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For many of its survivors, the huge death camp is both a family memorial and the setting of their youth.

Last Year at Auschwitz

BY J. HOBERMAN

THE PACKAGE TOUR. Directed by Gyula Gazdag. Produced by Mafilm-Objektiv Studios (Budapest). Released by New Yorker Films. At the Public Theater, January 23 through 29.

THE LOOM. A film by Stan Brakhage. At the Museum of Modern Art, January 26.

The Package Tour, a Hungarian documentary about a group of Jews who make a pilgrimage from Budapest to Auschwitz, is a quiet shocker. Unpretentious and empathetic, it's a Holocaust film without catharsis: "The more deeply involved I became," director Gyula Gazdag has said, "the more clearly I saw I'd not understand or find any answer."

Gazdag, who is scheduled for a retrospective this spring at the Museum of Modern Art, makes both fiction films and documentaries—and the latter are often more fantastic. His particular brand of cinema vérité is blandly situational and open-ended, not to mention steeped in the contradictions of contemporary Hungarian life. *The Resolution* (made in 1971, shelved for a dozen years, and included in the last "New Directors" series) documents the process by which Party officials attempt to oust the popular president of a cooperative farm; *Selection* concerns a Communist youth organization's campaign to find a politically correct rock band.

In late 1983, Gazdag noticed a newspaper ad for a group tour to Auschwitz: "I felt a need to make a film on it [although] I'd no idea what the film would be about," he told a Hungarian interviewer. "For a start, I was curious about the kind of people who embark on such a trip." He discovered that the 140 tourists who signed up for this excursion were virtually all survivors of Auschwitz. For them, the huge concentration camp 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. "You think of it every single day," one man says late in the film.

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.

Most of the prosperous-looking, middle-aged subjects of *The Package Tour* were originally village Jews and in some cases are the sole survivors of an entire Jewish community. "Nobody can say that they survived because they were clever or strong," one observes. This randomness is underscored by a woman's account of being condemned to death because of a boil on her breast and then being saved from the gas chamber by a 20-year-old SS man. Risking his own life for no apparent reason, he allowed her to go through the initial selection again ("the most horrible 10 minutes of my life"); seconds later, the same guard casually shot another woman who asked him for help.

Like *Shoah*, *The Package Tour* eschews archival footage to focus on the past as it exists in the present; 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. Traveling through the snowy Carpathians to have lunch at the Hotel Prague, old ladies trade their wartime itineraries and the most shocking reminiscences of Auschwitz. Pregnant women went straight to the gas chamber, one observes as—bang!—an adroit waiter slaps a plate of food down in front of her. "I'll take a tranquilizer tomorrow morning," another says.

One of the film's most ineffable moments occurs when the pilgrims reenter 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 snapshot-taking families, letting the camera take in one young couple sitting dazed and silent in the sun.

Modest as it is, *The Package Tour* is no easy ride—it's filled with sudden turns and complicated emotions. A young cantor who accompanies the Hungarian group turns the black "wall of death" (a place where public executions were staged) into a version of the Wailing Wall. His keening prayer gives the pilgrims leave to sob, but their faces are more eloquent than his chant, which, however appropriate, inevitably feels like part of the package. The prayer stimulates a spontaneous dispersion: Old people go off by themselves to cry or sit quietly. One woman collapses in grief; another wanders to look for a stone to place on a memorial; a third scrounges in a field for a pathetic bouquet of dandelions.

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.) "Good Lord, why did I have to come here?" the woman cries, in a state beyond comfort by the Polish medics who lift her onto a stretcher and into an ambulance. Despite her agitation, the translator isn't permitted to come along; through the ambulance window we see her face, panicky and alone.

While *The Package Tour* reinforces one's sense of the arbitrary nature of the Auschwitz system, it also underscores the isolation of the survivors. Even in community, they seem always orphaned. "We came here to do penance," one says. When they ask each other how they could have allowed their deportation to happen, or blame themselves for a failure to resist, the absence of therapy is palpable—it's a tacit acknowledgment of continuing anti-Semitism in the Warsaw Pact nation with the most visible Jewish presence and greatest degree of official protection. The trip is intercut with statements by a woman who had to cancel out because of an operation (the result of injuries suffered in Auschwitz). She describes a hospital roommate praising Hitler and expressing disappointment that he didn't finish killing all the Jews. (Again, there's a powerful sense of isolation: the woman tells the camera why she let this statement go unchallenged. One reason is the impossibility of explanation.)

The Package Tour isn't the first Hungarian movie to treat the wartime suffering of the nation's Jews, but it's by far the most complex. Films like Imre Gyöngyössy and Barna Kabay's *The Revolt of Job* and its companion documentary *Lest Ye Inherit* (*In Memory of 425,000*) mourn Hungarian Jews as an absence; *The Package Tour* acknowledges the living remnant as a presence. While *Lest Ye Inherit* was broadcast over Hungarian TV, *The Package Tour* received a domestic release that could be kindly described as "cautious." To be fully appreciated, Gazdag's film must to be understood in the Hungarian context where, although the meaning of "Jew" varies considerably, the identity itself is a perilous birthright.

Thus, *The Package Tour*'s final, 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.

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