

FILM REVIEW

56/50: AMERICAN DOCUMENTARIES OF THE HUNGARIAN REVOLUTION AND WAR OF INDEPENDENCE OF 1956

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The fiftieth anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution received worldwide attention: Over 100 conferences were held and more than two dozen scholarly publications appeared in English. In the modern world of digital media, it is hardly surprising that documentaries were also made, but it was a pleasant surprise to see four of those coming from North American filmmakers. The 1956 Revolution is one of the formative events of both Hungarian and world history, and it has been the subject of earlier American documentaries. *Revolt in Hungary* and *Hungary in Flames* both aired in 1958, and both were compiled from archival footage smuggled out of Hungary in November and December 1956. Between 1958 and 1986, four additional programs were made for American television.¹ Yet, what we saw on the fiftieth anniversary is something quite different.

The period since the end of the cold war has seen a revolution in filmmaking and distribution. With the development of HD and computer technology, it has become easier to shoot and produce films, and the collapse of the Iron Curtain has made hitherto unavailable information (and people) more easily accessible to American filmmakers. The Internet serves as a medium for both advertising and distributing films, sometimes even illegally. The measure for success is now performance at film festivals, although more and more documentaries hit the movie screens as well. The four films under review here represent four different approaches towards filmmaking, advertising, and distribution. What they do have in common is reliable storytelling and wide appeal, which reaches, or should reach, into American classrooms.

Freedom's Fury (2006)²

Two young Canadians, Colin Keith Gray and Megan Raney Aarons, commonly known as "the Sibs" (they are brother and sister), started work on their film in 2002.

¹*Hungary: Return of the Terror* (1958), *Hungary Today* (1961), *Hungary Ten Years Later* (1966), and *Hungary: Pushing the Limits* (1986).

²*Freedom's Fury*, DVD, 90 minutes running time, directed by Colin K. Gray and Megan Raney, 2006; Santa Monica, CA: Cinergi Pictures Entertainment, 2007. When I was doing research on 1956 in American Memory in 2006, this film was the talk of the Hungarian communities from New Jersey to California. Website: www.freedomsfury.net.

The story originates with the brother, whose high school water polo trainer was a student of Dezső Gyarmati, a key member of Team Hungary at the 1956 Olympic Games, held in Melbourne simultaneously with the post-revolutionary Soviet crackdown in Hungary. Hungary and the Soviet Union played “the bloodiest game in Olympic history” in the semifinal with a bench-clearing brawl after a Soviet player caused a serious facial injury to one of the Hungarians, Ervin Zádor. *Freedom's Fury* tells the story of the communist takeover in Hungary and that of the Soviet-Hungarian water polo rivalry after World War II in alternating scenes, all the way to the semifinal game. It is narrated by American Olympian Mark Spitz, and surviving members of both teams contribute interesting insights and comments. It concludes with references to Hungary becoming fully independent in 1989 and with an account of the reunion between the two teams in Budapest. The film had three sold-out screenings at the Tribeca Festival in New York City in April 2006. It was shown in theaters in Hungary around the time of the anniversary and has since been released on DVD.

While sports as warfare is nothing new, placing it into the context of one of the key historical events of the twentieth century makes this film cut out for use in both sports history and general history classes. It also lends itself naturally to film studies classes by virtue of the elegant cuts between scenes and because a feature film was also made of the story. When the Sibs began to run out of money, they enlisted the support of three Hollywood stalwarts: Lucy Liu, Quentin Tarantino, and Andrew G. Vajna (who himself is of Hungarian stock). In return for financial support to finish the documentary, the Sibs agreed to let Vajna have the rights to produce a feature film out of the story. The Hollywood producer left the task to Hungarian director Krisztina Goda, who completed a very “American” movie featuring many prominent Hungarian actors and state-of-the-art special effects in time to screen for the anniversary. *Children of Glory* (2006)³ combines elements of love, achievement, and loss in time of war—a theme that sells well anywhere and anytime. The British DVD release described it as “*The Life of Others* meets *Chariots of Fire*.” Both *Freedom's Fury* and *Children of Glory* are supported by websites with additional study guides.

³*Children of Glory*, DVD, 123 minutes running time, directed by Krisztina Goda, 2006; Santa Monica, CA: Cinergi Pictures Entertainment, 2006. The UK distributor is Lionsgate. The original Hungarian title is *Szabadság, szerelem*. Website in both English and Hungarian: www.szabadsagszerelemfilm.hu. The film was screened in the White House on October 29, 2006.

Journey Home (2006)⁴

Second in line in chronological order is a family story coming from Cleveland, Ohio, the center of the 1956 Hungarian political emigration. The film was directed and produced by two sisters, Réka and Eszter Pigniczky, children of 1956 refugees. After the death of their father, they decided to trace his life back to Hungary. *Journey Home* is the story of the girls uncovering the somewhat disturbing past of their father and taking his remains home to bury him with other members of the family. One of the many strengths of the film lies in the revelation of how difficult it is for Hungarians to talk about 1956, even half a century later. The story in short is that the puppet regime of János Kádár violently suppressed even the memory of the Revolution and branded it a "counterrevolution" and the 1956 refugees "Fascists." Being the children of 1956 "counterrevolutionaries" was a "shame" in communist Hungary, and the Pigniczky girls demonstrate how irrational the linguistic imperialism of communism seems to people who grew up on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Réka and Eszter also approached the 1956 History Institute in Budapest (www.rev.hu) for assistance and called its attention to a hitherto unknown resistance group, the one incidentally their father was a member of. Documentary filmmaking and historical research thus joined forces to uncover the story of the "Royal Szálló group."

The film was produced by 56films, a company owned by Réka Pigniczky. It was released on DVD simultaneously in English and Hungarian and has shown on Hungarian television several times. There are no extras on the DVD, but the website carries a "Director's Note" on the film. *Journey Home* is the first-ever film made by children of 1956 refugees and has been followed up by a socio-documentary titled *Incubator* in 2010. Both can be used in class to introduce the immigrant take on the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and refugee/immigrant life in the United States. While *Freedom's Fury* focuses more on sports than revolution, *Journey Home* elegantly brings out the personal dimension of a key historical event.

Freedom Dance (2007)⁵

Third in line in chronological order is an animated/live action 1956 escape story from Craig Herron and Steven Fischer, both students of Edward Hilbert, a 1956

⁴*Journey Home*, DVD, 90 minutes running time, directed by Réka and Eszter Pigniczky, 2006; Budapest: 56Films, The Hungarian title is: *Hazatérés*. Website: www.56films.com/english/journey-home.

⁵*Freedom Dance*, DVD, 30 minutes running time, directed by Steven Fischer and Craig Herron, 2007; distributed through the website, 2007. Website: www.freedomdancethe-movie.com. Fischer was nominated for an Emmy for his short tribute to Soviet mass murder at the Katyn forest in Poland during World War II: *Silence of Falling Leaves* (2000).

refugee. One interesting development in American culture (since the launch of *The Simpsons* in 1989) is the tendency to use animated stories to convey serious messages to different age groups. *Freedom Dance*, a thirty-minute visual tour-de-force, is no exception to this rule: It can be used from elementary school to graduate classes, and it will facilitate class discussion. Hilbert was a child movie actor in interwar Hungary, later became a set decorator and animator, and in 1956 decided to flee the country with his wife, Judy, a Holocaust survivor. During the escape, Hilbert started drawing images and recording their experiences from Budapest to New York. Most of the drawings were destroyed but recreated by Hilbert before his untimely death in 2006, and this raw material was used by Herron, the owner of an animation studio, and Fischer, a prominent documentary filmmaker. This is not a story of the Revolution, but a very human (and often lovably funny) account of the Hilberts' escape from tyranny and of their unconditional belief in America as the Promised Land. One highlight of the film is their arrival in New York City, when Edward and Judy fly around the Statute of Liberty on a magic carpet made out of an American flag. The real strength of the story lies in its honesty in dealing with the abuses suffered at the hands of human traffickers, which refutes a key myth of the revolution that everyone helped everyone else, and with the difficulties experienced in Vienna and on the transatlantic trip.

The driving force of the film is the narration by Mariska Hargitay of *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* television fame. The excellent extras tell the story of the sound effects of the film (among other things) and include a lengthy audio interview with Hargitay on her Hungarian ties. The film won a CINE Golden Eagle award in 2007, but, disappointingly, has not been shown in Hungary. The website for *Freedom Dance* follows the making of the film only up to late 2006.

Torn from the Flag (2007)⁶

Torn from the Flag is a film by Klaudia Kovács, a Hungarian émigré of the 1990s. It is a first-class historical documentary that tells the story of communism in Hungary from the Soviet invasion in 1945 to full independence and Soviet withdrawal in 1989-1991. The title is a reference to one of the visual symbols of the Revolution: On the first day, October 23, 1956, protesters cut the Soviet coat of arms of Hungary out of the red, white, and green national flag. (The "torn flag" today is one of the 23 official historical flags of the country and is on public display on official ceremonies of state.) Naturally, the bulk of the film deals with the Revolution itself. Kovács interviewed over 2000 people for the film, including Mikhail Gorbachev, Otto von

⁶*Torn from the Flag*, DVD, 95 minutes running time, directed by Klaudia Kovács and Endre Hules, 2007; distributed through the website, 2009. Website: www.tornfromtheflagfilm.com. It is available in four different editions. The film has won eight major awards at festivals and was nominated for an Oscar in 2009.

Habsburg, and Henry Kissinger, as well as Hungarian communist party leaders and nameless secret service henchmen. This traditional historical documentary was shot in high definition by two Hollywood legends of 1956 background, László Kovács and Vilmos Zsigmond.⁷ Professor István Deák of Columbia University called it “Easily the best documentary film on the 1956 Hungarian revolution.”⁸

Kovács started work on the film in 1998 and completed it only in 2007, a year after the fiftieth anniversary. This outstanding film (both as history and film) has won numerous awards all around the world. It was screened at the Slow Film Festival in Eger (Kovács’s birthplace) in 2009, with no Hungarian version forthcoming. One reason for this is the survival of the pre-1989 communist elite in Hungarian politics and its reluctance to provide any funding for dubbing or subtitles while in power until the spring of 2010. Kovács runs a website for the film, and the DVD release is underway. She is also editing the interviews for separate release. With due respect for the other films under review here, this high-budget, 95-minute work is the cream of the crop for general educational purposes.

Summary

It seems natural that Hungarians in Hungary should make dozens of documentaries on all aspects of the Revolution for the fiftieth anniversary, but it was a pleasure to see four excellent and very different films coming from Americans, Canadians, and Hungarians in America. As for classroom use, *Torn from the Flag* is the obvious pick in any history course, but all four are legitimate choices. When I was teaching at the University of Missouri—St. Louis in the spring of 2009, I used *Freedom Dance* in an upper-level history class on the Cold War in Eastern Europe., and we had a surprisingly lively and enlightening discussion. I have already pointed out the possible uses of *Freedom’s Fury* in sports history and film studies classes (especially because of the feature film version). *Journey Home* and the more recent *Incubator* could be used in multiculturalism and ethnic studies courses. It also naturally lends itself to historical research methodology and film studies classes by virtue of its feedback into historical research. These four films are recommended for classroom use in the United States because American students will find these easier to understand than (equally reliable) Hungarian documentaries translated or dubbed into English.

⁷Both Zsigmond and Kovács are noted Hollywood cinematographers. Zsigmond’s credits include *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and *The Deer Hunter* (1978). Kovács (1933-2007) shot *Easy Rider* (1969) and *Ghostbusters* (1984). In 1956 they smuggled reels of amateur film out of Hungary that were used for the *Hungary in the Flames* documentary mentioned in the opening paragraph above.

⁸http://www.artshound.com/event/detail/440967982/Houston_Screening_Torn_from_the_Flag