

When planning our events for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, we were looking for ways to educate as well as commemorate the occasion. I discovered Albert Kish, a veteran Hungarian-Canadian filmmaker with an extensive career as a director and editor with the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) from 1967 through 1997.

Kish arrived in Canada in 1957, and started working in the film industry as a cameraman, then editor and later as an independent filmmaker. He joined CBC in Toronto in 1964 and became senior film editor by 1966. He then moved to the NFB in 1967 where he directed and edited over thirty productions. Many of his works are documentary in nature, sometimes investigating the immigrant experience – like “Hold the Ketchup” (1977), “Our Street was Paved with Gold” (1973) and “Békevár Jubilee” (1977) – the latter film looks at the first Hungarian people that settled in Saskatchewan.

I spoke with Mr. Kish to learn more about his extensive career and tell him that we would be using his poignant film “This is a Photograph” (1971) that won several awards including the Canadian Film Award for the Best Short film, as part of our ‘Evening of Commemoration this October 23<sup>rd</sup>’. I asked him about his Hungarian influences:

by Lorraine Weideman



## A CONVERSATION WITH ALBERT KISH

“I lived in the small town of Eger, famous for its red wine, known as *Bikavér* (bull's blood) and its baroque churches. One morning on my way to school, I noticed a commotion at the front of the cathedral which stood at the center of the city. When I went closer to see what it was all about, I discovered a world that would fascinate me for the rest of my life.

A film crew was shooting exterior shots for a feature motion picture. There were men and women in period costumes, horses, old carriages, giant lamps, and a camera mounted on a dolly which traveled a great distance along tracks. But what really fascinated me was the crane. The director, cameraman and his assistant could be lifted up from eye-level to above the crowd, and horizontally - 360 degrees or down for a close-up.

When stepping into a studio for the first time, Orson Wells said: “What a marvellous toy store for grown-ups.” Clutching my school bag, I watched the hullabaloo for four days. On the second day my mother came and informed me that I should be in school and, not with the ‘clowns’. On the third day, my teacher came, and on the fourth day my principal came; yet I stubbornly refused to return to school – that was the day the cameraman noticed me and asked if I wanted to look into the camera.

One of the assistants pushed the dolly, and through the viewfinder I discovered another reality, another world

During the oppressive years of communism, I watched the

classic Soviet films whenever I had a chance, particularly those that were directed by Sergei Eisenstein. His editing or ‘montage’ as they say it in cine-clubs, was new and exciting. Eisenstein’s “Potemkin” and “October” were made in the silent film days and the montage made up for the lack of sound. In our day-to-day existence, we had to balance aesthetic enjoyment with abhorrence for the regime that produced the films. At the same time I managed to get a copy of Béla Balázs’s book “Film

Kultura” – a book that explained the nuts and bolts of cinema. After reading his book, I looked at movies very differently.

During the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, I managed to get into the office of the Chairman of the Revolutionary Council. The local museum had a brand new 16mm movie camera with lots of film stock. The chairman gave me an ID card, and with two armed guards we went there, and were given the camera, with the instruction manual and all the accessory gadgets.

As it became clear that the Soviets would intervene and the Revolution would be over, I took all the exposed film and threw them in the river, roll by roll. Goodbye to all the images of happy faces, students pulling down red stars and Stalin pictures - all the events I filmed ended up in the bottom of the river. I took the camera back to the museum and on the same day I was on a train to Austria.

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I wanted to go to America - after all, Hollywood was the 'center of the world' to a cinema buff like me.

One day, however, a friend of mine told me about a film screening at a university in Vienna. Luckily, I had the curiosity and sit through an evening of films from the National Film Board of Canada - films that were beautifully photographed and cleverly edited. After seeing many Hollywood films, I quickly realized that the NFB films were perfected in the editing room. The next day I was at the Canadian Embassy to fill out an application form, and a month later I got my visa. By March of

1957 I was living in Montreal. Ten years later, after working as a senior film editor at the CBC in Toronto, I became an employee of the Film Board.

Later, as a director, my early films were about Canadian history - I liked the subject and as an added bonus I traveled to the ten provinces and the two territories. I learned so much about Canada and Canadians.

My immigrant subjects were suggested to me by my producers. I insisted that I didn't want to become what I called a 'licensed ethnic' and that I was interested in the immigrant stories only as universal human experiences."

**Albert Kish is also well known for his photography, and his work is currently available at the Stephen Bulger Gallery in Toronto. [www.bulgergallery.com](http://www.bulgergallery.com)**



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