary on its own could do little – Hungarian irredentism was once derided by the writer László Németh as 'sabre-rattling without the sabre' (see Sándor 1997: 11) – many were drawn into the Nazi embrace, now the only power that could arbitrate on issues of territoriality and sovereignty in Central and Eastern Europe.

The dark side of this Faustian pact, a theme which recurs in a number of Szabó's films, most obviously in *Mephisto*, was overlooked or ignored by many when, following the First Vienna Award on 2 November 1938, Hungarian troops occupied (or liberated, depending on your point of view) territory previously lost at Trianon. The Felvidék, the southern part of Slovakia, was the first area to be taken over. This was followed by the occupation of Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia in March 1939. The Second Vienna Award on 30 August 1940 returned a huge chunk of Transylvania to Hungarian sovereignty, since the Treaty of Trianon a part of Romania. Regent Horthy used the opportunity to mount, yet again, his famous white horse and lead his ill-equipped and unopposed army, this time through the streets of Kolosvár (Cluj Napoca), where cheering crowds (of Hungarians) lined the streets. The occupation of surrounding territories was so great that by the end of 1941, Hungary had increased its territory from 93,073 to 171,753 square kilometres (see Romsics 1999: 204). To some, the pact with the Nazis was now paying dividends.

Hungary's position, however, was becoming increasingly complex and difficult, not helped by the rapidity of change at the top level of government. Béla Imrédy lasted barely a year, being replaced by the most Anglophile of Hungarian Prime Ministers, Count Pál Teleki, a conservative, Head of the Boy Scouts movement in Hungary, but also deeply anti-semitic. Committed to maintaining Hungarian independence and to avoiding war he took his own life when Axis troops crossed Hungarian territory to invade Yugoslavia shortly after Hungary had signed a friendship pact with their neighbour to the south. A few days later Hungarian troops would join in the attack on Yugoslavia and occupy those areas where a Hungarian minority lived – around Szabadka (Subotica in Serbia) and Újvidék (Novi Sad in Serbia) as well as small areas in Croatia and Slovenia. The die was now well and truly cast. Into Teleki's shoes stepped László Bárdossy and it was he who crossed the Rubicon by presiding over the suicidal decision to join the Nazis in their attack on the Soviet Union (Operation Barbarossa commenced on 22 June 1941). This decision was partly provoked

by an unmarked aircraft which dropped some bombs on the city of Kassa (Kosice in present-day Slovakia). The aircraft were perceived to be Soviet but there still exists some doubt as to their origin. On 7 December, apparently at Stalin's insistence, Britain declared war on Hungary, followed a week later by Hungary's declaration of war on the USA, much to the puzzlement and bemusement of White House staff. Rarely in history can tragedy and farce have been so intermingled.

From every standpoint imaginable, the decision to join the Axis attack on the Soviet Union was a disaster but it was now time to repay Hitler. The Devil now demanded payment of the bill, yet Hungary was a debtor that was ill-prepared and ill-equipped to respond. Its ability and potential to wage a long and demanding war was limited in the extreme. The Hungarian Army lacked adequate training, was poorly equipped and suffered dreadfully in the terrible conditions on the Eastern Front; morale was low and there was little overt enthusiasm at the front or back home for a war that many thought was none of Hungary's business. Initially some 40,000 Hungarian troops joined the Blitzkrieg on the Soviet Union but by the end of 1941, when the Nazi offensive had become bogged down at the gates of Leningrad, Moscow and Stalingrad, Hitler demanded more troops. The early part of 1942 saw a huge mobilisation and some 207,000 were in position by the end of the summer. The winter was especially harsh and the Hungarian troops were ill-prepared for either sustained conflict or the extremities of the Russian winter when temperatures reached as low as -40° . They had few anti-tank guns, a vital component in this increasingly mechanised war, while provision of food and other vital supplies was often erratic. Defending a 200-kilometre front just south of Voronezh they suffered huge losses when a Soviet offensive broke through their lines in January 1943. As news of the catastrophe filtered through to Hungary, often via the broadcasts of the BBC, some people started to realise the enormous price they would now have to pay for the alliance with Nazi Germany.

Conditions at home deteriorated. As early as September 1941 bread and flour was rationed, followed by milk in May 1942 and meat in January 1943, while the distribution of fuel was already tightly controlled (see Romsics 1999: 207). To add to the gloom, the Allied Air Forces – the Americans during the day, the British at night – began to bomb selected targets in Hungary, particularly in the Budapest region; Hungarians now became accustomed to the blackout and air raids became common occurrences. There was much to grumble about, although eye witnesses bear testimony that many Budapest citizens seemed remarkably unaware of the approach of the Red Army. One such witness was future film director Karoly Makk, then a young man who arrived in Budapest in 1944. The son of a cinema projectionist in the countryside, in the 'big city' for the first time, he once told me how he found little evidence of any military threat and that everyone appeared surprisingly calm and peaceful. Even when Budapest came under direct siege there appeared to be a reluctance on the part of many in the population to accept reality (see, for example, Ungváry 2005: 220).

The Soviet victory at Stalingrad was the major turning point in the war on the Eastern Front and from this time on the German Army, along with the remnants of the Hungarian Army, were in, more-or-less, continuous retreat. Anxious to save something out of the deepening catastrophe, Hungarian diplomats began to seek talks with

the Allies to conclude a separate peace which would get Hungary out of the war. These attempts came to nothing, partly because of Hungarian insistence on maintaining present borders, something which the Allies would not contemplate. With numerous Nazi sympathisers in positions of power and with its extensive spy network in Hungary, Hitler was soon alerted. Alarmed at the increasing unreliability of its ally, the Nazis put in motion Operation Margarethe and occupied Hungary on 19 March 1944.

For Budapest's Jewish population what hope there was dwindled rapidly. A Second Anti-Jewish Law was introduced on 4 May 1939 creating even more restrictions for the Jewish population. The Third and final Anti-Jewish Law (introduced on 8 August 1941) was, arguably, the most 'Nazi' of all – marriage and sexual relations between Jews and non-Jews were branded as 'racial pollution' (see Romsics 1999: 207) and all Jewish property was confiscated. To add to this burden of suffering many Jewish men, although excluded from military service, had been conscripted into Labour Battalions for some time. They were often dispatched to the front to perform backbreaking work on inadequate rations, in all weathers and often under fire. It is estimated that between 25–30,000 were conscripted in this way, of which only around 6–7,000 survived.

With the occupation of the country by the Nazis the situation for Jews became absolutely desperate. In the wake of the Wehrmacht came Adolf Eichmann's Sonderkommando (SS Special Units) whose main purpose was to implement the Nazi's Final Solution. The repression against Jews took a symbolic but also very visible turn when, on 31 March 1944, less than two weeks into the occupation, the authorities ordered the compulsory wearing of the yellow Star of David on outer garments. Jews had to undergo a form of house arrest, only being allowed out for two hours a day to purchase provisions but even this limited concession became redundant when, from the middle of May, ghettos were established for all Budapest's Jewish population. Empty Jewish apartments and property were given to Christians or taken over by the authorities; looting and theft were widespread.

Deportations of Jews began in May and continued for about six weeks. It is estimated that between 15 May and 8 July around 435,000 Jews were transported to, primarily, Auschwitz before the practice was stopped by the intervention of Horthy. (This is the figure for the whole of Hungarian territory as it stood in the summer of 1944; the figure for Budapest is around 10,000. It does not include those who died in forced labour. See Stark 1993: 134–43 for a more detailed breakdown.) Quite why Horthy intervened in this way is not known for sure but it is likely that he was prompted by the news of the Allied landings in Normandy (6 June 1944). By the middle of 1944, with the Western Allies established on the European mainland and the Soviet Army at the borders of Hungary, the writing was now on the wall for the Nazis. It would only be a matter of time before the Third Reich collapsed and the thought must surely have been in the back of the Regent's mind that he might be put on trial for war crimes (he did later appear, briefly, at the Nuremberg Trials).

On 27 August, units of the Red Army crossed the border into Hungary through the Oituz Pass. The situation was now moving rapidly towards chaos. The Nazis leaned on Horthy to appoint Szallasi as head of state and although he complied, and at the same time resigned his post, this did not prevent a Nazi Commando unit abducting the

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