



Fateless

Fateless

aka Sorstalanság

Film Guide **Tony Tracy**

Fateless aka Sorstalanság

Director Lajos Koltai
Hungary-Germany-UK/134 mins/2005

Cast

Marcell Nagy Gyuri Kovcs
Aron Dimeny Bandi Citrom
Andras M. Kecskes Finn
Jozsef Gyabronka Unlucky Man
Endre Harkanyi Old Kollmann
Daniel Craig US Army Sergeant

Crew

Director Lajos Koltai
Screenwriter Imre Kertész based on his novel 'Sorstalansag'
Music Ennio Morricone
Cinematography Gyula Pados
Editor Hajnal Sello
Production Designer Tibor Lazar

Director Lajos Koltai

Koltai was an internationally esteemed Director of Photography before he made his directorial debut with *Fateless*. This background helps explain the powerful visual quality of a film in which images have as much, if not more, power than words or even plot.

At 14, Koltai shot his first film on Super 8 – made on holiday with his family. At school he wrote and directed a number of films with his classmates. Graduating from the Hungarian Film Academy, Koltai eventually came to work in the state television station.

Koltai finally came to work for director Istvan Svabo in 1974, shooting a film for him for television. This resulted in a collaboration that lasted for fourteen films. His work was recognized when Svabo's 1980 film *Mephisto* was nominated for a best foreign language film Oscar.

Recognised by other directors, Koltai came to America and worked on such films as *Max* (2002) *When a Man Loves a Woman* (1994), *Wrestling Ernest Hemingway* (1993) and *White Palace* (1990). He divides his time between Europe and America and most recently received an Academy Award cinematography nomination for the Italian film *Malena* (2002)

His second film as a director is *Evening* which features Meryl Streep and Toni Collette and will be released this year.

Writer Imre Kertész

At the age of 14, Imre Kertész was deported with other Hungarian Jews during World War II to Auschwitz and then Buchenwald, from which he was liberated in May 1945. Returning to Hungary, he worked as a journalist for the newspaper *Világosság* but was dismissed and turned to translation as a means of supporting himself. Kertész is best known for his first novel, *Sorstalanság* (*Fateless*), which he completed in the mid-1960s but was

unable to publish for nearly a decade. When the novel finally appeared in 1975, it received little critical attention. With the end of communism came the publication in 1990 of the first German-language edition of the novel, and his reputation soon began to grow in Europe. The novel was later published in more than 10 languages and won him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2002.

"I have heard it said before, and now I can attest to its truth: narrow prison walls cannot set limits to the flights of our imagination."

(*Fateless* - novel- page 188)

"We can never start a new life. We can only continue the old one. I took my own steps. No one else did. And I remained honest in the end to my given fate. . . . Why can't you see that if there is such a thing as fate, then there is no freedom? If, on the other hand...there is freedom, then there is no fate. That is...we ourselves are fate."

(*Fateless* pp. 188-189).

Synopsis

The story of *Fateless* begins with the removal of a young boy - Gyuri Köves - from his family and home in Budapest in 1944. He is deported by train to the concentration camps at Auschwitz (Poland) and then to Buchenwald (Germany). Close to death on several occasions he barely survives the hard labour and inhuman conditions of the camp. He is liberated by American troops in 1945, one of whom advises the now barely recognisable boy, not to return home to Hungary but to escape to the USA, go to college and try to make a new life for himself. The boy however decides to go back to Budapest where he is met with a mixture of indifference, hostility and curiosity. Despite the horror of his experiences he is strangely unable to satisfy people's expectations of his suffering.



Historical Context

The Holocaust and Hungary

The film deals with a small story from one of the most disturbing and distasteful events of human history; the 'Holocaust'. The Holocaust is the name applied to the massive, highly organised 'ethnic cleansing' or genocide of minority groups by Germany's ruling Nazi party from 1939 until its defeat in 1945. By far the biggest group targeted by the Nazis were the Jews; some 6 million Jews from Germany, Poland and other conquered territories were executed during this time. Including all the minority groups and individuals killed under the Nazi regime brings the total figure to between 9 and 11 million – considerably more than twice the population of Ireland.

The Hungarian government had begun deporting Jews on the request of the German government as early as

1942. Although a subsequent request was refused, and the majority of the Jewish population believed they had escaped the fate of their fellow Jews in Poland and elsewhere, this process was greatly enlarged upon with the invasion and defeat of Hungary by the Nazis in 1944. By the end of June that year half of all Hungary's Jews (who had numbered 825,000) were deported to Auschwitz. The pro Nazi government who took control continued to persecute and execute Jews until the end of the war, by which time 564,500 Hungarian Jews had been sent to their deaths.

The Concentration camp at Buchenwald

- Weimar is a famous German town known for centuries for its cultural life. Goethe, Schiller, Franz Liszt, and Bach lived in Weimar. Goethe used to climb the Ettersberg and sit

and work under a beech tree. It was this place which was chosen by the Nazis to establish the concentration camp of Buchenwald (Beech Wood)

- The gates of the concentration camp bore the inscription: Jedem das Seine ("To each according to his merits")
- Between July 1937 and April 1945, approximately 250,000 people were incarcerated in Buchenwald by the Nazi regime. The number of deaths is estimated at 56,000.
- Many thousands of Jews arrived at Buchenwald from Hungary and various eastern camps in 1944 and 1945. Most had been evacuated by railroad from Auschwitz and other camps threatened by the advancing Red Army.
- American soldiers liberated the camp and its remaining 21,000 inmates (including 900 children) on April 11th, 1945.



Story Coming of Age

The film begins with an image of a happy, healthy teenager, on his way home. “I didn’t go to school today,” he tells us simply. Spying from behind a partition he sees his father and step-mother in conversation with a businessman with whom they are trading jewellery in return for assistance. His father, following the increased pressure on Jews since the German invasion of Hungary, is about to be sent to a labour camp. Gyuri would rather play cards with the pretty girl upstairs. This is our introduction to the story’s hero; a dreamy boy who will soon be exposed to the harshest of human experiences.

The centrality of so young a figure in the story makes *Fateless* a kind of ‘coming-of-age’ tale; albeit in the most

extreme circumstances imaginable. It begins with a warning from his uncles that his carefree days are behind him. They have no idea of the irony of their words. His move from childhood to manhood will be swift and savage.

Central to their advice is the issue of Gyuri’s religion; his identity and his Jewishness are indivisible. At a sad ‘last supper’ for Gyorgy’s father, his uncle tells him that he is “part of the common Jewish fate.” What does that mean? For the uncle it means “a millennium of continuing persecution” doled out by God in reprisal for the sins of our ancestors.” In short, the uncle is saying that the inescapable fate of the Jews, as God’s chosen people, is suffering.

In a paradoxical sense this gives the uncle, a religious believer, some hope.

That is, hope beyond the immediate horror of what is happening to the Jews for no comprehensible reason exists at this time. It must be understood, he proposes, as some part of God’s great plan because it cannot be explained otherwise.

Gyuri neither accepts nor denies this interpretation. He is a Jew who does not speak Hebrew; he cannot pray in the language of his God. He remains passive; unmoved; neither heroic nor victimized. He is sent to the camps for being Jewish, yet it is not a religion he feels a strong sense of connection to. What does it mean to be Jewish? Why should it mark him out to be sent away?

This sense of distance and naivety is central to the character of Gyuri. When he is first arrested by the policeman and later encouraged to ‘escape’ he shows no emotion; no sense of really understanding his situation. He is borne on the tide of history; confused about whether he can or should escape. There is a touching scene where the boys lie about their ages so that they can work. When the German officer believes Gyuri’s lie he is delighted; he has passed a test he does not yet suspect the meaning of. The boy in him clings to the adventure.

Later he will decide to accept what he calls ‘the secret’ of his universe, that anything can happen at any time, including death.

Story In the Camps

Fateless is unusual in the way it renders the experience of the camps. It does not try to communicate their horror in some objective way; showing us, sickening us. To be sure the horror is there but it is available to us through the point of view of Gyuri; coloured by his dimming consciousness. It gives an other-worldly quality to a good deal of the action; an almost poetic distance. As he becomes hungrier and more exhausted the camp is shown in shorter, less complete ‘impressions’

that are virtually wordless. A number of scenes at the centre of the film powerfully convey his diminished humanity and loss of perspective.

The first is a strange, only half explained scene where the prisoners are standing out in a courtyard. Why are they here? Has someone escaped? It is not made clear. In a half light; somewhere between dark and light, in the glistening mud the prisoners stand. Barely. Until morning? For an eternity. Their vertically striped uniforms seem to blow in a breeze like reeds, but they sway from pitiful weakness and exhaustion. One is continually on the verge of breaking; that is of falling over. He steadies. Another finally falls - a dull thump on the muddy earth. Dead?

In the next scene, sometime later, Gyuri's only friend **Bandi Citron** gives out to him for not washing and taking care of himself. Bandi is something of an older brother to Gyuri. A veteran of the Ukraine prisoner of war camps he preaches self-discipline and order as the way to survive. A strong spirit cultivates a strong body: "self-esteem is more important than bread and soup," because having a will to live is an advantage over those who have surrendered to their fate. But though he tried hard to practice the advice at first, now the younger boy is beginning to break down. "I am cold," is all he can manage. Bandi stops yelling, and slips his own jacket over the boy. Gyuri is losing the fight, exhausted, and in crippling pain from an infection which has set into his knee.

In a short wordless scene we see an emaciated Gyuri sitting on a heap of rubbish during a break from work. He has a ghostly pallor. He stares at a well-fed German officer hungrily gulping his lunch. These humans sit near each other but live in different worlds. Unconsciously, he begins to imitate the officer's munching; eating vicariously. The German senses the boy's intense stare and turns away from him. It is an

image that is both specific to the setting and universal in its implications.

Next; Gyuri is tossed onto the back of a cart carrying naked and twisted bodies. Once again the distance between life and death is narrowed to so fine a difference that we are not sure what we are looking at. What's going on here? Is he being taken to the gas chambers? He sees the world upside down; a powerful visual equivalent for the capricious, inexplicable nature of this parallel world he lives in. In fact he is taken to the infamous showers; but they turn out to be only that, showers.

What is remarkable about these and other scenes in the camp is how much is left to our imagination. They begin after the action has commenced and conclude with often unresolved meanings. The story telling is linear, but not consecutive.

Story Return to Budapest

On returning to Budapest Gyuri has three encounters which show us how he has changed: on the bus; looking for Bandi Citron and finally reaching his old apartment building, meeting with his 'uncles'.

Refusing his 'fate' once more, Gyuri walks away from the train he and other prisoners are being directed towards (in comparison with the train he innocently boarded earlier with a Jewish crowd). We are stuck by his presence in a city where life has simply continued mostly unchanged while he was in the concentration camp. He still wears his prison uniform jacket and yet a woman on the bus ignores him while a well-fed and officious conductor harangues him for a ticket. After all he has been through! A kinder man pays his fare and asks him about the camps. But Gyuri will not declare his experience as extreme or unimaginable; to the man's disappointment. What does he feel on his safe return to Budapest? 'Hatred'.

It is to Bandi Citron's house he first goes. His relatives are afraid and

suspicious. A knock on the door will never be the same again. Who is this? Bandi is not here. "Come back later", his mother tells him, more in hope than conviction. What happened to Bandi? Did his discipline spare him? We never find out. As the mother calls after Gyuri, he simply walks away. He has no interest in talking about the camps.

Finally he reaches home. After discovering his family apartment now belongs to someone else – as if he had ceased to exist – he discovers old Jewish neighbours are still living down the hall. They are delighted to see him and want to know all about it. But again he disappoints them; no it is not like hell because hell doesn't exist whereas the camps do. They send him off in search of his mother; he has made a vague insinuation that they, and others, simply sat idly by when he and others were deported. It didn't have to be the way it was. There is no fate, only choice. This is uncomfortable for these two old men who have trouble remembering the name of the concentration camp where his father died, or his mother's new husband. They'd sooner deal in generalities.

As he walks away from the building to search for his mother and begin his future, Gyuri is reminded of the concentration camp. It is the time of day he liked there most; the time between work and the night-time roll call, when the prisoners would congregate, talk, and console each other. It is a strange and unsettling admission.

Narrating the Holocaust Representing the 'Un-Representable'

Claude Lanzmann, who made the thirteen hour documentary 'Shoah' has said, "Fiction [about the Holocaust] is a transgression. I deeply believe that there are some things that cannot and should not be represented."

Lanzmann's monumental film was a series of interviews with survivors of the

camp. The horror of their experiences, the depravity of their circumstances, the inhumanity of the Nazi's was, in his mind, impossible to re-present (represent). Why? Because all representations would be an **approximation**, a fictional telling of something so serious, that it could not be properly imagined. But more than that. By re-creating or creating a story around the Holocaust, a film maker could claim to understand what happened in some way; could have some **mastery** over its horror. For Lanzmann this would be an intolerable arrogance; an insult to those who actually experienced the camps. Finally, a representation would take away the primacy of the **memory** of the survivors and the imagination required by those who came afterwards; us, the audience. It would make us lazy consumers of yet more images; shocking perhaps, but no different from all the many images we see on TV and film.

Style

Fateless shares obvious similarities in setting and theme with the growing number of films set in concentration camps during World War II. Perhaps the best known of such films is *Schindler's List*, along with *The Pianist*. (see list below)

The film is told in series of episodes; fragments which become less coherent, mirroring the growing blurring of the boy's consciousness. The camera fades out; the moment is gone but its trace remains. Often the scenes are more visual than narrative. Their meaning is more poetic than literal. This is particularly true of the scenes towards the end of the film where Gyuri is beginning to lose consciousness.

Along with **editing** and **pace**, **colour** plays an important role in creating mood and atmosphere. The early and late scenes set in Budapest are sepia-toned, warm and comfortable suggestive of sunlight. By contrast, once Gyuri arrives in Auschwitz the colour

slowly drains away from the images as it drains from his face and life. This section of the film is mostly grey/blue, almost monochromatic, suggesting cold and death.

The film makes no use of flashbacks or archive footage. Unusually, it was shot chronologically, with the director following the journey of the central character as it was evolving. This is uncommon in a film of this scale where scenes would be shot 'out of sequence' to save time and effort. Thus, for example, the scenes in Budapest at the family home would ordinarily be shot together, back-to-back. Here the director chose not to do this in order to maintain the truth of the performances.

The film opens and closes with a variation on the same image; as he walks across a square in Budapest he smoothes down his billowing coat; there's a yellow star pinned to his lapel

He rebels at playing the role of the victim and says, "there is nothing too unimaginable to endure". When asked about the atrocities, he talks of his happiness. "The next time I am asked", he says, "I ought to speak about that, the happiness of the concentration camp. If indeed I am asked. And provided I myself don't forget"

Imre Kertész on the writing of Fateless

"If I look back now and size up honestly the situation I was in at the time [living in post-war Communist Hungary], I have to conclude that in the West, in a free society, I probably would not have been able to write the novel known by readers today as 'Fateless' the novel singled out by the Swedish Academy for the highest honor.

No, I probably would have aimed at something different. Which is not to say that I would not have tried to get at the truth, but perhaps at a different kind of truth. In the free marketplace of books and ideas, I, too, might have

wanted to produce a showier fiction. For example, I might have tried to break up time in my novel, and narrate only the most powerful scenes. But the hero of my novel does not live his own time in the concentration camps, for neither his time nor his language, not even his own person, is really his. He doesn't remember; he exists. So he has to languish, poor boy, in the dreary trap of linearity, and cannot shake off the painful details. Instead of a spectacular series of great and tragic moments, he has to live through everything, which is oppressive and offers little variety, like life itself.

But the method led to remarkable insights. Linearity demanded that each situation that arose be completely filled out. It did not allow me, say, to skip cavalierly over twenty minutes of time, if only because those twenty minutes were there before me, like a gaping, terrifying black hole, like a mass grave. I am speaking of the twenty minutes spent on the arrival platform of the Birkenau extermination camp - the time it took people clambering down from the train to reach the officer doing the selecting.

[. . .] I came upon a series of photographs of human cargo arriving at the Birkenau railroad platform - photographs taken by an SS soldier and found by American soldiers in a former SS barracks in the already liberated camp at Dachau. I looked at these photographs in utter amazement. I saw lovely, smiling women and bright-eyed young men, all of them well-intentioned, eager to cooperate. Now I understood how and why those humiliating twenty minutes of idleness and helplessness faded from their memories. And when I thought how all this was repeated the same way for days, weeks, months and years on end, I gained an insight into the mechanism of horror; I learned how it became possible to turn human nature against one's own life.

[. . .] Now the only thing to reflect on is where we go from here. The problem of Auschwitz is not whether to draw a line under it, as it were; whether to preserve its memory or slip it into the appropriate pigeonhole of history; whether to erect a monument to the murdered millions, and if so, what kind. The real problem with Auschwitz is that it happened, and this cannot be altered - not with the best, or worst, will in the world."

Extracts taken from Imre Kertész's lecture accepting The Nobel Prize in Literature 2002¹

Films on the Holocaust

Europa Europa (1991)

A Jewish boy separated from his family in the early days of WWII poses as a German orphan and is taken into the heart of the Nazi world as a 'war hero' and eventually becomes a Hitler Youth.

Life Is Beautiful (1998)

A Jewish man has a wonderful romance with the help of his humour, but must use that same quality to protect his son in a Nazi death camp.

The Pianist (2003)

A brilliant pianist, a Polish Jew, witnesses the restrictions Nazis place on Jews in the Polish capital, from restricted access to the building of the Warsaw ghetto. As his family is rounded up to be shipped off to the Nazi labour camps, he escapes deportation and eludes capture by living in the ruins of Warsaw.

Survivors of the Holocaust (1996)

Documentary blends personal accounts of what happened before, during and after WWII.

The Last Days (1998)

Five Jewish Hungarians, now U.S. citizens, tell their stories: before March, 1944, when Nazis began to exterminate Hungarian Jews, months in concentration camps, and visiting childhood homes more than 50 years later.

Schindler's List (1993)

Oskar Schindler uses Jews to start a factory in Poland during the war. He witnesses the horrors endured by the Jews, and starts to save them.

Night and Fog (1955)

Filmed in 1955 at the post-war site of Auschwitz, the film combines colour footage with black and white newsreels and stills to tell the story of not just only the Holocaust, but the horror of man's brutal inhumanity.

Good Evening Mr Wallenberg (1990)

Raoul Wallenberg travels to German-occupied Budapest during WWII in order to effectively intervene in the fate of trapped Hungarian Jews, by providing them with safe passage to Sweden.

Judgment at Nuremberg (1961)

In 1948, an American court in occupied Germany tries four Nazi judges for war crimes.

Further Information

Holocaust Encyclopaedia

<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/>

A list of Holocaust-related sites

<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/holocaust.htm>

Nazi concentration camp badges

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nazi_concentration_camp_badges



¹ http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2002/kertesz-lecture.html

