

Imre Kertész, *Fateless* and His Holocaust Nostalgia

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It is sometimes argued by Holocaust historians that those survivors who possess literary talent are those who are most likely to have their stories revered, remembered and processed by the general public who then store them in their collective memory of the event. This theory seems relatively likely, as most people, Holocaust historians and lovers of literature alike, seem to have sat down to read Elie Wiesel's *Night*, Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* (also sometimes called *If This is a Man*) and *The Diary of Anne Frank* as well as other chronicles by those who are literarily gifted. However, Imre Kertesz's books have just entered our consciousness ten years ago, despite his immense talent, due to the political situation in his home country of Hungary. The silence surrounding his story and the necessity for him to carry on without making a career of reflecting on the Holocaust (as many gifted writers are able to do), has forced him to think about his past privately. It has been only in the recent past that Kertesz was able to look at his story publicly, reimagining it for a wider audience in 2005 when he wrote the screenplay to his own story. Kertesz claims that his book *Fateless* (or sometimes called *Fatelessness*), which was originally written in Hungarian in the 1970s (and met with stone-cold silence) is much more of a work of fiction than the film, which he states is his own autobiographical story, written entirely from memory.¹ The two works are not vastly different, but enough time had elapsed between them that clear divides remain, one of the main differences being that the film does not attempt to focus on

¹ Alan Riding, "The Holocaust from a Teenage View" The New York Times Online <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/03/movies/MoviesFeatures/03fate.html> Accessed 26 Dec 2011.

the "bad times," relying on a certain feeling of nostalgia that perhaps Kertesz began to feel as he grew older.

Svetlana Boym states that nostalgia is a longing for a home that no longer exists, or perhaps one that never existed in the first place.² This may be a strange notion when coupled with the Holocaust, or World War II in general, but nevertheless, it is not uncommon for people from all over the world to look upon that time with a sense of nostalgia and fondness. This is particularly true of those who came of age during that time. Kertesz himself states in Riding's New York Times interview that when he set out to write *Fateless*, it was not intended to be a Holocaust memoir, but a coming of age story with the Holocaust as a backdrop.³ Whether or not it is a conscious effort, this immediately places Kertesz in a position of extreme nostalgia, despite the horrific circumstances that surround his transition to manhood. In fact, Kertesz stated in a 2006 interview with The Guardian that he began to write *Fateless* not for others to hear about the atrocities of the camps or to hear his story, but merely for him to put his memories on paper and to work out the muddled anecdotes. He stated he did not want to get lost in the masses of the dictatorships (meaning Hitler and Stalin), but instead wanted to step out of line.⁴

² Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books: New York, 2002), xiii.

³ Alan Riding, "The Holocaust from a Teenage View" The New York Times Online <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/03/movies/MoviesFeatures/03fate.html> Accessed 26 Dec 2011.

⁴ Julian Evans, "A Man Apart," The Guardian Online <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/apr/22/featuresreviews.guardianreview> 7 Accessed 26 Dec 2011.

World War II marks a very important time in world history, the impact of which can still be felt and seen around the world in modern society. In Tom Brokaw's book, *The Greatest Generation*, he states that this time period was critical in shaping not only the United States, but also the world, and likens it to the American Revolution or the Civil War. Indeed, World War II is often revered in modern society as a time when things were "simpler" (although removed from the situation and not having lived through it, it is hard to see what was so simple about world politics at that time), when conflicts were "black and white" and when the Good (implying the Allies) set out to rid the world of Evil (the Germans and the "Axis of Evil").⁵ Indeed, it is evident even from the title of Brokaw's famous book, *The Greatest Generation*, that those who have lived through this horrific time period, as captives, soldiers or those who were working for the war effort at home, seem to recall fond memories of the one of the most tragic times in human history.

Kertesz first wrote *Fateless* in 1975. At the time, he was 45 years old, writing about himself in his early teenage years, likely already prone to bouts of nostalgia for his formative years. However, due to the political climate of the time, it took Kertesz several tries in order to find someone to publish the book, as Soviet forces occupied Hungary and strong censorship was in place. Although the book is now thought of as controversial, in part due to the nostalgia Kertesz cites that he feels for the camps, initially it received very little attention. In fact, the book received so little attention that Kertesz would not write again until the 1980s, instead making a living writing librettos for musical comedies and translating works from Hungarian to

⁵ Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (Random House: New York, 2004), 1.

German. His story that he so desperately wanted to tell, that he had spent many years thinking and reflecting on, fell immediately on deaf ears. Even now, Kertesz remains somewhat of an anomaly in Hungarian literature, for despite the fame he achieved in the early 2000s, he is still not very well read in Hungary.⁶ The Holocaust was, and still is, a taboo subject in Hungary, as I learned from my time living in the country. While the silence of the Holocaust was broken in Western Europe and North America in the 1970s, it has never done so in Eastern Europe. Because of this, it is likely that Kertesz spent even more time reflecting upon his story, ready to divulge it completely when the prospect of the film arrived.

Fateless, Kertesz's most famous work, was translated into English and other Western European languages following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Although he did not earn immediate acclaim in 2002, he won the Nobel Prize in Literature, elevating his story to the forefront of the art world and earning him a place in the Holocaust literature cannon. Although he had been thinking of turning his story into a movie several years before his accolade (perhaps suggesting that he is constantly reminiscing on the event, as would be natural for such a traumatic experience), this recognition allowed him to collaborate with Lajos Koltai, the film's director, and gather the necessary funds to go ahead and make the film.

Fateless is not only unique in that the author of the book wrote the screenplay (and as such, is also depicting his own life), but also because the topic of

⁶ Alan Riding, "The Holocaust from a Teenage View" The New York Times Online <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/03/movies/MoviesFeatures/03fate.html> Accessed 26 Dec 2011.

the Holocaust is hardly broached in Hungary in cinema. Movies about Hungary and the Holocaust are usually made by foreigners, making *Fateless* one of the few films that forced Hungarians to hold a mirror up to their own society and face their own painful past. Kertesz has stated in his New York Times interview that he did not reference the book much when writing the screenplay--this time he simply relied on his own memory. However, Kertesz still kept a thin veil between himself and his main character. In the book, Kertesz names himself, or the character that represents himself, Gyuri Koves, presumably to create a distance. Although Kertesz recognizes that he's kept much less of a distance between himself and his character in the movie than in the book, he still keeps this fictional name.

While the movie may, indeed, be more autobiographical, if Kertesz relied solely on memory, it may be argued that the passage of time caused him to be more nostalgic. As we get older, our memories of the past are often distorted, and in Kertesz's case, his memories seem to become much more pleasant than times actually were. Already in the book's final chapter, Kertesz states through Gyuri that he felt a certain nostalgia and homesickness for the camps after the ordeal was over.⁷ While this is the center of much of the controversy surrounding Kertesz's work, it is almost clear when comparing the film and the book that the film leaves out much of the worst of the Nazi atrocities that are so clearly described in his narrative. This may be due to nostalgia, the highlighting of the better parts of his youth as he grows older, or perhaps it may be due to the political climate at the time of the book's publication. As the book was published under Soviet rule, it was very

⁷ Imre Kertesz, *Fatelessness* (Vintage: New York, 2004).

en vogue to portray the Nazis in a bad light, perhaps raising a theory that those who would ultimately read Kertesz's book might then connect better to his story. After the book was met with silence in his home country in 1975, perhaps Kertesz no longer felt it was necessary to elaborate on the atrocities in order to get his point across, the controversial point being that happiness and joy can be felt and seen in the most unlikely of places.

Key differences between the film and book include, of course, the omission of most of the Nazi atrocities in the film adaptation. While the medium of film is much different than that of text, and it must rely on visual aids such as costumes, lighting, make-up, sets, shots and the actors' choices to convey meaning, SS atrocities are still absent. It is not that Kertesz and Koltai have chosen to portray the camps as five star resorts in the film, quite on the contrary, however the SS and Nazis seem almost conspicuously absent from the film itself. Koltai and Kertesz have chosen instead to focus on the camaraderie between the prisoners which afforded Kertesz so much happiness. They do appear a few times, their cruelty noted only in one scene in which Gyuri drops a bag of cement during work detail, only to have the SS officer overseeing him to rub his face in the cement and personally load each bag of achingly heavy cement onto Gyuri's feeble back. Otherwise, the perpetrators of the crimes appear to be other prisoners (in the form of kapos, or those who were prisoners themselves and then selected to oversee a group of prisoners for special privileges) and Hungarian gendarmes. The latter may be partly due to the fact that in the 1970s, and even today in Hungary, many are unwilling to face the Hungarian involvement in the Holocaust. However, because of the book's popularity abroad,

the film gained a worldwide audience, thus perhaps allowing Kertesz to portray the truth a bit more accurately, despite his "fond memories" of the time spent interned.

Noticeably missing from Kertesz's film adaptation is his time in Auschwitz. Auschwitz has grown to be the symbol of the Holocaust, particularly because of its sheer size. Most people who passed through the concentration camp system had the unfortunate fate of passing through this hellish place. There are many debates about the number of people who were actually killed in Auschwitz as the SS did not maintain records for the individuals who were murdered upon arrival. However it is estimated that between 1.1 and 1.6 million people were murdered there, more than in any other camp.⁸ Kertesz only spent three days in Auschwitz, however like most survivors, the camp (which had the sole purpose of exterminating people) made a lasting impression on him as is shown distinctly in the book. The novel accounts his days in Auschwitz in detail, discussing the atmosphere, the humiliating intake process, the terrible smells, the terrifying way the prisoners were treated and the general sense of uneasiness he felt as a 14-year-old boy alone in a place designed solely to kill. But Auschwitz is all but lacking from the film version, simply showing Gyuri arrive on the train with his friends and pass through the infamous selections (when prisoners were either given a reprieve to be used as forced labor, or to be killed on the spot in the gas chambers). In the next shot, we see Gyuri huddled with his friends whom he was sent to the camps with, discussing the fate of their friend who did not make it through selection. The scene, which lasts less than two minutes,

⁸ The Nikzor Project, "How Many People Died at Auschwitz?" The Nikzor Project, <http://www.nizkor.org/faqs/auschwitz/auschwitz-faq-09.html> Accessed 26 Dec 2011.

takes the time to allow the boys to imagine that their friend was surrounded by care and affection in his final moments on earth, before abruptly changing pace. We are then taken to Buchenwald where Kertesz (and likewise Gyuri) were sent following Auschwitz, but do not have the benefit to learn anything of the horrors of Auschwitz, or about Kertesz's treatment in the camp.

Interestingly, Kertesz states in his 2006 interview with *The Guardian* that Auschwitz is the ultimate embodiment of dictatorships.⁹ Indeed, his book *Kaddish for an Unborn Child*, written about Gyuri Koves' life after the Holocaust, discusses his unwillingness to father a child in a world where Auschwitz is allowed to exist. Kertesz seemingly continues to return to Auschwitz, but leaves a gaping hole in his film narrative of such a defining event.

This may be to advance the plot of the film and to allow Koltai and Kertesz to focus on the "good" aspects of the camp, as the message of the film is stated quite clearly near the end in which through Gyuri, Kertesz states that there is nothing too unimaginable to endure. Kertesz also states in his interview with the *New York Times* that the goal of the film is to avoid Holocaust clichés and allow the narrative to speak for itself. Because of the nature of Auschwitz, perhaps leaving it out was a conscious choice on his part to avoid any more clichés in his story. It could be argued that the intake in Auschwitz, the humiliating process of having all of his body hair shorn and being rid of the clothes on his back is not only counterproductive to

⁹ Julian Evans, "A Man Apart," *The Guardian Online* <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/apr/22/featuresreviews.guardianreview7> Accessed 26 Dec 2011.

the message of the story, but also provides a Holocaust cliché that Auschwitz invariably cannot escape from.¹⁰

Interestingly, both the film and text operate from a naive and detached perspective, which is decidedly adolescent in its nature. Kertesz cites some of his major writing influences as Camus and Kafka, which is evident from the detached nature of his prose. The book reads, as perhaps it was intended to be read as such, as a compilation of memories that fulfill a narrative. The narrative is written in first person, but it is almost as though he is describing the events as though they are happening to someone else, allowing Tötösy de Zepetnek, author of *Imre Kertesz and Holocaust Literature* to make a deep connection between Camus and Kertesz, stating that Gyuri is similar to the main character in Camus' Seminole classic *The Stranger*.¹¹ The sense of detachment is pervasive throughout the book, allowing Kertesz to reflect on his experience with a sense of nostalgia, but keep a safe distance from it. However, no matter Kertesz or Koltai's intentions were with the film, they are somewhat unable to achieve this distance completely. Perhaps this is because text cannot translate completely to a visual art form and the mood of a film can only go so far. Gyuri is detached in the film only to a point, stating in the beginning that he cried when his father was called up for forced labor because he felt that was what he was expected to do. However, throughout the film, Gyuri's emotions become a bit more evident, such as his tears in the scene in which the SS officer places the cement

¹⁰ Alan Riding, "The Holocaust from a Teenage View" The New York Times Online <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/03/movies/MoviesFeatures/03fate.html> Accessed 26 Dec 2011.

¹¹ Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, *Imre Kertesz and Holocaust Literature* (Purdue University Press: Purdue, 2005), 129.

bag on his back, or at the point when he returns home to Budapest to find his father has not returned from forced labor and that his stepmother has remarried and changed addresses. This may be partly due to the choice of the actor who portrayed Gyuri. However with Kertesz having such a hand in the film version, it would be likely that if he did not like the reaction the actor was eliciting at that particular moment, he would have demanded it be changed to his liking.

The film, like the book, ends on a positive note, in which Gyuri tells the audience that he is sure happiness is waiting for him somewhere in his future. Gyuri tells his neighbors in the film that what he experienced in the camps was not hell, because he had never been to hell and therefore could not relate the two to one another. Gyuri also talks of the abuse in the camps as "natural," which elicits questions from friends who contest that a concentration camp is not natural, thus exemplifying both nostalgia and normalizing the absurd in a way that allows the human spirit to continue. It could also be surmised that Kertesz views the concentration camps in terms of human nature, and if it is possible for humans to create such a place of torture, then the concentration camps are only "natural."

While Kertesz tells his story bravely and defiantly, he maintains that he writes only for himself, which presents the biggest case for most of his work emanating from feelings of nostalgia. Kertesz states in an interview to *The Guardian* that the book and the film are not necessarily in an effort to preserve the memory of the Holocaust, but rather something more personal for Kertesz. These statements banish the lofty ambitions of many Holocaust memoirists of the mantra of "Never

Again," the oft-repeated saying about the Holocaust which Kertesz does not ever broach in his interviews.

He states at the end of his Guardian interview, "We are after something. That's the way we live. What writers can do in this symbolic ice age is to preserve and present individual identities, individual existences that you can pick out from the flow and present as something that moves people, or shocks them."¹² This quote makes it clear that Kertesz writes and revises simply for his own nostalgic purposes, in an effort to preserve his own life and memories in the sea of other lives and shocking circumstances around him.

While he may not have meant it to be, and it seems he did not, Kertesz was still able to write an inspirational story in both the film and book, despite their differences. He states in his New York Times interview, "[writing the book within the context of happiness and nostalgia] was an act of rebellion against the role of victim which society had assigned me. It was a way of assuming responsibility, of defining my own fate."¹³

Despite the differences between the two works of art, nostalgia has most definitely played a large part for both of them, especially in the wake of the ever-changing country Kertesz was born into and chose to return to, unlike many

¹² Julian Evans, "A Man Apart," The Guardian Online
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/apr/22/featuresreviews.guardianreview>
7 Accessed 26 Dec 2011.

¹³ Alan Riding, "The Holocaust from a Teenage View" The New York Times Online
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Holocaust survivors. As Hungary changed drastically, and as the world changed, Kertesz's memories of Auschwitz, Buchenwald and Zeitz could never be taken away from him. As such, he was able to produce a powerful narrative that has earned him a place in the annals of not just highly regarded Holocaust literature, but literature itself, even though his accolades came much later than those of his fellow survivors.

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