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THE DISPOSSESSED

Szilárd Borbély, trans. Otilie Mulzet



THE DISPOSSESSED is Szilárd Borbély's first novel, although he has been active – and widely acclaimed – as a poet, literary historian and essayist for more than twenty years. Its first print run sold out almost immediately. To state that the book has touched a raw nerve in today's Hungary is something of an understatement; nonetheless, Borbély's portrayal of growing up in the country's rural northeast during the beginning of the Kádár era (1956-1988) haunts the reader for its unsparing truthfulness and attention to small details. The novel's narrator is a child – possibly Jewish, although he himself is uncertain about it – who registers and remembers colours, scents and sounds from the unchanging brutal microcosm that is impoverished village life. A historical note: The Arrow Cross was a fascist political organisation, allied with Nazi Germany, that held power in Hungary from 15 October 1944 to 28 March 1945. Under Ferenc Szálasi's rule, the Arrow Cross oversaw the murder of approximately 200,000 Budapest Jews, as well as continuing the deportations of rural Jews to Auschwitz which had begun under the previous government of Admiral Miklós Horthy. Béla Kun was a Communist revolutionary and leader of the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919. Overthrown by Admiral Horthy, Kun fled to the Soviet Union, where he was killed in Stalin's purges.

—O.M.

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When Mózsi came back from the forced labour camp, he no longer looked like a Jew. He was just like anyone else. He came back like the other refugees who were looking for their homes, their belongings, the families left behind here. Like everyone else who could not stop living. He lugged the burden that was life. He was bald, and he wore a threadbare soldier's uniform. His luxuriant hair of old, his curled ear locks, were nowhere to be seen. No longer did he wear his black caftan. Nor his hat. Nor his white shirt. Never again the mourning-shirt fringed at the corners, which the men had always worn.

In the village, nobody talked about what had happened to these clothes. Mózsi too did not ask. Just as he didn't ask what had happened to the goods from the shop. The books from the shelves. The hooks from the wall. The clothes from the cupboards. Compassion from the hearts.

Mózsi, emaciated to the bones when he returned, sat down in front of the plundered house which the village had taken apart every single night, breaking the gendarmes' seal. Our uncles and their kin were the first to start the mayhem at that time.

'Nobody dared to say anything to them, because they were members of the Arrow Cross, and at that time everyone was very afraid of the Arrow Cross men,' says Máli.

They didn't even greet each other under the cover of darkness. They hurried, they moved around. There were those who turned up even more than once. Mutely, wordlessly, they ransacked the house and the shed. They broke apart the cupboards, grabbed the damask tablecloths right in front of each other, clutched the vases taken from the shelves. They did this in the darkness, as if they didn't recognise one another. And they never again spoke about these nights. The village became filled with secrets. There were only hands reaching in the darkness for the dinner plates, the tableware, the woollen underwear, the sought-after Berliner scarves, the toys the children left behind. They took the prayer shawls as well, the matzo plates, the embroidered Shabbat yarmulkes. They unloosened the mezuzahs from the doorframe. And then they were disappointed, because there was no paper money inside, just a bit of rag with scribbles on it. When they took apart the decorative chests, they didn't even look at each other. When they dug up the earth in the larder and in the pantries. When they broke apart the chimney, and examined it brick by brick. Because they were searching everywhere for the hidden treasure. For the legendary Jewish treasure, spoken of in undertones in the tavern. They were looking for money, for the silver cutlery, the genuine pearl necklaces, the engraved pocket watches, the earrings of precious stone.

They considered Jewish property to be their own, because they had been telling each other for years that the Jews had taken it away from them. From the Hungarians. They had to get it back. To have it returned to its rightful owners was their due.

But now, when they tore apart the pillowcases and the quilts, when they turned out the straw pallets, ripping apart the upholstery of the divan, what they came upon was too scarce, because the coveted treasure that was stolen from them was nowhere to be found. The longed-for objects, which they thought they had seen with Mózsi and his family—all the objects the family didn't have when the gendarmes took them away. Then they searched, they hunted obsessively. In the meantime they already suspected one another: maybe the more cunning among them had already stolen the items. Once again they were too late, because they never had any luck. They had observed everything however, what kind of clothes the family was wearing, kind of jewels they had. They had counted up the takings of the shop for many years back. And the treasures were nowhere. But they had to be somewhere.

'That fucking Jewish gold has to be hidden somewhere,' they kept repeating bitterly.

'Where can it be? Where can those filthy Jews have shoved it?' they muttered to themselves. There was a certain recognition in their voices. These Jews were clever, they knew how to hide things so well. But the villagers' anger was greater. Rancour and greediness mixed with the eternal yearning of the poor.

During that time they talked about the legendary wealth of Mózsi and his family every evening in the tavern. They calculated, they reckoned how much their income could have been over the years. They were searching for the margin. The margin between imagination and reality would not leave them in peace. The legend of Jewish gold electrified the imagination of the village. They spoke about it in undertones during the day as well on the Ramp.

'Mózsi and his family had so much gold,' they hissed into each other's ears, 'that you could pave the entire street with it from the Ramp to the belfry.'

They imagined that they remembered the precious jewels, the glittering brooches, the heavy candelabra, the silver cutlery, the diamond earrings of the women.

'Neither Szále nor Rézi took these things with them. They didn't even give it to the little girl,' said the women, who, watching carefully on that May day through their sobbing tears, scrutinized everything through the fingers of their hands held in front of their faces. All of it was engraved in memory, everything the deportees had: the blouses, the shirts, the bodices, the skirts, the box-calf boots.

'They weren't wearing earrings,' they said.

‘There wasn’t even any jewellery on the little girl. If there had been I’d remember it,’ they kept repeating.

‘Of course it’s possible that they hid it somewhere in the house or in the shed or they crammed it in there—in a place—where only women can tuck away smaller items,’ they kept saying with a delicate laugh.

And the men reached over to that place, so they could hear the women’s shrieks as they jumped away from the approaching hand. Of course there were some who jumped too late. And some who didn’t even jump away at all, but towards it. Everyone laughed about this on the Ramp.

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‘When they took away the Jews,’ said my grandfather, ‘it was May. The carts came from Csaholc. The people were already waiting on the Ramp, because it had been announced. Everyone knew that they were coming for them on the third day of May. Mózes and his family were at home, by then it was forbidden for them to leave the house, they could not come out. Young Mózsi had already been taken away for forced labour long ago. At the beginning they still heard from him. A few postcards, short letters written hastily. Then not even that. Old Mózsi prayed so much. From dawn until late in the evening. Maybe by that point he wasn’t even sleeping. In his tasselled white shirt, with the straps on his arm and on his forehead, he chanted prayers the entire day. His wife just cried. Szále, their daughter-in-law, had stopped crying by then. She didn’t speak to anyone. She just hugged her children to herself. She was dread itself. She did not move. Just waited. I’ve never seen anyone so afraid.

May was beautiful. The winter of forty-four had been hard. Starting from nineteen forty, when the Germans attacked the Russians, every winter was hard. The trunks of the trees cracked open. The crows fell down one by one from the branches. There was nothing for them to eat.

“Maybe the winter from forty-three to forty-four was the worst.” The old people used to say that. Bad news was coming from the front, but only spoken of in whispers. On the radio, the only news was of victories. Of smaller tactical withdrawals. Of the realignment of troops being carried out for the coming attack. Of course, everywhere people were talking about the approaching Russians. Talking openly about the Arrow Cross. They cursed the Regent, whom, however it was strictly forbidden to insult. But mainly they threw mud at the Jews.

Your great-uncle and his family were the biggest Arrow Cross men in the village. They carried out all the Jewish pranks. They snuck in through the garden and smeared pig shit all over Mózsi’s door. They wrote JEWISH PIGS on the limestone wall. And then JEWISH PIGSTY. They were having fun. At the beginning everyone was ashamed, but nobody dared say anything. And they even denied doing it. But then they started to boast.

“The Jews made the war, they created Communism. They were behind Trianon too, and the crisis, the big Crash.’ They yelled this. They smeared everything on the Jews. As the military situation worsened, and they talked about how they would round them all up, women, children, even old people, and take them to Germany to work, your great-uncles got louder and louder. By then they were going into Mózsi’s shop during the day, pointing at the goods that were still there, at this or that, whatever took their fancy. They had no intention of paying. If Mózsi asked for money, they just guffawed.

“Shit is what you’ll get,” they said. And when they were going to the outhouse they didn’t even say, “I’m going to the outhouse,” but they would say “I’m going to pay the Jew.” And then they sniggered.

“Report it, Jew,” they said to Mózsi if he spoke up. They never greeted him anymore the way they used to in the old days, saying: “Upon my honour, Mr. Mózes! How is your health today, dear Mr. Mózes?”

By now they just cast out their words with contempt.

“Add it to the rest, Jew,” they said haughtily, when they took things out of the shop without even a greeting. They looked at him with loathing. They no longer shook his hand, because Jews are filthy. There is some contamination in them, they knew.

“All Jews must be avoided, because whoever fornicates with them commits racial degradation,” they read on the announcements put out on the Ramp, “and whoever helps them shall be slaughtered on the spot.” Who would want to get himself slaughtered?

Come evening, in the tavern they guffawed with laughter at terrified Mózsi, who was afraid of them. Who was so self-confident before. So proud. Like some lord, that’s how he used to act.

Your uncles were still young lads, they still had one or two years left before their call-up for military service. They were the ones who set the tone in the village. All the men were at the front. They marched up and down in Kepecgyep like members of the Levente corps. They drilled with cudgels made of hazel wood. They worshipped Szálasi. And in the spring, they became even more bold. There was nothing they could not do. There was no one who dared speak up to them. They were free, like the flea that God let go.

In the evening they smashed in Mózsi’s windows. The old man cried out.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“The Messiah is here,” they said. But they couldn’t hold out for too long. They did not wait for an answer. They broke out in raucous laughter. The night watchman didn’t dare to speak to them. They went over there at midnight, after the tavern. Or at dawn. When they were already drunk. Anyone who had to do a little job relieved himself. They hushed one other to be quiet. Like drunkards. They pissed on the doorframe. Then some of them, whoever needed to, shat in front of the door. When they farted, the raucous laughter broke out.

The day has eyes, the night has ears. Everyone heard everything. By the spring of nineteen forty-four the pranks were happening every day. They took everything from the shop. Mózsi still wrote down who had taken what. He did the inventory every evening. But as for paying their debts, no one paid them.

Mózsi let them take the things away. What else could he have done. By this time, the entire village was in debt to him. When the gendarmes came for them on the third, and they put the family into the cart, it was almost a kind of relief. Mózsi’s wife, old Rébi, lamented. And again Szále was crying. She embraced her two children. Many who were gathered that day on the Ramp wept for them. Mainly the women. There were sorry for the children, the innocent. But everyone kept their traps shut. No one spoke a word.

The Jewish families from the neighbouring villages were already sitting on the cart with their permitted allowance of hand luggage. They too were weeping. The gendarmes were malevolent, haughty. They shouted at the people.

“Get lost! There’s nothing for you to look for here! This isn’t a circus! Don’t stand there gaping! You can get on too if you want! There’s plenty of room!” It was evil, but well, an order is an order.

The Jews cried out as the carts set off towards Berek.

“My God, what did you do to us, Béla Kun? What did you do...” As if Béla Kun could have been responsible for everything.

Then the carts disappeared on the way to Berek, and the row of linden trees leaning towards each other above the road closed in behind them. They disappeared from our view. The dust settled, and yet the people stood there for a long time, watching where they had gone. The women were sniffing. They dispersed from the Ramp only very slowly.

Those who had debts thought about their debts. About how they no longer had any debts. They felt relieved. As long as Mózsi didn’t come back, they would not have to come up with the money. No authorities knew how much they hadn’t paid. Only the list of debts would betray this. The gendarmes put the seal over the entrance to the house.

“Somehow, we have to make that list disappear,” they said.

That’s what they were talking about that night on the Ramp,’ my grandfather said.

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When I hear talk of Jews, I feel like I'm suffocating. If I hear the word Jew, my throat contracts. I gasp for air. My ears start to ring. They will notice me. I'm afraid that I will give myself away. I try to behave as if I'm not interested at all. At times like that, I hold my breath. I am not allowed to breathe for a while. I know that I can't hold my breath for a long time, but I don't move. I don't dare take a breath. My ears are burning. They certainly can see that too. I have to look in a mirror. I am afraid that my ears betray me. They often talk about Jews. The words are full of menace. I am afraid of the words.

The carob tree ripens in the autumn. Its fruit is a long, brown capsule. It looks like the husk of a pea or a bean, only larger. The seeds spread out within. The coiling husks of the carob tree are the colour of chocolate. Dark brown. Some of them are as long as a grown-up's forearm. While still fresh, not yet dried out, its flesh is sweet and fragrant. In the village, they call it Jewish shit. Máli calls it that too. This is also the name of the tree. 'The Jewish shit has ripened,' they call out to each other on the Ramp. 'Tell the kids!'

Then they laugh.

They always laugh when they use ugly words. When they say cock or cunt. They like to get the children who are still learning how to talk to repeat after them: cunt, cock, together fuck.

'Say "Your mother's cunt!"'

'Your father's bloody cock!'

'May God shove his cock into you,' they repeat.

Everyone has his favourite. When the children repeat the words that are meaningless to them, they burst out in laughter.

'Again, one more time!' They can't get enough of it.

'Jewish shit, Jewish shit,' they repeat. 'The Jewish shit has ripened!' They like to say this. They like to hear this.

I am afraid of this word that everyone repeats with such joy. I gasp for air. I can't laugh with them. Everyone else, though, is laughing.

I'm thinking of old Mózsi. About the piece of paper, the one he wrote the debts on.

'He can wipe his ass with it,' they said.

One of the most significant poets to emerge from Central Europe after 1989, Szilárd Borbély has created an oeuvre that unflinchingly examines questions of loss, absence, trauma and memory. He has been awarded several important prizes for his work in Hungary. English translations of his poetry have appeared in THE AMERICAN READER, ASYMPTOTE, and POETRY MAGAZINE.

Ottillie Mulzet translates from Hungarian and Mongolian. Her latest translation is SEIOBO THERE BELOW by László Krasznahorkai.

This piece was selected for inclusion in the January 2014 Translation Issue by Daniel Medin, a contributing editor of THE WHITE REVIEW. He helps direct the Center for Writers and Translators at the American University of Paris, and is Associate Series Editor of THE CAHIERS SERIES.

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