



*Inheritance*. Peter Hegedus,

**Reviewed by** Dr. Cynthia A. Melendy

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This film follows the story of Balazs Meszaros, a Hungarian fisherman whose livelihood is threatened when a gold-mining dam bursts, leaking cyanide into the Tisza River and destroying the river's fish. The gold-mining company is part-owned by an Australian company, Esmeralda Explorations. By chance, the Australian filmmaker Peter Hegedus, who is of Hungarian descent, was on holiday in early 2000 when he heard about the spill. "It didn't seem possible that Australians could have done this." Thus began a three-year journey, during which Hegedus traveled to Hungary to investigate. He was drawn to Balazs Meszaros and his passion for the river, his way of life and his culture. <p> The film documents the death of the river and Meszaros's ensuing fight to overcome financial and emotional ruin; one of his strategies is to document his way of life by writing a book titled *Inheritance*. As Hegedus is drawn into Meszaros's struggle, the film resonates with sympathy for the fisherman, while managing a balanced point of view which does not demonize those responsible for the catastrophe. Hegedus utilizes several techniques that accomplish this, including reminiscences of the river, shown in black and white, and a subplot of Meszaros's rescue of a stork symbolizing life for his culture. <p> We are drawn to Balazs Meszaros's reverence for nature when he arrives home with a stork which had been electrocuted when its two wings simultaneously touched two electrical wires. Moved by the importance of storks as a symbol of life in

Hungarian culture, Meszaros freezes the stork until he can obtain permission from the government to stuff the bird for educational purposes. Thus we come to understand that Meszaros's protest over the river is not just enlightened self-interest. Rather he has a spiritual connection to the natural world through both his fishing and the storks that live in his village. <p> In a twist that only seems to occur in real life, Meszaros is appointed president of his local fishing co-op and leads the fight for its members to receive compensation. Hegedus accompanies Meszaros on a trip to Romania to see the site of the cyanide spill. The two then travel to Perth, Australia, where they meet the Esmeralda corporate representatives, who, in turn, had been victimized financially by the publicity of the spill. The film investigates the mining process and learns that it was a joint venture between the Romanian government and the Australian company without the benefit of any environmental safeguards in place when the undertaking was planned. The mining process was one similar to that used in arid climates, where tons of rock were crushed and blended into a watery slurry, treated with cyanide to remove the gold, with the tailings left in sand dams to dry up. In the cold, severe Romanian climate, this process was too fragile to hold up, and the slurry lakes containing cyanide burst through their fragile dams during a temperature spike. A group, which convened to investigate the cause of the contamination, recommended that the mining company contain the

waste product in closed containers, but their recommendations held no official enforcement value. <p> As Hegedus becomes both a subject in the story and the storyteller, Meszaros also tells the story of his lost way of life. In the process, his ailing relationships with his fiancée and neighboring fishermen reflect the destructive power of cyanide beyond that of simple pollution, but Meszaros is galvanized to action and calls on fishermen in villages along thousands of miles of the Tisza River in order to gain support for his petition to receive compensation. <p> The film ends in Meszaros's darkened living room that, for months, had only been lit by candles. After three years of effort, four large storage tanks had been built to contain the waste. The Esmeralda company reorganized, changed its name and CEOs, and resumed operation without making any reparations to any of those who lost their livelihoods with the death of the river. Unable to pay his bills, Balazs Meszaros still had no electricity, and the court case was still pending. In a fitting conclusion to the movie, Meszaros brings the stuffed stork to the village schoolroom, awing the children. A symbol of new life, the stork brings hope that the river will regenerate, but darker fears remain that another spill could occur, destroying whatever meager inheritance Balazs Meszaros is able to pass on. <p> <cite>Inheritance</cite> is an excellent film for the global environmental history classroom. Winner of several awards from film festivals around the world, it introduces several themes for discussion: corporate and national responsibility for national resources, proper risk planning as part of the project structure, and the significance of collateral cultural damage--an aspect overlooked by many films that study the problems of environmental degradation. The sheer scope of the cyanide spill is striking; indeed, a river no longer alive and filled with heavy metals seems almost beyond imagination. Yet people like Balazs Meszaros are left to cope, without help and without compensation. What river is next? <p>

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