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| **FEATURE ARTICLE** | | |
| ***Michael*** [***Asimow***](mailto:asimow@law.ucla.edu), of UCLA Law School, is co-author with Paul Bergman of [Reel Justice: The Courtroom Goes to the Movies (1996)](http://www.law.ucla.edu/faculty/asimow/book), available at local bookstores or through [amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).                **"**  It's a big commitment to watch this three-hour film, but it's **emphatically** worth it. It is one of the **finest pictures** of its kind I've ever seen.    **"**                  **"**  Once again, a work of popular culture sounds themes that **resonate deeply** in our lives. *Sunshine* is such a film.    **"** |  | ***Sunshine*** and Judges Who Sell Out  by Michael Asimow  *Sunshine* is an overpowering chronicle of an entire century of Hungarian history. Over the twentieth century, Hungary careens from monarchy to communism to fascism back to communism and finally emerges at the other end to an uncertain future.  We experience this century of nearly unrelieved misery through the lives of three generations of a Jewish family named Sonnsenschein, ironically meaning the *Sunshine* of the film's title. It's a big commitment to watch this three-hour film, but it's emphatically worth it. Everything about it is first rate, including the acting, the music, the gorgeous interiors, and especially its panoramic historical sweep entwined with deeply affecting human stories. It is one of the finest pictures of its kind I've ever seen.  The Sonnenschein family, always loyal to their country and to the government in power, glides steadily away from its Judaism. Desperate to assimilate into the country they love, the family first changes its name to Sors, then converts to Catholicism. In the Holocaust, and in the Communist government that follows the War, this religious conversion makes no difference at all. They are Jews and only Jews. Their loyalty to Hungary is always repaid by betrayal.  Ralph Fiennes plays the male lead in each of the three generations: he's Ignatz Sonnenschein/Sors, a judge under the Hapsburg emperor; his son Adam Sors, an Olympic fencing champion trapped by the Holocaust; and his son Ivan Sors, Holocaust survivor, lawyer and interrogator for the Communist police, and ultimately a rebel against the Communists. Ivan changes his name back to Sonnenschein and seems ready to return to Judaism.  I don't believe you'll soon forget the power of Fiennes' acting. I thought he was stunning in the three roles. Just as unforgettable was the character of Valerie Sonnenschein, Ignatz's cousin and also his wife, played as a captivating young woman by Jennifer Ehle and as an inspiring old woman by Rosemary Harris. The character of Valerie knits together the stories of all three generations.  But this website concentrates on law, so let's focus on the first generation--Ignatz Sonnenschein, brilliant and ambitious judge for Emperor Franz Joseph. He believes wholeheartedly in the monarchy and its phony promise of liberal change. He impatiently brushes aside the passionate Socialist arguments of his brother Gustave. Gustave claims that Ignatz is overlooking the rampant corruption of the regime, not to mention the ordinary people starving in the streets. Once, Ignatz even meets with the Emperor, certainly the proudest day of his life.  But the monarchy cynically uses him. A local official, protected by powerful patrons, is accused of corruption. These patrons, so important to Ignatz's career, ask him for help. Ignatz makes the fateful choice of obstructing the investigation. From that point on, he cannot claim to be an independent judge, only a cat's paw of the authorities.  Later, in order to be promoted, Ignatz has to change his name to Sors. A Jew could be a judge in those years, but couldn't have a Jewish name. Once more, Ignatz makes the fateful choice, moving ever further from his roots into a doomed assimilationism. Ignatz serves as a military judge during World War I and is decorated for bravery. As he ages, he becomes steadily colder and harsher, less able to express emotion. Ultimately, his wife leaves him. And in the Communist government that seizes power in Hungary on the collapse of the Empire, Ignatz is disgraced and publicly humiliated. His beloved country casts him aside like so much rubbish. Not long after, he is dead.  The character of Ignatz is reminiscent of perhaps the most famous sold-out judge in the history of film, Ernst Janning (Burt Lancaster) in *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961). Janning also was brilliant and ambitious, a famous professor and legal scholar, a drafter of the liberal Weimar constitution. When Hitler came to power, Janning remained a judge, unlike his colleague and mentor Dr. Wieck who resigned rather than wear the swastika on his robes.  Even though he loathed the Nazis and Hitler personally, Janning stayed on the bench and administered the hateful laws of the Third Reich. Janning was partly ambitious, but partly he hoped that he could save more innocent people if he stayed on the bench instead of being replaced by some Nazi thug. And perhaps he did save some people.  But in the notorious Feldenstein case, Janning was instructed by the local Nazi party bosses that he must convict an elderly Jew of having sex with an young Aryan woman in violation of the Nuremberg laws. Feldenstein was entirely innocent, but Janning carried out his orders and Feldenstein was shot. For that single case, he was condemned in the Nuremberg trial of Nazi judges. In that trial, Judge Dan Haywood (Spencer Tracy), stoutly resisting military pressure to go easy on Janning, sentenced him to life imprisonment.  How often are judges corrupted by the power structure or swayed by demands of military authorities? Do we have to look further than the shameful *Korematsu* case in which the U. S. Supreme Court upheld the Japanese internment during World War II? Or to the way South African judges provided the legal underpinning for the abuses of the loathsome apartheid regime? Or to the ongoing scandal of campaign contributions to judges who must stand for election, a system that allows litigants to purchase the favor of state Supreme Court justices? Or to judges who administer without protest the draconian minimum sentences for trivial drug offenses or the incredibly punitive "three strikes" laws?  Once again, a work of popular culture sounds themes that resonate deeply in our lives. *Sunshine* is such a film. Its treatment of the themes of patriotism, acculturation and assimilation is profound. The concentration camp scenes are as graphic and terrible as any you'll ever see. And the story of the sold out judge, while not the main focus of this gripping film, is timeless.  ***Michael*** [***Asimow***](mailto:asimow@law.ucla.edu), of UCLA Law School, is co-author with Paul Bergman of [Reel Justice: The Courtroom Goes to the Movies (1996)](http://www.law.ucla.edu/faculty/asimow/book), available at local bookstores or through [amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). Prof. Asimow has published and article entitled "Bad Lawyers in the Movies" - Vol. 24 of Nova Law Review. Michael Asimow's email address is [asimow@law.ucla.edu](mailto:asimow@law.ucla.edu).     |  | | --- | | **Other Picturing Justice Articles by Michael Asimow** |  |  |  | | --- | --- | |  | * [**The Winslow Boy**](http://docs.google.com/winslow_boy.htm) * [**The Practice**](http://docs.google.com/articles/ThePractice.htm) * [**Real Court Television**](http://docs.google.com/articles/realcourt.htm) * [**A Civil Action**](http://docs.google.com/articles/Civil_Action-Asimow.htm) * [**Return to Paradise**](http://docs.google.com/articles/ReturntoParadise.htm) * [**Anatomy of a Murder**](http://docs.google.com/articles/anatomy.htm) * [**The Practice II**](http://docs.google.com/articles/ThePractice2.htm) * [**Roxie Hart and The Big Hangover**](http://docs.google.com/articles/RoxieHart.htm) * [**The Gingerbread Man**](http://docs.google.com/articles/gingerbreadman.htm) * [**Knock on Any Door**](http://docs.google.com/articles/KnockonAnyDoor.htm) * [**A Free Soul**](http://docs.google.com/articles/FreeSoul.htm) * [**Body Heat**](http://docs.google.com/articles/BodyHeat.htm) * [**Lynch Mobs in Trial Movies**](http://docs.google.com/articles/LynchMobs.htm) * [**Judgment at Nuremberg**](http://docs.google.com/articles/Nuremberg.htm) * [**Dangerous Beauty**](http://docs.google.com/articles/dangerousbeauty.htm) * [**The Practice**](http://docs.google.com/articles/thepractice1.htm) | |  |  | |  |  | |  |  | |  |  | |  |  | |  |  |  |  | | --- | |  | |

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