



Hungarian American  
Coalition

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## Cultural Outreach through Television and Films

### Hungarian topics for non-Hungarian audiences

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My experience as a print journalist led to numerous pieces of news writing I published between 1988 and 1992 on Hungarian subjects. These ranged from stories about the East Germans I found on the streets of Budapest in August 1989, to the very first articles about István Tökés and the origins of the 1989 overthrow of Nicolae Ceausescu in Romania to appear in English, one in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the other in *Japan Times*.

Getting these articles published in newspapers and reprinted in books was trivial compared to the difficulties of making Hungarian-themed films. My most successful film, *N is a Number: A Portrait of Paul Erdős*, is about Hungarian mathematician Paul Erdős, who would be 100 this year. The English-speaking film took six years to make (1988-1993), and has been widely shown on television in more than eight countries, and would never have been completed without the support of the National Science Foundation and some grants from private foundations. There was not one Hungarian source of funding.

See: [www.zalafilms.com/films/nisanumber](http://www.zalafilms.com/films/nisanumber)

This year (2013) I am trying to create a sequel *Erdős*. *The Erdős 100* project will be screened at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in early July 2013 as part of a week-long celebration of Erdős and his enormous contributions to mathematics. Again, this project has very little support, and nothing as yet from Hungary or the Hungarian community abroad.

The pattern has repeated itself with my other two Hungarian-subject documentaries: *Troop 214*, and *Songs Along a Stony Road*. Each took over a decade to make, and neither was supported by Hungarian-American funding. *Troop 21* or *214-es Csapat* is a history

of Hungarian scouting from its beginnings through exile in the 1940s, and the establishment of the Hungarian Scouts in Exteris, paralleled by the creation of the Communist Pioneers in Hungary. The film was produced between 1988 and 1995 using interviews mixed with archival footage. The period was fortuitous because it allowed coverage of the return of scouting to Hungary, and access to the founders of the exteris movement, the underground scouts in Hungary, and the last communist prime minister of Hungary. The film was completed in 1997, and broadcast on Duna-TV the following year. In 2008, Zala Films released an English-subtitled DVD.

See: [www.zalafilms.com/films/troop.html](http://www.zalafilms.com/films/troop.html)

*Songs Along a Stony Road* is a co-production with Dutch filmmaker Chris Teerink that was initiated in 1999 when Chris wanted me to help him find traces of the music collected by Béla Bartók in Transylvania. We were very quickly led to Zoltán Kallós, Transylvania's pre-eminent ethnomusicologist. While he is highly regarded in Hungary and in his own country, he was unknown in the rest of the world. Our film is a tribute to his work, and to the living musicians who carry on the traditional music of Transylvania and Romanian Moldova. After five expeditions, we completed the film in 2011, and it has played at festivals in Chicago, The Netherlands, and most recently in Kathmandu. This film was supported by grants from the Citizens Exchange Council and the National Geographic All Roads documentary initiative, and by several grants from the Dutch government. The film has never been shown in Hungary or Romania.

See: <http://zalafilms.com/films/stony.html>

I am currently working on three documentary film projects with Hungarian themes; again they are historical projects, in English, for non-Hungarian audiences. *Angel of Mercy*, started in 2005, is about Sister Margaret Slachta, her role in the Hungarian Holocaust and her subsequent persecution under Communism. Another is an interview with Recsk prison camp survivor István Déness, and the third is the aforementioned *Erdős 100* project.

If there is a theme to my talk, it is that it is very difficult to produce works about Hungarians and Hungarian culture addressed to non-Hungarians. There is no obvious source of support, or mechanism for seeking support for these kinds of projects. Hopefully, my presence here will at least bring awareness of these projects to the Hungarian diaspora and stimulate discussions about how these kinds of historical media stories can be supported in the future.

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Given time, I would also like to mention the problems of exhibition, and the very successful program of films I curated with Steve Kovács in 2006 at UC Berkeley and San Francisco State University on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution.