

Hungary's Cultural and Sports Relations with the Arab Countries in the 1960s and 1980s

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Abstract:

Culture and sport are of great importance in relations between states, much more than is usually thought. In fact, perhaps people understand and appreciate its importance more than politicians. These are the areas of relations that most affect people, broadening their knowledge of the world and bringing them closer together, even those from completely different cultures and civilizations. This system of relations could even be called "people-to-people or everyday diplomacy", which makes a major contribution to understanding between peoples and to reducing prejudices and stereotypes. Of course, for it to work in a balanced and effective way, it is essential that states organize and encourage. Here, we portray the sport and cultural relations between Hungary and the Arab World, with special focus on the Algerian-Hungarian, and Egyptian-Hungarian fruitful cooperation.

Keywords: Hungary, cultural relations, Maghreb region, Algerian-Hungarian cooperation

INTRODUCTION

In the present study, we interpret cultural relations in a broad sense. We do not only mean the classical field of human culture (film, fiction), but also scientific cooperation and professional training. In this respect, we would like to focus on the Arab world, where Hungary's most important partners after the Second World War were Egypt, which had a decisive influence in the region, and Algeria, which became independent in 1962. In the wide-ranging relations with these Arab states, the cultural sphere was of particular importance and, over time, became one of the most dynamic forms of cooperation.

Hungarian-Egyptian cultural influences and cooperation

Cultural and sports relations with Egypt were established relatively early - between the two world wars.¹ These relations expanded and deepened after the 1952 revolution: film screenings took place (e.g. the film *Erkel* in July 1953) and Hungarian literary works were published in Cairo (e.g. Péter Veres' short story collection *Próbatétel*). The highlight in this respect was the visit of the Hungarian national football team, the Golden Team, to Egypt, which made its first foreign trip to the Arab country after a historic 6:3 victory at Wembley Stadium. During their month-long stay (27 January to 25 February 1954), the Hungarian footballers played five matches and were received by the head of state, Mohamed Naguib.² From September 1954, Radio Cairo also broadcast Hungarian programmes. For example, short narratives or biographies of famous Hungarian musicians such as Ferenc Liszt were often read out as part of the "Loud Newspaper" programme. The Egyptian radio also broadcast Hungarian music, and its youth programme also dealt with Hungarian universities and the training courses offered there.³ Several film screenings took place at festivals in the Arab world, notably in Cairo and Damascus. The 1955 Cairo Festival, for example, saw the screenings of *Gassing*, *Lily Boy*, *Kati* and the *Wildcat* and *Gypsy Dance*. The biggest success was, of course, the documentary about the London victory, *The Match of the Century*:

"The film was literally a smash hit. The audience behaved as if they were at a football match, not a film screening. The Hungarian goals were met with the Cairo fans jumping up from their seats and applauding."⁴ The increasing importance of the relationship and the Cairo leadership's position in this regard was also clearly demonstrated by the fact that in August 1956 the staff of the Hungarian embassy in Cairo was expanded with a new staff member, whose task was to handle cultural relations. As a result of his activities, on 5 September 1957 Hungary signed a cultural treaty with the Nile riparian country, the first of its kind with a non-European country.

Between 10–16 December 1962, another Hungarian Film Week was held in Cairo, where five new feature films were shown: *Legenda a vonaton* (Legend on the Train), *Szegény gazdagok* (The Poor Rich), *Napfény a jégen* (Sunshine on Ice), *Kölyök és Dani* (Kid and Dani). At the opening ceremony, the famous Egyptian film actor Yehia Chahine recited a poem by Sándor Petőfi. The films screened were such a success that the Egyptian authorities bought the screening rights to all the films. The Hungarian actors were represented by Ildikó Pécsi and the directors by Tamás Rényi, who said that they had used their stay to see several works of the Egyptian film industry. Based on what he saw, he drew a kind of indirect parallel with the aspirations of contemporary Hungarian filmmaking when he emphasized the strong representation of social problems in Egyptian films, which "are generally about liberation from oppression and the struggle against exploitation."⁵ The Hungarian delegation's impressions were enriched by their visit to the modern, state-of-the-art Film Academy, where they talked to the students, whose interests were dominated by Soviet, Italian and French cinema. The students also expressed their determination to make films or see films by other national authors that could counterbalance the "bad Hollywood school, which they had a long tradition of".⁶

By the end of the year, the 91-minute co-production film *Egyiptomi történet* (The Egyptian Story), directed by Gyula Mészáros and Seif Eddine Shawkat, was completed. The youth entertainment film stars two Hungarian children who find themselves

in Egypt under adventurous circumstances and eventually find their way back to Hungary. To prepare for the shooting in Egypt, writer László Ranódy, one of the authors of the script (the other author was Gábor Thurzó), travelled to Cairo. Later, a group of 30 filmmakers arrived in the Arab country for the shooting, with such distinguished actors as Irén Psota, Kálmán Latabár, Manyi Kis, Sándor Pécsi, Marianne Krencsey and Mária Mezey. The film also featured Egyptian actors, including Zahya Ayoub, Yehia Chahine, Abdel Moneim Ibrahim and Ahmed Farahat, whose performances raised the standard of the film. Filming itself lasted three months, and the film premiered in January 1963. However, its critical reception within the Hungarian professional circles was not very positive and the 'rushed' work of the directors in particular received a lot of criticism.⁷ The comments, however, still highlighted and praised the performances of the child actors, especially Ahmed Farahat, the "cute Arab boy", "who has a sense of humour."⁸

The Egyptian Film Week, planned in Cairo on the occasion of the 1962 Hungarian Film Week, was held between 16–22 May 1963 at the Uránia Cinema in Budapest. The films screened at the time (The Mysterious Dweller, Modern Cairo, Jamila, Old Cairo, Woman at the Petrol Station, The Path of Sin, Port Said, Love Intervenes, The Suez Canal, The Aswan Dam) gave a realistic picture of life in the Arab world.⁹ The attendance of the films was 70-80%, although the artistic quality of the films did not leave a particularly positive impression. Hungarian audiences were particularly disturbed by the fact that, compared to the films they had seen and were used to, the Egyptian films were rather slow and long.¹⁰

At the same time, the positive experience of the reciprocal series of events provided an incentive to deepen cooperation, which they now want to make regular and contractual. This was also the reason for the agreement signed in December 1962 between the Hungarian Radio and Television and the United Arab Television for the reciprocal screening of film works from the two countries. The agreement provided for the exchange of experience and services as well as programme material. It included "the exchange of newsreel films on social, economic and cultural life and highlights of the two

countries, as well as music, variety and folklore programmes in 16 mm black and white".¹¹ The parties also specifically agreed to produce programmes to mark national holidays (4 April and 23 July) and undertook to provide English or French language accompanying texts for all programmes. The agreement was implemented, and in the 1960s, Hungarian feature films or documentaries and reports on the country were frequently shown on Egyptian television.

Alongside film, classical music was an equally notable area of cultural cooperation, which had unfolded years earlier with the Bartók Festival of March 1956 at the Cairo Opera House. It was also during this period that the pianist Lajos Hernádi, who gave three solo concerts in Egypt, visited the country. The cultural agreement signed in 1957 also created the opportunity for Egyptian music scholarship holders to come to Hungary to study. In January 1964, the 34-member folk dance troupe of the Builders' Union arrived in Cairo as part of the International Festival of Folk Arts, performing at the Cairo Opera House, in Aswan and Alexandria. In December of the same year, the ballet troupe of the Hungarian State Opera House performed in the Egyptian capital.¹² In January 1965, the Cairo Puppet Ensemble performed in Budapest. Later that year, two Egyptian theatre professionals were received in Hungary to study the Hungarian theatre scene.

The contact between the journalists was also very important, as they could do a lot to help the two peoples get to know each other better. From 1966 onwards, the Hungarian Telegraphic Office again had a permanent correspondent in Egypt, and Egyptian journalists often came to Hungary to exchange experiences and gather material for their articles.

Mutual knowledge of fiction has also been an important element of cultural cooperation. In this area, the world-renowned orientalist and Arab scholar Gyula Germanus, who was accepted as a member of several Arab academies of sciences, including the one in Cairo, has made a particularly important contribution. In 1961, he published an anthology of Arab költők a pogánykortól napjainkig (Arab poets from the pagan period to the present day), including poems by

Egyptian poets. The following year, he published another work, *The History of Arabic Literature*, in which he devoted several chapters to Egyptian fiction. In addition, the professor has published several books in which he has shared his experiences of his travels in the Arab world in an enjoyable style with Hungarian readers, who have come within arm's reach of Arab-Islamic culture and modern Egypt through his vivid accounts. Among the latter, the book *Kelet fényei felé* (*Towards the Lights of the East*), published in 1966, is particularly noteworthy, in the first chapter of which the author describes his visit to the Arab Academy of Sciences and his inaugural lecture there. Here he also mentions that in 1940, in a Cairo journal, he had already described the poetry of Sándor Petőfi, "emphasising that our great lyric poet had introduced pure folk simplicity into literature".¹³

Works by Egyptian authors have also been regularly published in Hungarian. In 1964, for example, the short novel *The Sin* by Yusuf Idris, one of the best-known figures in the literary scene after the 1952 Egyptian revolution, was published. In 1965, he published the novel *The Beginning and the End* by Naguib Mahfouz, who later won the Nobel Prize, followed by a number of other contemporary Egyptian writers.

Sports relations developed very dynamically and fruitfully after the 1954 visit of the national football team. Several football teams (Honvéd, Győr) toured Egypt, where the number of Hungarian coaches increased from the late 1950s. Pál Titkos, who was also a member of the Hungarian team that finished runners-up in the 1938 World Cup, managed the Egyptian national football team between 1957 and 1959, which won the 1959 African Nations Cup in Cairo. By the mid-1960s, six Hungarian football coaches were working in Egypt, including Sándor Kapocsi, who managed the national team and helped to set up a system of sports schools. Two fencing coaches and a water polo coach also worked in the country during these years.¹⁴

A very important and valuable area of relations has been academic cooperation, in the framework of which Egyptian young people have

received undergraduate and postgraduate training and obtained academic degrees in Hungary. In this respect, the rapidly growing number of Egyptian students was illustrated by the fact that while in 1958 there were 25 students studying in Hungarian higher education institutions, by the early 1960s an average of 15 Egyptian research fellows were arriving in Hungary each year to obtain a scientific degree. This trend continued in later years and the number of students studying in Hungary later reached 25-30 per year. As a result, about 800 college students were trained in Hungarian higher education institutions between 1957 and 1967, while Hungarian professionals actively contributed to the establishment of an industrial and an agricultural college in Egypt.¹⁵

A more nuanced analysis of the undoubtedly impressive statistics reveals that 60 Egyptian citizens obtained scientific degrees (PhDs) in Hungary between 1960 and 1970, almost exclusively in one of the natural sciences (chemistry, biology, physics, etc.), economics, or medicine and agriculture. On returning home, they became professors or worked in senior positions in the state apparatus.¹⁶ Of course, young Hungarians also went to Egypt to study at university, where they mainly learned Arabic.

It was common for university professors and leaders (such as the Dean of the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences at the University of Mansoura) to visit, exchange experiences, attend academic conferences or carry out research in the other country. The archaeologist László Castiglione spent 10 months in Cairo in 1958, and the following year three Hungarian researchers studied Roman monuments.¹⁷

After Nasser's death, President Sadat gradually but firmly distanced himself from the Soviet Union and the socialist countries, seeing a solution to the Middle East problem in close relations with the United States. This also had an impact on political and economic relations between Budapest and Cairo, which were clearly loosening as a result. However, the political process had no impact on cultural and scientific relations, which, despite the changes, have developed successfully. Young Egyptians continued to be accepted for

undergraduate and doctoral studies in Hungary, with an average of 30 students per year. In 1972, ELTE signed a cooperation agreement with Al-Azhar University for the exchange of students and teachers. The Institute for World Economic Research of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences has established links with the Egyptian Planning Institute. A particularly significant event was the opening of the Hungarian Scientific and Cultural Centre in Cairo on 26 October 1974, the first Hungarian institution of its kind in a non-European country. The opening ceremony was attended by Minister of Culture Yusuf Sibai and Miklós Nagy, Director of the Institute of Cultural Relations. On the occasion of the event, the institute presented Hungarian painting from the period between the two world wars and Hungarian folk art.¹⁸ A year later, the Hungarian Ambassador assessed the work of the Institute and stated: "The work that has been done since its opening is clearly positive, and even in this relatively short period of time it has done a lot to promote the achievements of Hungarian culture, science and education".¹⁹

The Ambassador described the professional presentations on the achievements of Hungarian education, science and agriculture as successful. The Hungarian language courses also proved useful. Hungarian music concerts in the capital and Alexandria were successful. In the autumn of 1975, the Institute presented Hungarian feature films and documentaries for the first time. The reception of the latter, however, was rather muted among Egyptian audiences. According to the ambassador, "it was not bad, but it is also a fact that it will not be easy to find the most suitable films for Egyptian audiences with fundamentally different tastes".²⁰ Three years later, in 1977, however, Pál Gábor's film *A Járvány* (The Epidemic) won the top prize at the Cairo International Film Festival.

At the same time, the socialist countries repeatedly criticised the strong US orientation in President Sadat's foreign policy. In retaliation, on 8 December 1977 the Cairo government closed the consulates of the GDR, the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Poland outside Cairo, as well as the four existing cultural institutes: the Soviet, Czechoslovak, East German and Hungarian, on the grounds that the states maintaining them were carrying out Marxist-Leninist

propaganda. The Hungarian government - cautiously - assessed the move as "aimed at narrowing relations between the two countries".²¹ The Foreign Ministry's head of department, who communicated the decision to the head of the cultural centre, added at the end of the official text, "I, for my part, sincerely regret and hope that the time will come when the Hungarian Institute in Cairo will be able to reopen its doors."²² This happened in the following decade.

Thanks to the active work of the Cultural Counsellor's Office, Egyptian-Hungarian cultural cooperation started to expand again in the early 1980s, although its dynamism was below the level experienced in the 1960s. In November 1984, coinciding with the visit of Deputy Prime Minister József Marjai, a Hungarian film week was organised in Cairo as part of the Hungarian Days, and Hungarian artists and performers took part in a film screening and a folk dance festival. Among others, the films *Vera Angi* (Pál Gábor), *Diary for My Children* (Márta Mészáros) and *Top Hat and Spuds Nose* (István Lauró Bácskai) were screened. The director Miklós Szurdi was present at the premiere of *The Effect Hunters*. Two discussion evenings on the films were also organised at the Independent Critics Club of Egypt. During these, the difference between the cultures of the two countries became very clear. Contributors were critical of the nudity and extramarital sex in our films. They expressed their disapproval of the fact that they appear as a natural element in the stories. The Hungarian participants tried to explain that these elements are only present in the specific artistic situation. This reasoning may have helped the Egyptians to understand the phenomenon, but not to accept it," noted the journalist covering the debate.²³

In addition to events showcasing the film industry of both countries, the cooperation plan signed with Information Minister Safwat El-Sherif during his visit to Budapest was also significant. No less significant was the sports cooperation agreement signed by István Buda, State Secretary, with his Egyptian counterpart in Cairo.²⁴ Interstate cultural and sports relations then continued uninterrupted. In the latter context, the continued interest shown by Hungarian museums in the artefacts of ancient Egypt was not

negligible, which made it possible to constantly expand the knowledge base of various Hungarian educational programmes and to organise exhibitions on the heritage of the Pharaohs in Budapest and other Hungarian cities.

Hungarian-Algerian cultural relations

Algeria won its independence in 1962 in a war of national liberation that lasted nearly eight years (1954–1962). Direct cultural cooperation with the North African country could only be established afterwards, as previously it would only have been possible through the colonial power, France. In the field of sport, however, meaningful links were already established during the Algerian war. Algerian footballers played for the most successful French clubs (Monaco, St-Étienne, Nice, Lyon, Toulouse) and three of their players were in Hungary when the French national team played a friendly match with the Hungarian national team in the Népstadion on 6 October 1957, winning 2–0.²⁵ In April 1958, however, all of them left France on the same day and at the same hour, but separately, after a secret meeting with the FLN delegate. They gave up a stable existence and prosperity (200,000 francs a month) out of patriotism. Subsequently, the FLN (National Liberation Front), which led the fight against the colonial regime, formed an independent football team on 13 April 1958, which was subsequently hosted twice (in 1959 and 1961). They stayed in Hungary for ten days, where they formally arrived at the invitation of the National Council of Trade Unions, rather than a government body.²⁶ Naturally, all the Algerian footballers were already familiar with the legendary Hungarian "Golden Team". However, the consequences of the 1956 revolutionary struggle for freedom also had an impact on the world-class Hungarian national team, which did not escape the attention of Mustapha Zitouni, who played in the defensive position. Critically, but also realistically, he noted that "Hungarian football is not what it used to be, it has fallen back a bit".²⁷ However, Rachid Mekhloufi, a striker who was also a member of the national team that visited Budapest in the autumn of 1957, added that "if he were to play for a Hungarian club team, he would choose the Vörös Lobogó (Red Flag), because Hidegkúti also

plays there. But, he added, I would only come if my country was free."²⁸

The team, called Free Algeria, played several matches in Budapest (on Üllői road) and in the countryside (Tatabánya, Győr, Dorog) with local teams and with the regional trade union teams. The proceeds from the match played in Tatabánya on 4 June 1959 were donated 20,000 forints to support Algeria in the war.²⁹ The new sports ground in Oroszlány was inaugurated on 1 May 1961 and the Algerian team's appearance was timed to coincide with the opening ceremony. The match ended in a 2:2 draw.³⁰

Most of the matches were played in front of thousands of spectators who enjoyed the game spectacularly. The Algerian footballers' presence and participation was aimed, as their leader made clear, at "making friends". The players are great with the ball, but above all they are patriots and diplomats."³¹ Accordingly, in addition to the matches, there were a number of public meetings, factory visits and professional exchanges at the College of Physical Education.

In addition to their statements, the patriotic spirit of the players was also evident in their determination to stick with the team throughout the war. It was only after the independence of their country (1962) that some retired from football, while others (such as Ben Tifur) continued to coach.

On the cultural front, the first contacts were made the day after the official declaration of independence, thanks to Emmanuel Roblès (1914-1995), a French-language writer who interrupted his trip to Romania and Bulgaria in Budapest on 7 July 1962. The successful and respected writer has published several works in Hungarian. His short story *The Fortress*, published in 1959 in the volume *Contemporary French Narrators*, and his work *Villa district* in 1962. His play *In the Name of the King* was first performed in the Hungarian capital in 1948. He met representatives of Hungarian culture and gave short interviews. As the child of Spanish immigrant parents, he never hesitated to call Algeria his homeland: "Algeria is my homeland. I am from Oran, I lived there for almost 30 years.

Solemn words cannot, I think, express my emotion, but let's say: I am happy for the freedom of my country of birth."³²

The first cultural agreement between the two countries was signed in 1964. It provided for the exchange of folk ensembles, performers, journalists, the sending of Hungarian lecturers and the establishment of relations between museums. On 18 November 1967, the film *The Battle of Algiers*, which won the Golden Lion Award at the Venice Film Festival, was presented in Budapest at a gala screening, authentically depicting one of the most tragic periods of the Algerian war. In the spring of the following year, a Hungarian film week was held in Algiers, where, among other films, *A Hungarian Nabob* and *Twenty Hours* were screened. There were also performances by folk bands. The Algerian Folk Ensemble visited us in the spring of 1970 and performed in several provincial towns outside Budapest. Béla Bartók was regularly commemorated in Algeria (the composer studied Algerian Arabic folk music alongside Biscay in 1913 in search of the eastern roots of Hungarian folk music).

Naturally, relations in the field of sport also became more lively. The Hungarian Olympic and national football teams visited Algiers in 1963 and 1967, winning both times. In addition, Hungarian coaches, in response to the Algerians' regular requests for emphasis, worked in the North African country in the 1960s, where they gained great respect for themselves and their country through their contribution to the promotion of football, water polo, swimming, fencing and athletics. Hungarian educational methodology programmes were also handed over.³³

Of particular note is the construction of the 5th of July Stadium in Algiers. Negotiations and preparations began in 1964. The Budapest Népstadion appealed to many politicians from the Third World who had visited our country, and this contributed to the Algerians' decision to entrust the design and organisation of the construction of the stadium to the Hungarians. The \$20 million project was completed by 1972. The design was by Ybl Prize-winning architect Sándor Azbej. The stadium became a reference and contributed significantly to the fact that Hungarian professionals were later

commissioned by the Algerian state to carry out high-value construction projects.³⁴

Even during the war, Hungary had already accepted some Algerian young people for vocational training. Their numbers averaged between 20 and 30 in the 1960s, but by 1969, there were 59 and 111 in 1971. Bridge and railway builders were trained in Békéscsaba, concrete element manufacturers in Szeged and Pécs, and mining specialists in Tatabánya.³⁵ Their numbers increased, and from the 1970s they trained mainly water professionals in Hungary. At the same time, Hungarian experts also helped to organise vocational training in water management in Algeria. Four secondary schools for water management were set up with the help of Hungarian teachers. By 1988, under an agreement between the two countries that had been in existence since 1972, some 200 Algerians had been trained, 20 of them at the higher level.³⁶ Of course, we also sent specialists like agricultural engineers, doctors, nurses. Including family members, the Hungarian colony gradually increased in size until 1985, when its number exceeded three thousand people. However, by the following year, after the major investments were completed, it had more than halved.³⁷

A series of events showcasing the countries' cultures has been an important part of the relationship. The Algerian Cultural Week in Hungary in November 1986, the first of its kind, was a major event, and in 1989 the Hungarian Cultural Week was held in Algiers. According to the Hungarian Ambassador, "as a result of the press preparations, both the French and Arabic-language press covered our country and the events of the Week to an extent unprecedented in similar events in other nations."³⁸

Cultural relations with other states of the Arab world

In the Maghreb region, Hungary still has a good relationship with Tunisia, with which it has developed significant cooperation not only in the fields of economy and trade, but also in culture and sport. In 1968, a Hungarian film week was held in Tunis. Hungarian coaches (fencing, football) worked in the country at that time and later. In 1975, a Hungarian film week was held in the capital, prior to the visit

of Pál Losonczi, the head of state, in November. The newspapers gave a very favourable review of István Gaál's *Holt vidék* (Dead Landscape) and Károly Makk's *Szerelem* (Love), and Mari Törőcsik's 'outstanding talent' was particularly emphasised.³⁹

Hungary has signed cultural agreements with Syria and Iraq in the Middle East. Events took place, Hungarian films were shown, art and ethnographic exhibitions were organised in Damascus and several Hungarian coaches, mainly football coaches, worked in the country. However, according to the ambassador's report, "our cultural contacts were at a very modest level due to the scarcity of funds. Although the current cultural work plan foresees the organisation of various events, years of experience have shown that these are not being implemented."⁴⁰ Until the change of regime, young people were welcomed for vocational training and to learn the Hungarian language.

Our cultural presence in Iraq is also demonstrated by "Hungarian film week, Hungarian cultural week (9-16 January 1975), art exhibitions. However, the Ambassador painted a depressing picture of the country's cultural life when, among other things, he reported the lack of a permanent theatre and described the fine arts as downright amateurish."⁴¹ The somewhat one-sided report, however, made no mention of the large-scale investments in education (building schools and universities) or the mass enrolment of girls in school, which had led to the virtual eradication of illiteracy by the end of the decade.

CONCLUSION

Finally, the Arab-Hungarian cultural conventions and work plans are also a clear testimony to the close and intensive cultural cooperation that Hungary developed and maintained with the Arab world (especially Egypt and Algeria) in a remarkable way during the period under study.

Documents related to cultural relations

I.I. Report of the Hungarian ambassador to Egypt on cultural relations in 1959⁴²

"There are still 200 Egyptian scholars studying in Hungary today. So far, 150 have graduated here. When they returned, we held a reception with two ministers and four state secretaries. The students who spoke said that they were very, very grateful to the Hungarian government for making it possible for them to study there. They are happy that another group is going to Hungary, because this will further strengthen our friendship. We also have very extensive cultural contacts. For example, we have concluded a cultural agreement. Most of the foreign coaches in the United Arab Republic are Hungarian. Of our seven coaches, the two we sent home were only returned in tears. One technical school has an all-Hungarian teaching staff. We have seven teachers in this Egyptian school. Unfortunately, we cannot do what other friendly countries do, which is to send bands, for example. The difficulty is that the Egyptian leaders and the competent bodies are always asking for operetta theatre and we are always offering opera. They say that if they ask for bean soup, we should not offer them a straw hat. They want Hungarian operetta, and every time I have written home about this, they have always replied that we cannot, operetta is very busy, but we will give them opera. Well, of course the Egyptians don't want it. They want light music, especially things like Kálmán, they love it."

Scene from the 1962 co-production film The Egyptian Story



Directed by Gyula Mészáros and the Hungarian-born *Seif Eddine Shawkat*

In the picture: Irén Psota and Kálmán Latabár

Algerian-French writer Emmanuel Roblès in Budapest⁴³

On his way to Romania and Bulgaria, French Algerian writer Emmanuel Roblès spent a few days in Budapest. His name is already familiar to Hungarian readers; he has recently published a volume of his work entitled *Villa district*; and another of his great short stories (*The Fortress*) in the collection of *Contemporary French Narrators*. Roblès heard the news of Algeria's independence on the way, and that was of course the first thought in our conversation. – I'm from Oran, I lived there for almost thirty years. Solemn words, I think, would not express my emotion, let's put it simply: I am happy for the freedom of my country of birth. In an independent Algeria, literature will also flourish more, and among my Arab writer friends there are many outstanding talents, to mention just two of the best: Ahmed Sefrioui, Mohamed Dib. I know them well; I am the editor of the book series *Algerian Literature* for the Seuil publishing house in Paris. Moreover, a younger generation of writers is emerging with a new message and exciting artistic projects, a generation of writers

who have already been matured as writers by their experiences of the struggle for freedom. Many of them, such as A. Crea and Ai-Dsaffer, have lived in Morocco. Now they can return to their homeland. I, too, am going to Algeria after my holiday in Bulgaria, where I would like to finish my novel cycle (the first volume of the cycle is Villa district, published in Hungarian, the second is Mount Vesuvius, and the third, which Robles is writing, is Spring in Algeria, which is about the first years of the war.) The struggle for freedom, which has now ended, confirms my belief that people can be killed, but the ideas for which they gave their lives can never be destroyed.

The Battle of the Algiers premiere⁴⁴

Friday at the May 1 cinema Gillo Pontecorvo's Italian film, The Battle of Algiers was screened at a gala premiere. Moushaoui Mohamed Elias, director of Cinematique Algiers, arrived in Budapest for the screening. The gala was attended by Mohamed Kellou, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Democratic and People's Republic of Algeria accredited in Budapest. Dr. László Pesta, vice-president of the Institute of Cultural Relations, gave introductory words before the screening of the film, which was received with great applause. At the same time as the presentation, a photo exhibition was opened in the glass showcases of the lobby of the movie theatre, reviving the events of the Algerian War of Independence and the path of peaceful construction.

After the event, Dr. László Pesta hosted a dinner in the Gellért Hotel in honor of the Algerian guests. (MTI)

Achievements, problems, and tasks of our relations with the Arab countries, 9 January 1983 (details)⁴⁵

Many other areas of our relations reflect the importance of the Arab world in our country's external relations. We have signed cultural agreements with 12 Arab countries, but we currently have only 7 work plans in force, as our Arab partners are dissatisfied with the drafts we have submitted in 4 relations.

Between 1960-80, 732 Arab students graduated from universities and colleges in our country. In the academic year 1982/83, 638 Arab

students are studying in our universities, almost 50% of the students (1344) from the developing world. In the academic year 1981/82, we started the transition to fee-based admission, which has caused some misunderstandings.

From 1958 to the present, nearly 300 people have obtained a PhD in Hungary, mostly from Egypt. From developing countries, 238 people are currently studying in Hungary, 95% of them from Arab countries, mostly Egypt and Iraq, and some from Syria. We also benefit from educational links. Over the past two decades, some 80 Hungarian professionals have studied languages in the Arab world. Most of the participants in vocational training have also come from the Arab world. This year, we trained 945 Arab skilled workers, 51% of the total number of graduates.

Direct cooperation between academies of sciences and universities is a neglected area, but one that will receive more attention in the future. The first steps have already been taken with Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Algeria, and a larger-scale cooperation between the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the University of Tripoli is expected to be launched soon.

Although there is interest in some areas of Hungarian culture, such as film, and exhibitions are welcome, the decline in our financial resources has led to a significant reduction in our cultural contacts. Book publishing is a neglected area, with the exception of a few published poems, Arabic literature is unknown in Hungary.

Over the past five years, relations between sports organisations have developed rapidly. In the priority areas, sport cooperation agreements or protocols are in place. A total of 44 Hungarian sports coaches are working in the developing world, 29 of whom are based in Arab countries, including 25 in Kuwait.

Gyula Hegyi: Our Culture in the World. Hungarian Film Week in Cairo.

National Film Weeks are one of the events of cultural diplomacy in which professional cooperation and direct contact with the general public are both present and complementary. The mutual organisation

of film weeks, usually based on an intergovernmental cultural agreement, the selection and exchange of films and the outlining of further cooperation require careful organisation and preparation, from the assessment of the host country's taste in film, through the subtitling or on-site translation of films, to propaganda and the organisation of post-screening discussions, all in a spirit of mutual trust, since the hosts become guests within a few months, on the other side of the cultural exchange. On the other hand, even the most careful preparation and mutual professional courtesy cannot change the fact that the productions of the film week have to compete for success in public cinemas, within the local cinema circuit, in front of the audience of the country concerned: when the lights go out in the cinema and the screening begins, the only thing that matters is the cinema experience, the reception of the film presented. In the benevolent and cruel darkness of cinema, there are only spectators, who either get the film or are hopeless.

The programme of the Hungarian Film Week in Cairo, which took place in the last days of November and the first days of December, in the framework of the Hungarian Economic Days, can be described as a success because the friendly goodwill and appreciation shown at the professional meetings and protocol sessions was matched by the interest of the film-going public: the results of cultural diplomacy were completed and made joyful by the successful Cairo debut of contemporary Hungarian cinema. Exaggerated and extreme adjectives are hardly necessary, of course, as they would make the realistic results seem frivolous: just as Hungarian Film Week was understandably not the most important event among the economic and technical-scientific events of the Hungarian Days, so too in the Egyptian capital, which is also a film metropolis with over ten million inhabitants, the cinema life did not revolve solely and exclusively around Hungarian films. But goodwill and interest were evident at every turn, with the stars of the Cairo film scene and the spontaneous arrival of young people, and the four-member Hungarian delegation was constantly being questioned by students, budding filmmakers and interested journalists with questions reflecting their personal experiences and opinions.

The main host of the Hungarian Film Week, the Egyptian Film Commissioner Dr. Mustafa Mohammed Ali, the Minister of State for Culture, set the official tone of the film week with his frequent presence and constant friendly support, but the presence of the most celebrated stars of Egyptian cinema was just as natural at each event, which the guest could judge even more than the introductions from the almost constant flashes of the army of photographers. The appreciative reports in the leading Cairo papers and the co-production offers made by private producers in the course of the conversation might be a little too frivolous to overestimate from Budapest, but the interest of the press and the profession was undeniably palpable and, coupled with the official cooperation, could certainly lead to a significant improvement in the film and, more broadly, cultural relations between the two countries. In any case, the next step will be the Egyptian Film Week in Budapest next spring, when Hungarian audiences will have the opportunity to get acquainted with the latest achievements of Egyptian cinema after a long period of absence, and the members of the Hungarian delegation, Anna Wagner and Vera Orbán, senior officials of the Directorate General of Film and the Ministry of Culture, discussed the details of this with their Egyptian counterparts.

MAGYAR FILM WEEK featured seven films, offering a broad overview of the most diverse trends in Hungarian cinema in recent years: Bálint Fábri's *Encounter with God* by Zoltán Fábri, *Ripacsok* by Pál Sándor, representing the "middle generation", *Vera Angi* directed by Pál Gábor, *Diary for My Children* by Márta Mészáros, two first feature productions, *Hatásvadászok* directed by Miklós Szurdi and *The Princess* by Pál Erdöss, and a children's film, *Top Hat and Spuds Nose*, directed by István Lauró Bácskai. The programme for the gala premiere included the *Night Rehearsal*, and the delegation included its young director Miklós Szurdi in Cairo. All seven films were screened with Arabic subtitles, and after the film week the prints will remain in Cairo for further screenings, in preparation for sales, and for the continued representation of Hungarian cinema.

In addition to the protocol events, which reflected sympathy and interest, we also had the opportunity to inform and sometimes literally discuss the new Hungarian films in two public debates (the critic, as a member of the delegation, however much he may adapt to the rules of cultural diplomacy, feels at home in the latter.) The independent Cairo Film Critics Club, which meets regularly on Sunday evenings, held an extraordinary meeting on the occasion of Hungarian Film Week, and we also had the opportunity to meet students from the local film college. (The questions, comments and counter-opinions can basically be divided into three groups, and even if they seem to be random, they reflect the different cultural traditions of the two countries. The opposition to nudity and extra-marital sexual relations presented as natural in recent Hungarian films as an almost universal device, even on the part of young people, was felt almost immediately: although our response that this could only be appreciated within the specific artistic situation seemed to be accepted in the end. The second set of questions that inevitably arose was how, within a state-owned film industry (in Egypt, feature films are made by private producers), artistic freedom for creators could be asserted, although the question was more cautious and patient than it might have been in a Western country. No less so than in the face of a profit-seeking capitalist film producer, we argued, and of course we could refer to our critical films. It would be superfluous to list the CONTEXTUAL, DETAILED questions and evaluations from the debate, but it is certain that several compliments were paid to the director of the opening film, *The Hound of Hounds*, who was present, the names Miklós Jancsó, Márta Mészáros, István Szabó seemed to be quite familiar, and there were critics who publicly described Zoltán Huszárík's former masterpiece, *Sinbad*, as a lasting film experience. The Egyptian pronunciation of the title of which, by the way, we did not understand for a while, but then we realised that there must be a reason for the Arabic pronunciation. Like so many other elements of our culture, we borrowed Sinbad from Arab culture.

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12. Action

Footnotes:

- ¹ For more details, see: *Abdallah Abdel-Ati Abdel-Salam Mohamed: Az egyiptomi-magyar kapcsolatok a két világháború közötti időszakban*. JATEPress, Szeged, 2015.
- ² *Mohamed Naguib* (Khartoum, 19 February 1901 – Cairo, 28 Augustus 1984): Egyptian politician, military officer, President of Egypt. As a professional soldier, he was initially a member of King Farouk's personal bodyguard. After the overthrow of the monarchy and the proclamation of the republic, he was elected president in 1953. His conservative views forced him to resign in November 1954. He was subsequently placed under informal house arrest in a villa on the outskirts of Cairo, from which he was released only under President Sadat, President Nasser's successor, in 1972.
- ³ For more details, see: Fügedi Nóra: „Magyar Kultúra a világban: Egyiptomi-Magyar kulturális Kapcsolatok 1945–1964”. *Acta Historica (Szeged)* 134 (2012. January):143–151.
- ⁴ *Népszport*, 1954. February 4.
- ⁵ *Film, Színház, Muzsika*, 1962. Decembre 28. pp. 28-29.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ *Népszava; Magyar Nemzet*, 1963. January 29.
- ⁸ *Film, Színház, Muzsika*, 1963. January 25.
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- ¹⁶ *An Almanac of 385 Egyptians who obtained their postgraduate degrees in Hungary, between the early sixties and the mid-ninties*. Published by the Egyptian Academy of Scientific Research and Technology, Cairo, 1996.
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- ¹⁸ *Népszabadság*, 1974. október 27. Among the socialist countries, the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic also had cultural institutes in Cairo.
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- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ *Népszabadság*, 1977. december 9. Hungary had no consulate outside Cairo.
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