

5 ways to mark St. Stephen's Day in Hungary

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If you're of Hungarian origin – and there are over a quarter of a million in Canada, with 15,000 living in Montreal – you know that this Monday is St. Stephen's Day.

Nothing to do with that other, better-known St. Stephen's Day, which the Irish and many other Christians in Europe celebrate on Dec. 26. That's a different Stephen, the Jerusalem evangelist who, in biblical times, became Christianity's first martyr.

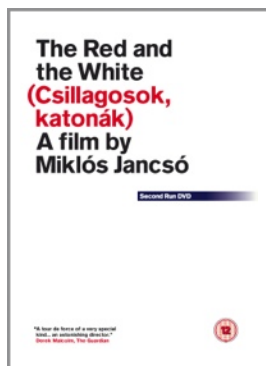
The Hungarian holiday – and the St. Stephen at the heart of it – are something else entirely.

Held every Aug. 20, the day honours Hungary's first medieval monarch, King Stephen I, who united the Magyar clans, was crowned by the pope, turned his people from paganism to Catholicism, and held the throne for nearly four decades, from 1000 to 1038. He was canonized Aug. 20, 1083.

Long Hungary's national day, St. Stephen's Day got a name change in 1949, when the post-war Communist government symbolically chose Aug. 20 to create a new Socialist constitution, in one swoop eliminating the day's Christian significance. St. Stephen's Day became Constitution Day.

Under the Communists, it was also a harvest day, Day of the New Bread, with atheism the new ersatz substitute for the old "bread," the body of Christ. When Hungary became free again in 1989, back came St. Stephen, as if he and the faith had never left.

Here are five great films on DVD – mostly imports, since for some reason Hungarian films are hard to find in Canada – that show Hungary at different points in its modern, 20th-century history. All the discs are available on Amazon's sites in Canada or Britain, and are playable on standard DVD players.



The Red and the White (*Hungary/Soviet Union, 1967*) The nihilism of civil war was never more poetic than in this Cinemascope classic from legendary director Miklós Jancsó. His mastery of long, unbroken takes and complex crowd scenes add to the realism of a very disturbing picture. It's set along the Volga River in 1919, in the aftermath of the

Russian Revolution, and depicts how counter-revolutionary Whites slaughtered Hungarians fighting with the communist Reds – and how the Reds got their bloody revenge. Avoid the poor U.S. DVD from Kino; get the better British release from Second Run, coded Region-0 for all players.

Love (*Hungary, 1971*) Another fine Second Run release, and a fine film, too. Somewhere in Hungary after the 1956 Soviet invasion, a frail old lady lies in bed, waiting for the next letter to arrive from her son. She thinks he's in America making a movie, but in fact he's locked up in a Hungarian jail for political dissidents. The lady's daughter-in-law keeps up the charade, Goodbye Lenin-style. A moving tribute to love and family by director Károly Makk, who updated the story in 2003 in *A Long Weekend in Pest and Buda* (also available on DVD from Second Run).

Almanac of Fall (*Hungary, 1985*) The antithesis of *Love*, this film could be called *Hate* – or maybe *Greed*. Again, the central character is an old matriarch, but here the entire movie takes place in the woman's decrepit apartment, where four people fight over how they're going to get her money. None of them – not the son, nor the old woman's nurse, nor the nurse's lover, nor a new lodger – has any redeeming quality, and under the direction of the acclaimed Béla Tarr, the misanthropy is mesmerizing. The Facets DVD comes with a collectible booklet but little else.

Colonel Redl (*Hungary/Austria/West Germany, 1985*) The great Hungarian director István Szabó made this Oscar-nominated espionage drama, and it's a haunting film. Based on a true story, it's about the life and death of Alfred Redl, an officer of the Austro-Hungarian empire's secret police who was unmasked as a Russian spy on the eve of the First World War. Klaus Maria Brandauer gives a stunning performance in the lead role. The DVD is out of print in the U.S. but is available from Britain in a Region-0 release by inD, an independent distributor.



Sunshine (*Germany/Austria/ Canada/Hungary, 1999*) Another Szabó history lesson, this time a three-hour saga about a Hungarian Jewish family living through each era of war and peace of the 1900s. Ralph Fiennes and Rachel Weisz share the best roles (apparently amicably, since they teamed up again in 2005 in *The Constant Gardener*, the John Le Carré thriller about Big Pharma in Africa). Paramount distributes the DVD in the U.S. but not in Canada; check www.dvdpricesearch.com for the best U.S. mail-order prices.

*And in the still-wishing-and-hoping department.: **The Journey** (U.S., 1959)*

Filmed in Vienna, this was a well-made Cold War drama about a group of tourists (Deborah Kerr and E.G. Marshall, among others) who get stuck in Budapest when the Soviets occupy the city after the 1956 uprising. Yul Brynner plays their captor, Robert Morley is their de facto spokesman and Jason Robards makes his film debut. Turner Classic Movies has the video distribution rights, but seems is in no hurry to release a DVD. There's an online petition for it, though, at imdb.com.

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