



## **The Boundary of the Twentieth Century: A Comment on Istvan Szabo's Sunshine**

**By Shari Cohen**

The boundary of the twenty-first century seemed rather arbitrary to me. Then, this summer, while watching Istvan Szabo's movie *Sunshine*, I realized just how much my personal focus -- and I think our focus more generally -- has changed as the century has turned. I spent much of the 1990s -- as I researched and wrote my book, *Politics without a Past: The Absence of History in Postcommunist Nationalism* -- trying to extract meaning, both intellectual and moral, from what I saw as the events that offered the central lessons of our time: the Holocaust and the communist experience, and how they were intertwined. These events set both an intellectual and an ethical compass regarding the excesses of the modern bureaucratic states, regarding tolerance in the face of extreme nationalism, regarding human dignity and the importance of legal protections, regarding the dangers of commitment to single ideologies, and regarding collaboration and resistance under coercive circumstances. But upon seeing *Sunshine* -- Istvan Szabo's epic about a family that lived through just these historical events -- I realized that these modern human tragedies may no longer be the same sort of reference points in a technologically driven, rapidly changing world. Their moral symbolism will remain; their guidelines for social and political inquiry will likely fade.

I am ambivalent about this realization. On the one hand, I believe that critical human lessons of these pasts should not be lost; on the other hand, I believe that it is dangerous to remain focused on pasts that no longer offer the lessons most relevant for our time. When is the past a guide and when not? Which aspects of the past do we look toward when moving into a potentially revolutionary time? How do we avoid the problem of "fighting the last war"? How do we avoid the arrogance of thinking our time is fundamentally different from other periods - part of what contributed to the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century to begin with? *Sunshine* provoked all these questions.

The movie is a sweeping story of three generations of a Jewish family in Budapest - the Sonnenschein family. It is a typical story of the central European Jew whose personal lives and emotions were completely intertwined with the tumultuous waves of history that passed through that part of the world all in a matter of decades. From the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian empire to revolution, to fascism, to communism and finally to democracy, they lived through it all. Jews had a unique role in these developments - they were beneficiaries,

revolutionaries, victims and later analysts and film-makers. They experienced the extremes; their lives read like a political sociology textbook.

In all of these twists of history, Jewish identity changed, sometimes disappearing completely. Many well-off Hungarian Jews changed their names and converted to Catholicism, in an effort to achieve positions that would have otherwise been inaccessible, as did Ignatz Sonnenschein who became a judge before World War I, and Adam Sonnenschein who joined an elite fencing club during the 1930s. Many swore loyalty to country, believing to the end that their Jewish identity could be erased even as the Nazis used blood as a measure. Thus Adam refused to admit his Jewishness as he was hung by the Nazis in front of his son Ivan.

Many fought fascism as partisans and communists, as universalists fighting extreme nationalism, as did Ivan Sonnenschein, who became a loyal Stalinist to avenge the fate of his father. Many, like Ivan, became opponents of the regime - animated by a condemnation of two totalitarian regimes, their disillusion with communism becoming a wake-up call to how much it resembled the fascism that they fought during the war. They ultimately came to represent -- to intellectuals and governments in the west -- individual resilience and resistance in the face of totalitarianism. Those who remained in dwindling numbers became important figures in post-communist democratization as advocates of individual dignity.

According to the director Szabo, "Each generation of grandfather, father and son loses themselves in the larger fight for comfort, to fit in, to be accepted. Ultimately, it is the third generation that realizes things cannot go on like this. The grandson, Ivan Sonnenschein, finally decides he will not be used.... I think this story shows how three supposedly different regimes - an Empire, a Nazi regime and a Communist regime - each promise happiness, but carry out dreadful acts in the name of society's betterment....But sometimes a generation comes along that will not continue that cycle."

(Quoted on Paramount's Web site about the movie at [www.paramountclassics.com/sunshine/production.html](http://www.paramountclassics.com/sunshine/production.html))

Redemption, for Szabo, comes in 1989, when Ivan, having reclaimed the family name and his Jewish identity, is finally free, having recognized his roots. Ultimately all that any individual can do, the movie tells us, is to be himself, to look honestly at his past, to claim his natural dignity, to avoid untenable idealism.

While surely this is one important lesson that the life histories of Ivan Sonnenschein and Jews with similar stories bring us, it left me feeling: "Is that it?" I was struck by how little this underlying message of the movie offered in terms of concrete lessons for how to avoid retreating into the very cycle with which Szabo is concerned. After all, though people filled the streets in the fall of 1989, it was not their will and heroism that brought the regimes to their knees. It

was the actions of the Soviet leadership and its cronies throughout Eastern Europe. And the propensity to claim dignity and roots has not alone been sufficient to create stable democracies in these countries that were the battlegrounds of the ideological struggles of the twentieth century. As we have painfully seen in Yugoslavia, returning to ethnic roots - both real and false - does not democracy make. Self-determination and individual rights stand in tense relationship to one another.

Not only does the movie fail to convey in a powerful way what these regimes bequeathed as warnings for the future, but the movie struck me as limited in its ability to help understand how, and whether, we would take the moral and sociological lessons offered by twentieth century history forward.

Do the lessons regarding individual dignity in the face of powerful states change now that state power is eroding; now that power is often in the hands of corporations, not states, and it is wielded in ways that are difficult to pin down? Do lessons about the abuses of modern bureaucracies come to mean something different as those bureaucracies are, in many places, dismantled? What does it mean to resist or to collaborate in less clearly coercive situations? What are the complex ways that ethnic hatred can turn into genocidal wars?

The Jews of Central Europe like the Sonnenschein family were the very embodiment of a particular period of history that will, for the near future, orient our moral compass. Their lives will continue to represent a powerful narrative about the abuse of power and about ideological movements gone astray. Their words and books shaped much of our understanding of totalitarianism, both communist and fascist. But we may well have reached a moment when mining these events for political and sociological insight is no longer as significant for avoiding a repetition of tragedies of that scale.

