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Author(s)	J. Hoberman
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The Museum of Modern Art Department of Film

Gyula Gazdag

April 10 - 21, 1987

Saturday, April 11 at 2:30

Sunday, April 12 at 5:30

PACKAGE TOUR (TÁRSASUTAZÁS). 1984. Hungary. Directed by Gyula Gazdag. Camera by Elemér Ragályi. Edited by Júlia Sivő. Sound by György Fék. Mafilm-Objektiv Studio (Budapest). Courtesy New Yorker Films. In Hungarian, English subtitles. 75 minutes.

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Like most of Gyula Gazdag's documentaries, PACKAGE TOUR was suggested by a chance occurrence. In late 1983, Gazdag noticed a newspaper ad for a group trip to Auschwitz. Intrigued by the apparent absurdity of such an excursion, he discovered that the 140 tourists who signed up for the trip were virtually all concentration camp survivors. For them, Auschwitz was not simply the only memorial their dead families might have, it was also a part of their youth, the setting for the central experience of their lives.

Although Gazdag set out to make a film without a clear idea what the film would be about, he was resolved to focus on the present. As a historical documentary, PACKAGE TOUR resembles THE BANQUET: "I didn't want to deal with the past. I didn't want to show what happened in Auschwitz -- I wanted to show how these people think and feel today, after 40 years. It's a completely different case than THE BANQUET, but the idea was similar -- to show people who live in the past and in whose life a certain historical event plays a very important part." But where THE BANQUET deals with an evocative footnote to Hungarian history, PACKAGE TOUR addresses a crucial and still highly sensitive occurrence.

The extermination of the Jews came later and with a more terrible efficiency in Hungary than in Poland. In the spring of 1944, when the Germans occupied Hungary to prevent its defection from the Axis, there were some 800,000 Jews left in the country; by early summer, more than half of them had been rounded up, packed in cattle cars, transported to Auschwitz, and gassed. Adolf Eichmann, who directed this operation, began with the countryside. Budapest Jews were temporarily reprieved when the Hungarian regent, Admiral Horthy, finally halted the deportations in July; three months later, after Horthy made a second futile attempt to surrender to the Soviets, Eichmann returned to liquidate the Budapest ghetto, driving Jews on death marches toward the Austrian border.

Like Claude Lanzmann's SHOAH, which opened in Paris several months after PACKAGE TOUR's Budapest premiere, Gazdag's film eschews archival footage; as with Gazdag's earlier documentaries, it abounds in suggestive metaphors and parallels. This tour (which could easily be leaving from Co-op City or Rego Park) is actually a sort of redeportation. Every passport check has a sinister resonance, as the bus retraces the earlier, fatal route. One of the film's most ineffable moments occurs when the pilgrims re-enter Auschwitz, some visibly anguished, some impassive, others with expressions that are impossible to read. Their trip immediately takes a grotesque turn when a Polish guide insists on addressing them in German; for a moment they're turned into obedient sightseers or worse.

Without indulging in cheap shots at Auschwitz as a tourist attraction, Gazdag allows for his own experience of the place as it is now, showing the survivors threading their way among groups of schoolchildren and picture-taking families, letting the camera take in one young couple sitting dazed and silent in the sun. Modest as it is, PACKAGE TOUR is no easy ride -- it's filled with sudden turns and complications. The film's most shocking incident evolves with the logic of a nightmare. An elderly woman backs out of a tourist snapshot and falls into a trench, seriously injuring herself. The sequence begins with the ensuing chaos and arrival of a medical team. (According to Gazdag, who is visible in the confusion, he asked his longtime cameraman Elemér Ragályi to stop shooting. Fortunately Ragályi ignored him; Gazdag only realized the importance of the accident during editing.)

While the anecdotes recounted in PACKAGE TOUR reinforce one's sense of the arbitrary nature of the Auschwitz system, the film itself documents the isolation of the survivors. Even in community, they seem always orphaned. "We came here to do penance," one says. This isn't the first Hungarian movie to treat the wartime suffering of the nation's Jews -- 33 years Mártón Keleti's KEEP YOUR CHIN UP! showed Jews being rounded up by Hungarian collaborators and there have been numerous references since -- but it's by far the most complex. Recent films like Imre Gyöngyösy's and Barna Kabay's 1983 THE REVOLT OF JOB, or their 1985 documentary, LEST YE INHERIT (IN MEMORY OF 425,000), mourn Hungarian Jews as an absence; PACKAGE TOUR acknowledges the presence of the living remnant. Thus, the film's final and saddest revelation concerns the young daughter of two survivors. Although her parents brought her on the tour in the hope that she would gain perspective on their lives and not be ashamed of them, the trip has had the opposite effect. The frightened girl hides from the camera -- she's afraid her schoolmates will see the film and reject her as a Jew.

According to Gazdag, PACKAGE TOUR was released in only a few prints: "I've never been to a screening at a theater. This is the only film of mine I can't see. I couldn't even sit through the premiere. For me it was like a nightmare -- the shooting, the editing, the whole process. We made it very, very quickly. Critics didn't like the film. But I had the feeling that through it they were confronted with their feelings about anti-Semitism. I think they wanted to be rid of that whole problem."

-- J. Hoberman

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Gyöngyösy

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