

Translated excerpt

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Die Abenteuer des Joel Spazierer

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The Adventures of Joel Spazierer

Translated by Bryn Roberts



The men I drink beer with sometimes - who don't have a clue about me – tell me that it's essential I start with something funny. A man walks into a bank. He goes up to the woman at the counter, holds a gun to her head and tells her: "Don't worry! You're not being robbed - it's just a killing spree!" My friend, the writer Sebastian Lukasser, who likes me and who *does* have a clue about me, suggests that a literary allusion would be the best way to get started. His thinking being (although he doesn't come right out and say it) that it would make my debut with the critics easier.

My story begins in a time that many believed to be the end of times. The best doctors of the greatest empire were reserved for the gentlemen in the Party and the army; the best of the best for Stalin, Molotov, Malenkov and Beriya. But they sold what they knew to the foreigners, were arrested and put in the dock. The charges were nothing less than murder and high treason, since their intentional malpractice had caused the deaths of several of those gentlemen – including some who hadn't even died. All of them, believe you me, were taken away, interrogated, tortured, executed, shot, liquidated and hanged.

My story begins in Hungary; doctors of that ilk existed there too. Their ringleader was Dr Ernő Fülöp, head of the internal medicine department at Semmelweis University Clinic in Budapest. Three men appeared at the hospital while he was in the middle of an operation; he had to ask a junior doctor to finish the job. He was taken to the HQ of the secret police, where he was interrogated by ÁVH officers Major György Hajós and Colonel Miklós Bakonyi. Dr Fülöp was accused of working hand in glove with the Moscow doctors; of attempting to murder the First Secretary of the Hungarian Working People's Party, the leader Mátyás Rákosi, during a gall bladder operation; and of maintaining contacts with the Yugoslav secret service, which was presumably behind the whole conspiracy, if indeed Josip Broz Tito himself wasn't personally responsible.

Dr Fülöp insisted that he had never met Party Chairman Rákosi in his life, certainly not in the operating theatre; he hadn't been to Belgrade or anywhere else in Yugoslavia since the end of the war, and he only knew Tito from the papers the same as any other Hungarian. After a night's interrogation, he confessed that a connection to the Party Chairman did exist: his wife. Dr Helena Fülöp-Ortmann – a well-known Egyptologist, whose book about the Pharaoh Akhenaton had been a great success in Hungary and was translated into many languages – had gone to primary school with one of Rákosi's cousins, although that was thirty years ago.

The same three men who had come for Dr Fülöp – Janko Kollár, Lajos Szánthó and Zsolt Dankó – were sent out again. They hammered on the door of flat number 7 on the second floor of Number 23 Báthory utca, and dragged Mrs Fülöp-Ortmann down the stairs. She shouted that there was a child in there, and that they could at least give her the chance to let his mother know. The men thought it was a trick designed to give her the chance to jump out of the window. Like her husband, she was taken to the headquarters of the ÁVH at 60 Stalin Street and interrogated.

The child in the flat was me. At the time I was called András Fülöp. I wasn't quite four years old. This day is where I begin to remember.

2

Shortly before the men came, my grandmother had laid me on the divan in the salon and covered me up for my midday nap. When I awoke, I was alone.

My grandparents' flat was very spacious; doctors had been exempted from the expropriations, certain doctors in any case. I called for Moma and padded through the room, thirsty. I crept cautiously up to the kitchen, because I thought I had heard something from there. At the same time, though, I knew I'd always thought that I had heard something from there, and that calmed me a little and gave me some courage. My grandmother was a young woman - she was only thirty-nine at the time! It was tradition in our family for the women to have children very young. She had been used to being waited on all her life; as the daughter of a diplomat and parliamentarian she had grown up in one of the finest villas in Rózsadomb (expropriated by the Red Army after the war, turned into an officers' mess and ruined); neither she, her mother or her sister had ever had to cook, and now in this "squalid little dump" (which in normal circumstances could have housed four families) she had to prepare breakfast, lunch and dinner for herself, her husband and her grandson, and one of her post-war habits was to swear while doing it (another was blowing her nose in the tea towel).

As everyone knows, the Hungarians are world champions in swearing, and my grandmother, who was from the German minority on her mother's side, and who within her own four walls had never spoken anything other than German, out-heroded herod - caricaturing them with contempt in her smoker's voice. So for a long time I thought that someone else could be in the kitchen; someone who wanted to do something bad to my

grandmother – but who she beat every time, because I saw her go in, heard that strange harsh nagging Hungarian, and saw her come out again with the plates and pots. So, nothing had been done to her. I was very proud of her.

When I'd made sure that no one was in the kitchen, I pushed a chair up to the sink, stood on it, turned the tap with both hands and drank – and I felt how Moma must have felt when she had defeated that wicked Hungarian spectre: heroic. I let the water run. I knew that I was soon going to be thirsty again. I was hungry as well. That was easy. I put the chair in front of the cupboard with the enamel box on top. I took the big round loaf, took it into the salon, started gouging out the soft insides and sticking them in my mouth.

I checked all the rooms for Moma once more, more thoroughly this time, even looking in the broom cupboard and the pantry, stuck my head under the cupboards, under the beds, under Moma's desk which smelt so nicely of her cigarettes. She wasn't there. To my mind, she was never coming back. I didn't expect anyone to ever come again.

On the window sills in the salon were houseplants in flowerpots. I had never liked them, because they blocked my view of the sky, and because some of them looked like ghosts' fingers. I tugged on the leaves until the pots fell to the ground. Most of them broke. I stuffed the plants into the tall crockery cupboard; I didn't want to see them. I pushed the soil up into a heap. Small it wasn't. I patted it down with my hands. I had two tin cars, both red: a saloon (I liked to hook my fingernails into its window frames), and a fire engine, with an extendible ladder and a tender with thin rubber hoses with tiny nozzles.

I played until I needed to go to the loo. I could do that all by myself. I could use the flush too, Moma had taught me how to do that. I would only have had to climb onto the bowl and pull on the chain with the porcelain handle. But I wanted to keep playing, crumbled the soft bread from the crust, drank from the tap, spooned sugar from the sugar bowl. When it started to get dark, I lay down next to my pile of soil. I would have liked to have a light. But I didn't know how you got light. I'd never seen it done, and Moma had never shown it to me. I knew that in the evening, light came from the ceiling. But I didn't know how it had got up there...

I'm getting childish, okay, I see that myself now. The men I sometimes share a table with, who don't have a clue about me, would think I was a big baby if they ever read this – which of course they won't. If an adult

chooses to act like a kid, then he's childish and that's that. There are no childlike people. At the age of three, you don't feel like a child. You only realise you're a child at the age of five. And then you don't want to be one anymore. I've never felt more grown up than I did then, never more sensible, never more able to face life – that is to say, capable of adapting. No tears. No fear. No loss of focus. No empathy. No truth, no lies. I would have trusted myself to run a country.

And in a way, I *did* run a country. The two tin cars stood in for all the cars I had ever seen, and the buttons on the sofa cushions were the people, calmly and maturely observing events. I spoke to the buttons – not *with* them, but *to* them – but never questioned whether they actually were buttons and not, in fact, people with ears. They were not people with ears. They were buttons. And the two cars weren't all the cars I'd ever seen. I understood the difference between representation and reality; understood too, that representation is necessary to master reality. The achievement of education is to call this distinction into question and, simply by demanding one, to make a decision more difficult.

By the following morning, I had already got used to my new life. What I mean to say is that the memories of my old one began to fade. I didn't miss it either. I was someone else. By noon I'd completely hollowed the bread out, and started on the crust. The crust tasted even better. I chewed it into pap, spat it into my hand, cooled it by blowing on it, then licked it up. Later, I was to learn that hyenas do exactly the same thing with their prey.

I knocked the mound of soil down and used it to build a road. It was rather thin and straggly, I'll admit, but it went all the way through the salon and along the windows to the big sliding door. At certain points, I put shards from the flower pots next to it. Those were the towns. I gathered up all the cushions I could find in the flat - from Moma and Opa's bedroom, from the armchairs in Moma's study, from the bench in the kitchen - and lined them up along the road, buttons facing forwards. By evening I'd eaten the contents of the sugar bowl. There were apples in a basket, and dried fruit. And butter on the windowsill. And a piece of cheese, also on the windowsill. But the cheese smelt a bit funny.

I woke up in the night. I couldn't remember ever having woken up in the middle of the night. I wasn't afraid. On the contrary, I felt heroic – more than heroic in fact: blessed, chosen, powerful and invincible.

This feeling was down to a new discovery. It was the beginning of January, and the winter was especially raw. Moma liked to keep warm, she spent a lot of money on firewood. Our tiled stove had been well stoked, but after a day the wood had burned down, and the flat started to grow cold. I'd never been cold up till then, and when I went to bed I'd been covered up with a blanket, in summer as well as in winter. So the causal link between blanket and warmth wasn't self-evident. It was a colourful blanket with animals embroidered on it; you couldn't tell just from looking at it that it could have a purpose other than being soft and pretty. In the evening though, I was frozen, and when I covered myself with the blanket, I wasn't freezing anymore. And I wasn't cold during the night either, as I wandered through the flat with the blanket around my shoulders.

In the bathroom there was a mirror with rounded edges that was as tall as a man. I had often seen myself in it, but I hadn't been very interested in the person I saw there. I'd played around with him, kissed him, laid my hand against his. I'd never seen him with a blanket around his shoulders. Only now, in this disguise, did I recognise myself in my reflection. I knew - he was *me* and no one else. I'd seen pictures in a book of fairy tales of a man who wore a blanket around his shoulders. That man was a king. Moma had read to me from the book, but I hadn't understood a lot of it, and she'd got impatient, because I'd kept asking questions. So granddad had finished the story for me. The king, he said, came from a town called Xanten - if you looked me in the eye, I could remember foreign words without even trying - and he was the strongest man in the world; with a single hammerblow he rammed an anvil into the ground; he killed a dragon and bathed in its blood and so became invulnerable; he owned a sword which he could talk to, and give orders to, and a cap that made him invisible; he defeated a dwarf who, because he let him live, gave him a hoard of gold; eventually he married the most beautiful and richest woman in the whole country. "This king was," said my grandfather, "blessed, chosen, powerful and invincible." And because he could see that Moma's impatience was still making me sad, he told me that he and Moma were like Caliph Stork and the Grand Vizier, which he had read right to the end for me the day before: the Grand Vizier was there to speak for the Caliph, who was far too grand to do it for himself, and he and Moma were exactly the same; he spoke for Moma, he said, and all the stories he told me actually came from her; I believed him and wasn't sad anymore, because I preferred Moma telling me stories over him or anyone else.

I stood in the bathroom in front of the big polished glass mirror; the only sound was water flowing from the tap in the kitchen, like distant applause; from outside, the glow from the streetlights seeped into the room; and I saw myself with the blanket around my shoulders and felt like the King of Xanten. I swaggered back into the salon and told the buttons on the cushions what I had seen in the mirror. Everything seemed different to me now - the buttons (because I couldn't really make them out properly in the darkness) like meekly lowered eyelids, and the crumpled bodies of the cushions like the bodies of wounded soldiers. The furniture were silhouettes, and as silhouettes, it seemed to me, they showed their true character for the first time: unyielding, dogmatic, disloyal, ready to rebel and betray. I swept the books from the shelves, those I could reach anyway, and scattered them on the floor, for they were staring at me like an enemy army standing at attention. I gave the divan a shove, and tipped the armchairs and the ottoman over - a weary task, but one that once more proved enlightening. Now I knew, for example, that sticking a book under the chair leg meant I could take a breather, without having to start again from the beginning. I took a closer look at the occasional table, next to where the ottoman had stood. Several drawers had been artfully fitted beneath its round top. Inside were matches and smoking things. I knew that you could conjure light from matches, because Moma had sometimes let me light her cigarettes. But I didn't conjure fire; I shoved the table over, one of the drawers broke to pieces. Finally, I dragged the cushions into the bathroom, spread them out in front of the mirror, lay down on them, covered myself with my royal cape and fell asleep. I heard the embroidered animals stirring, and I heard them calling; but they weren't calling for me, they were calling to the world outside, and they received an answer.

The next day, I looked at my face in the mirror and in the sunlight saw how it truly was. I saw my golden-brown curls, and the many golden dots on my forehead and my nose and my cheeks. My face is covered with freckles! Lots of people were entranced by them when I was a boy, and when I grew up those golden specks instilled trust. They came with many advantages – and one disadvantage: I was recognised. Even if someone had only seen me once, my face was fixed in their memory forever.

I can no longer remember the last three days and two nights of my hermitage.

My mother told me later that I had slept through most of it due to cold, exhaustion and hunger. She was only repeating what Dr Balázs had told her, though.

In contrast, I distinctly remember my interview with this doctor. It took place in his private flat. He didn't want to examine me at his practice, because he didn't trust the receptionist. He didn't want to go there after hours either – he told my mother that if a neighbour or a passer-by saw the lights on in the evening and started speculating it could be dangerous. In the hospital where he sometimes assisted in A&E, someone would most likely have started asking questions about the circumstances and reported it. He didn't want to conduct the interview in my grandparents' flat, which would have seemed most logical, not for all the tea in China – it couldn't be ruled out that they would come knocking again. How on earth would he have been able to explain to the men from the ÁVH that he wasn't involved with the Moscow doctors' deadly plot if they were to see him with their own eyes treating the grandson of the doctor whose wife had gone to primary school with the cousin of Mátyás Rákosi thirty years ago?

He sat me on a stool in his kitchen and pulled a second stool up close to me, so that his knees touched mine. He asked me my name. He spoke German with me. As a friend of the family – my mother had introduced him to me as such – he would have known that I spoke better German than Hungarian. He didn't say: "What's your name?" But "What are you called?" I didn't answer straight away. "What's your name?" was something I had been asked a million times, but never "What are you called?" I deliberated over whether both meant the same thing, and came to the conclusion that they couldn't mean the same thing. I loved words and was convinced of their economy and uniqueness, and considered it an unacceptable absurdity that there could be two ways of expressing the same thing. The word "called" bothered me. I deduced that it must have something to do with "call". Right, I thought, Dr Balázs had – bizarrely in the form of a question – demanded that I call out my name. So I bellowed: "András!"

Our talk was coloured by this misunderstanding. For Dr Balázs, every one of my answers was proof of how disturbed I was. I saw it differently. I found *his* questions peculiar and *my* answers straightforward. *He* couldn't maintain eye contact with me, but I certainly could with *him*. He told my mother that I had stared at him the whole time. He claimed that I was

shocked and exhausted, that I needed to be treated with the greatest care and tenderness.

The destruction in the salon in particular gave the doctor the pause for thought. He couldn't believe that a child could be capable of doing so much damage. He needed only to ask me. I wouldn't have lied to him. He was afraid that the ÁVH men had returned to the flat; possibly just one of them, on a mission of his own, for the pleasure of tormenting me. He examined my body for evidence. I had to stick out my behind for him, and he lit up the anus with a pocket torch. He was more horrified to find nothing than if he had found something – his mind's eye saw methods of torture that were "beyond imagining" as he whispered to my mother. But he comforted my mother as well: it wouldn't be long before I had forgotten everything; the best thing to do would be to never raise the subject again. Ever.

I had drawn a line under my previous life, to give my new life - in which I alone existed - sufficient space, and to avoid repeatedly stumbling over old memories. I wiped not the five days and four nights from my memory, as Dr Balázs had predicted, but everything that had gone before. I hadn't recognised my mother when she found me. She had stood screaming in the door to the salon, her face in her hands. She'd shouted my name. I'd crept out of my cave, and she had been a stranger to me. The concept of being human had become foreign to me, because I no longer conceived of myself as a human.

My friend Sebastian Lukasser advised me that I should at all costs place this reflection in the first chapter of my book. His intention being – again, he never put it into words – that in the development of my consciousness the grounds for my (this too he refused to say) terrible existence could be found; and that, if I placed the above anecdote and my reflections on it at the beginning of my story, I could count on the sympathy of my readers. He would have liked to write my story himself, had even started doing so – and read to me from it. I turned my back on him. My shoulders shook. He believed that I was overcome by my own life, and couldn't help crying. I couldn't help laughing. He loves me and wants to prove to the world that I am, at heart, a loveable human being. I withdrew my permission for him to save me with words. Under no circumstances do I want someone to borrow my character and have it transformed into the hero of a novel.