

Budapest, 1944. In a sports shop. Mr Köves is buying yellow stars for sewing onto clothes. The shopkeeper offers him a choice. They are not expensive. He chooses the best quality. One for his 14 year-old son György and one each for himself and for György's stepmother. Mr Köves runs his own shop nearby. Nothing much to worry about. All perfectly natural.

Two weeks later their lives change dramatically. The authorities have ordered Mr Köves to attend a Labour Draft. Father and stepmother go shopping again. They buy everything father will need on the labour-draft. They go to the same shop

friends meet for Mr Köves farewell dinner. Next morning he takes a tearful parting from György, Mrs Köves, many family members and friends and Mr Süt his bookkeeper. He joins others at the railway station and leaves for an unknown destination in another country. They don't know it — but his family will never see him again.

We next see György some weeks later. He is on a bus with his school friends travelling to

Kertész wrote from his own experiences. Descended from Hungarian Jews, Kertész — also as a 14 year-old — made the same journey from Budapest to the concentration camps. His experiences help him to tell György's story in incredibly moving detail. Film Director Lajos Koltai has long admired Kertész's novel, and dreamed of making the film of the book.

Fateless

a naturally awful episode of history

The powerful film version of Imre Kertész's 2002 Nobel Prizewinning novel *Sorstalanság*, a worldwide best-seller

where they bought the yellow stars, but this time, they take the boy with them. The woman behind the counter asks, "Are you shopping for the labour-draft?" Stepmother nods. The assistant smiles sadly. Father and Stepmother buy an airtight mess kit, a multi-purpose pocket knife and several other useful items that someone on a labour-draft might need. They leave the shop loaded with parcels. The shopkeeper calls after them, "Hope to see you again soon."

Within days a large gathering of family and

Csepel where they work as labourers at the Shell Oil Refinery. A lone policeman interrupts their journey and orders them off the bus. He leads them to the customs house where they wait, as commanded, happy to be enjoying a day off work.

It is their first unsuspecting day of a long journey few of them will survive; a journey which takes them to the unspeakable Nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz — and from there to Buchenwald.

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Filming **Fateless**, with its cast of well over 100 actors, has made his dream come true.

Ghastly horror

Hungarian Director of Photography Gyula Pados described how they tackled their daunting task. "Lajos and I discussed our approach. We agreed the most important challenge for us was to suggest the ghastly horror of György's story without showing it on screen. How to show the unending state of fear, always there, day and night, overhanging the prisoners' lives. How to tell a story that starts off in 'normal' everyday conditions and rapidly descends into disbelief and terror."

"So, using colour filters on camera and gels over the lights, we started our film with warm colourful opening scenes full of natural movement. As the mood of the film becomes increasing sinister and disturbing, we gradually change the filters and gels to make the colours cooler and less saturated. We lowered the temperature still more by adjusting the actors' make-up to remove colour from their faces and by filming in twilight and dull weather. The lively movement of the film's opening gradually slows down and becomes more and more static.





"We composed the scenes carefully, so you are almost seeing something appalling, but not quite. For example, in one scene a camp inmate is carrying the sick and suffering György through the camp, slung over his shoulders. We think we see what he sees; the terror, the beatings, the cold and filth, exhaustion, the effects of illness and starvation. But he sees it all upside down — as we see it on screen. So although we see it — we can't quite interpret it visually."

"Our aim was to make a beautiful film out of an unbelievably dire existence. We showed the horror of the camps by reflecting it in the faces of the inmates. The pain, fear, panic, hopelessness, fatigue — but also compassion, tenderness, generosity and courage. Much of the film's dramatic effect is seen through the expressions on the faces and in the eyes of the actors. We chose to shoot

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anamorphic, on Panavision cameras from London, using a set of Panavision Close Focus lenses to take us right into the faces of the actors to capture every nuance of emotion."

"We anticipated using some minimal special effects like adding glowering clouds to blue skies. But we didn't have to. We were lucky with the weather; no need to create dark and gloomy conditions — nature provided them! I used Kodak Vision 250D film 5246 for the exteriors. It gave me the harder, grainier contrast I wanted. I used Kodak Vision 500T film 5263 when shooting interiors in the studio. Perhaps our biggest challenge was in squeezing

the four seasons of the story into one and a half seasons of filming. Although we filmed on locations in Budapest, Hungary and Germany, finding snow in August is not so easy. But we succeeded in creating cold wintry scenes with the help of a snow machine and twilight filming."

Natural

Lajos Koltai and Gyula Pados were determined to preserve the spirit of Kertész's book. To do so the events of the film must appear natural. It's natural, of course, for law-abiding citizens to obey the orders of authority. Natural that one policeman can detain a dozen youths single-handed. Natural that they should march submissively, with discipline, to wherever they're told. Natural that they should volunteer to work in Germany, despite their growing suspicions. Natural that they should hand over their valuables

and undress before taking a shower.

Natural to have a baseless optimism, natural to have a belief in providence from an age gone by, natural to have a religious resignation. Kertész makes it clear in his story that everything happened as it did. And yet it didn't have to. It could all have been so different. Again and again the characters could have made different decisions. Yet they didn't. So they themselves become an active part of society as they march, though unwillingly, towards their inevitable destiny.

György miraculously survives his

ordeal and eventually arrives back home in Budapest. His father is dead. His stepmother has remarried. Everyone is busily going about their 'natural' lives. And it's also 'natural' that post-war society, now seemingly peaceful again, is incapable of coping with a damaged young man returning home from Buchenwald. He is invisible. The end of the story is dominated by the same behaviour, built on the same fake illusions seen at the start... as if nothing had changed.

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Gyula Pados summed up: "It was a memorable project and it is a memorable film." ■

Footnote: Gyula Pados is best



known internationally for filming **Hotel Splendide** and **The Heart of Me**.