An Austro-Hungarian Film Director: George M. Hoellering (1897-1980)

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“GMH” as his name was often abbreviated was born the 20th July 1897 as Georg Michael Höllering in Baden, Austria-Hungary, near Vienna. His father was a theatre director and a stage musician. From 1919 to 1924 GMH was licensee of the Schikaneder Kino in Vienna. At the beginning of the 1920’s he moved to Berlin, managed his Vienna cinema from the distance, and worked in the film industry in different jobs, as editor and director of shorts. Together with Robert Scharfenberg he was production manager of Kuhle Wampe (1932), a German film classic, written by Bertolt Brecht, directed by Slatan Dudow and with music by Hanns Eisler. In a late interview for Screen magazine he gave a vivid account of the turbulent story of the making of Kuhle Wampe. The censors took a hostile view of the film as an outright political pamphlet in the leftist-communist vein, and with the approaching Nazi takeover Hoellering and his pregnant Jewish wife thought it wisest to leave Germany at the end of 1932. For a short time they settled in Vienna, where their only child, Andrew, was born.

Early in 1934 Hoellering, his family and the cameraman Laszlo Schäffer moved to Hungary, to make a film at the famous Puszta of Hortobágy. Details of the inception of the film project we know from László Passuth, later to become an internationally known writer of historical novels. At the time of meeting Hoellering however Passuth was working as the manager of a branch of the Italian-Hungarian Bank in Budapest.

Schäffer and Hoellering drank coffee somewhere in Zurich or in Vienna together, chatting and making plans for a documentary about some exotic country. Schäffer was just returning from Sumatra, where he was to be the cameraman for „Rubber”, a Dutch film. Hoellering also wanted to go to the South Seas but – according to Passuth – Schäffer advised him to go to his country, Hungary, where at the Hortobágy puszta he could find fantastic herdsmen, with a thousand-year-old way of life that had never been filmed.

Hoellering, who was to become his own producer, embraced this adventurous project. His resources were meagre, and during the next two years he struggled to find the needed financial backing. He made use of the possibilities arising from Hungary’s then restricted currency system where foreign entrepreneurs enjoyed government financial incentives. He first got to meet László Passuth, who was willing to lend a helping hand during the two years of the making of Hortobágy, in the latter’s capacity of bank manager. Soon they became friends, and their friendship lasted well

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1 In this study we will use the English version of his name: George M. Hoellering.
after WW2. (Passuth even took two weeks leave from the bank in 1935 and helped Hoellering as an assistant.)

During the Summer of 1934 Hoellering and his small crew moved for several weeks to Hortobágy, filming birds, sheep, cattle, horses, wells, village houses and above all the Puszta people in the context of their landscape. László Schäffer, who had a distinguished record as one of the cameramen on Walter Ruttmann’s celebrated Berlin – Symphony of a Great City, recorded everything in black-and-white shots of extreme beauty.

Hoellering’s initial conception for „Hortobágy” was to make a „Kulturfilm”- a kind of instructional documentary. He also planned to include at the end of the film some ideologic commentary about the international capital, exploiting the shepherds of the Puszta. But having spent a summer among those shepherds and herdsmen, he rather wanted to show the traditional way of life there, as well as the eternal circle of conception-birth-life-death, of sunrise and sunset. Also, he came to the conclusion that to be successful in the commercial film industry and to reach a wider audience he has to incorporate a storyline into his film. He contacted Zsigmond Móricz, one of the greatest Hungarian writers of the period, well known for his novels and short stories depicting rural life in Hungary, asking him if he was prepared to write first a story and then a screenplay for the film.

Móricz was invited to the projection room to have a look at the rushes. After the first visit he wrote into his diary: "He (Hoellering) may possibly be a private pirate in the film jungle who discovered the Hortobágy for himself." After the second day of viewing the rushes he changed his mind: "...this is a subject worthy of me." - he wrote in his diary⁴. At the start of December 1934 Móricz took the train to Debrecen and then probably a cab to Hortobágy. He met the herdsmen and others he had first viewed in the rushes. He then set about collecting tales and generally informing himself about the life and traditions of Hortobágy. In the Christmas edition of the daily Pesti Napló he published the short story Darksome Horse (Komor Ló) which now served as the basis for his screenplay.⁵ The reader can notice in Darksome Horse that Móricz consciously inserted episodes into the story to make use of the material Hoellering had shot during the Summer. During the Spring months there followed endless negotiations, including arguments between Móricz and Hoellering, as a result of which the final shooting script took shape. This was a compromise between Móricz’s original literary conception and Hoellering’s filmic ideas.

Móricz’s original conception was retained. The final version of „Hortobágy” is built on the story of three generations, just as the short story „Darksome Horse”. There is an elderly couple, who find each other. There is the young girl who succeeds in her fight not to be forced to marry a rich peasant boy, but the penniless young herdsman she loves. And there is the teenager, attracted to the wonders of modern technology, who does not want to be a herdsman any more – and at the end is able to follow his desires.

A common thread goes through from the short story to the different versions of the screenplay and finally to the film itself: the ancient form of life is marvelous but it now belongs to the past and it must give way to a new, modern, mechanical world.

At the beginning of the 1930s Höllering’s formative experience regarding film music was the film „Kuhle Wampe“ where composer Hanns Eisler employed a three-layered musical structure: symphonic blocks in modernist style, ballads sung by prominent artists and a political choir written specially for the film.

Three years later in „Hortobágy“ Höllering and Hungarian composer László Lajtha employed an (in their age) unusual musical structure. Starting from the Eislerian inspiration, they adapted it and developed it further. Lajtha composed modernist symphonic blocks for the montage-sequences. But, together with Lajtha’s assistant Péter Balla, they let the five most important characters sing one Hungarian folk-song each, picked to suit their psychology and the situation. Instead of political choirs, in „Hortobágy“ at some points shepherds (men’s choir) sing folk songs and a folk ballad. Through this construction, „Hortobágy“ has acquired a style we can call „early folk-musical“, well in advance to the period when it was made.
Today we would call „Hortobágy” a docu-fiction, an amalgam of documentary shots with a threefold story-line, played by peasants and herdsmen. During the production Hoellering always had financial problems. When he emigrated to England with his family in the late spring of 1936, „Hortobágy” was handed over to the well-established Hungarian film laboratory and production company, Kovács and Faludi Ltd., probably as a result of the debts accrued in its making.

The National Film Control Committee (the censors) ordered four cuts to „Hortobágy” as a condition of a Hungarian premiere. However, the committee allowed the export of the entire uncut version of the film abroad – which is why today we can view the film unabridged.

„The Committee orders the cutting of the mating scenes of horses, the mating scenes of storks, (...) to cut the birth of the foal. Also, it orders the horse burial scene to be cut.” In the non-public („pro domo”) part of the decision they asked the applicant „to use the cut scenes only for scientific purposes”. This way the original length of the film, 2366m, was reduced by 267 m, that is by more than 10%. The measure of the loss can be assessed if we recall that outside Hungary where these scenes remained uncensored, most critics found the birth of the foal to be one of the most poetic and beautiful in the entire film.

The firm Kovács and Faludi appealed against the cuts. In his final decision Levente L. Kádár Head of Department in the Ministry of Interior upheld the cuts, because – as he wrote – „the scenes which had been ordered to be cut out are tasteless.”

The appeal had one benefit however: „Hortobágy” was re-classified from „instructional film” to „feature film”. A Hungarian-made feature film received from the authority 8 „bolettas”. In the Hungarian system of supporting indigenous film production, for any foreign film shown in the cinemas the distributor had to present one „boletta”. Bolettas had a market value of appr. 1800 Hungarian Pengos. As the
average Hungarian feature film was produced from 100-120,000 Pengos, and „Hortobágy” was certainly much cheaper, 8 bolettas represented a significant contribution to the costs of the film.

The belated Hungarian premiere of „Hortobágy” took place one year later, on March 18th 1937. The distributor put the film in a double bill with a short Hungarian low comedy („Where Do We Sleep On Sunday?”) One can suppose that the distributor wanted to enhance the appeal of the rather unusual docu-fiction by connecting it to a popular short film. It seems the trick failed, and „Hortobágy” (in its mutilated form) attracted little attention and ran only for a week in two Budapest cinemas.

In spite of these unfavourable conditions, „Hortobágy” had an extraordinary good reception in the press. Most dailies carried favourable reviews, but these were (according the custom of the period) mostly only 10-12 lines long. But Sándor Márai, the great Hungarian novelist and playwright (Ambers), who saw the film earlier in an uncut version, wrote more than a full newspaper column. „Weekdays and holidays, life and death, traditions and despair, dignity and prudence, helplessness and supercilious wisdom, misery and fate radiate upon us from every image. Lo, it is still possible to make a Hungarian film.” Several monthlies also praised the film – to no practical avail, as when their reviews appeared the cinemas were no longer showing it. The Hungarian film distribution system in the 1930s was ill prepared to handle art films at all, and even less films which did not fit in established categories. (There were no art cinemas or film clubs.)

Zsigmond Móricz’s relationship with Hoellering was full of ups and downs. During the writing of the final script they had many discussions and even arguments. In Móricz’s mostly unpublished diaries we find several caustic remarks about these differences. Still in August 1935 Móricz spent a full day at the locations in the Puszta, and wrote a long report in a daily paper about his experiences. In January 1937 he attended the Vienna premiere of the (uncut) film. „He was moved by the film, and said it was the best Hungarian film he knew with an immeasurable propaganda value. The images are perfect, the direction of Hoellering has no peer, the accompanying music of László Lajtha is dramatic, colourful and exciting. The success seems to be very great” – wrote the reporter of Pesti Napló quoting Móricz.

Thus „Hortobágy”, in spite of its initial non-distribution became part of the cinematographic memory of Hungary, part of the Hungarian film culture. In later decades it was shown at universities, in film courses, and more recently several times on Hungarian television. Film historians continue to discover the influence of „Hortobágy” for instance in the title scene of Zoltán Fábri’s „Merry-Go-Round” (1955) or in András Kovács’s „The Stud Farm” (1978), or Zoltán Huszárik’s short „Elegy” (1967). Miklós Jancsó’s (The Round-Up) early films also may have been influenced by „Hortobágy”. Jancsó accompanied Hoellering to the Puszta in 1967, calling him „the greatest Hungarian (sic!) realist filmmaker".
Hoellering, his wife and baby arrived in England in the early Summer of 1936. As soon as GMH arrived he began organising the projections of „Hortobágy”, his only possession at the moment. The premiere was organised by The Film Society, Sunday 13th December 1936 in the New Gallery Cinema. Graham Greene wrote about it in The Spectator: „Undoubtedly, the horses have it. Hortobagy, a film of the Hungarian plains, acted by peasants and shepherds, is one of the most satisfying films I have seen: it belongs to the order of Dovzhenko’s Earth without the taint of propaganda. The photography is extraordinarily beautiful, the cutting superb.” And later: „The leaping of the stallions, the foaling of the mares are shown with a frankness devoid of offence and add to the impression that here we are seeing, as far as humanly possible, the whole of a way of life. But we are not asked to admire one way more than another, the horse more than the tractor.” (Please note that Greene also had seen the uncensored version!) However, the public (i.e. not only closed circuit) distribution of „Hortobágy” in England did not begin until 1945. According to a newspaper report, before 1945 the British censors also objected to several scenes in the film.

Elsie Cohen who was the owner of the Academy Cinema at 167 Oxford Street, London, liked the film, and in 1937 Hoellering joined her as director.

In the Summer of 1940 the authorities arrested and interned all „enemy aliens”. Hoellering was also interned and taken to the Isle of Man. There in the camp he wrote and directed an amateur theatre performance, a musical called „What a Life!”

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The music, written by fellow inmate (and fellow Vienna-Berlin emigré) Hans Gál was also played by inmates. The internment, which was soon being criticised in the media as a „characteristically un-British” and counter-productive move, ended after some months.

During the war years, Hoellering directed several wartime propaganda shorts for different ministries. Also to his credit is a documentary called „Message from Canterbury” (1944) which he directed and edited and made with the close cooperation of Archbishop William Temple.

From 1944 till his death in 1980 he was managing director of the Academy Cinemas. (The cinema was badly hit by a German bomb in 1940, to be re-opened in 1944. Later on Hoellering transformed it into a three screen multiplex.) Together with the cinemas, he also was director of Film Traders Ltd. This combination made it possible for Hoellering to continue and further develop Elsie Cohen’s initiatives and to become the foremost British promoter of „continental” and Asian art films. To mention the Hungarians alone, he brought to London the films of Miklós Jancsó, Ferenc Kósa, András Kovács and Károly Makk.

Hoellering directed two more short films after the war. „Shapes and Forms” (1950) is an experiment to show abstract art matched with African folk art and contemporary music, while „The Glasgow Orpheus Choir” (1951) is a memorial to that ensemble and its conductor. In 1951 he produced and directed the feature film version of (later) Nobel prize winner T.S. Eliot’s drama, „Murder in the Cathedral”. Eliot participated personally, lending his voice as the unseen Fourth Tempter. The film was shown at the Venice Film Festival and won the prizes for Best Art Direction and Best Film in Costume.

With László Lajtha, the Hungarian composer of „Hortobágy” Hoellering cooperated in his British films. Lajtha became the composer of both „Shapes and Forms” and „Murder in the Cathedral”.

Hoellering also served as a governor of the British Film Institute from 1967 to 1972. When he died on the 10. February 1980, still in harness, he was described in the obituaries as a significant force in British film culture. David Robinson, film critic of The Times (London), wrote: „If he believed in a film, or a filmmaker it was a secondary consideration whether it was a guaranteed money-maker. Hoellering reckoned that the job of a cinema was to promote films, not just to rely on the easy sell.” And in a more personal vein: „He was tall, handsome, elegant, charming, and properly autocratic. Autocracy and perfectionism seem to have always been consistent traits.” Dílys Powell wrote in Sight and Sound : „George Hoellering, who ran London’s Academy Cinema for 36 years, was as important to the screen in this country as any of the great film directors. Without him we might not have seen the work of a good many of those great film directors. He was himself a gifted director.” And to quote from a Hungarian appreciation, written by film director Zsolt Kézdi-Kovács: „Maybe it is no exaggeration to say that it („Hortobágy”) is one of the most outstanding pieces of Hungary’s pre-WW2 film production.”

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See also: http://filmvilag.hu/xereses_frame.php?ckk_id=7823 [22.06.2013]