



**Erika Csontos, György Spiró**

## A witness of the first century

*An interview with György Spiró*

Alongside Peter Nádas's long-awaited *Parallel stories* (Párhuzamos történetek), György Spiró's new novel, *Captivity* (Fogság), is the latest Hungarian literary sensation. *Captivity* is a reconstruction of the period from around the death of Christ until the Jewish War. In an interview with Erika Csontos, Spiró talks about why he needed 800 pages to finish his story; why he imagined Jesus as a chubby, fortyish guy; and why people can no longer read the *Iliad*.

**Erika Csontos:** Did you have any preconceptions when you started working on the novel?

**György Spiró:** None. I read an enormous quantity of Jesus novels. They are mostly horrendous, and precisely because every author had a preconception. Or, to be more precise, they all had a worldview or a faith, and when they came across some facts that seemed to support their faith, they happily declared their research to be over and done with. These novels were mostly written from the point of view of Christianity: how wonderful it is and how it will conquer the world and is worth every sacrifice.

**EC:** You used historical sources: Suetonius, Tacitus, and Josephus Flavius.

**GS:** And Cassius Dio, who is not translated into Hungarian for some reason.

**EC:** And the philosopher who ardently fought for the reconciliation of Greeks and Jews: Philo of Alexandria.

### Related links

An excerpt from György Spiró's *Captivity* in [German and Hungarian](#) in *Babelmatrix* and in [English](#) in the *Hungarian Quarterly*.

**GS:** Philo does not mention Jesus, only Pilate — that Pilate executed prisoners who were not sentenced to death. As a matter of fact, Philo was my contemporary source, because it is known that there was probably something about Jesus in Josephus Flavius, but what is actually there now in his writings was added later.

**EC:** Who manipulated the text, and why?

**GS:** Most probably the Christians; their censorship was very strong. The Talmud was also an important source for me, but I used the Mishnah wherever it was possible, because it is more likely to have been born before the destruction of the Second Temple (70 AC). I had to take great care not be

influenced by later Jewish developments. And I also used archaeological material and historical works published in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

**EC:** Why are the small details of everyday life and the visual reconstruction of inner and outer spaces and buildings so important for you?

**GS:** Because I was interested in everyday reality. An archaeologist called Leon published a book about Jewish catacombs in 1960, and all the names in *Captivity* are from the tombstones. Who would have thought — not me, definitely — that Jews gave Greek or Latin rather than Hebrew names to their children at the time. I like Leon, because he is a really good positivist. I need data from which to draw the essence for myself. I like positivists, because they have no preconceptions. I guess they do have a secret preconception, but at least they don't ignore the facts so blatantly as historians who belong to other schools.

**EC:** From your book, we get a taste of contemporary Jerusalem, even the Temple. It is as if you had been there in secret.

**GS:** I have only been in Rome, and quite long ago. But just think of it: only one column has remained intact in ancient Alexandria. And I wanted to present it as if I had walked there myself...

**EC:** On what basis did you decide whose point of view to take?

**GS:** There are lots of important points of view, and already many people have thought along the same lines as me. It is difficult to determine though what this direction is. Many people have tried to conceive of religion a bit more sensibly than simple ideologues. I realized long ago that Christianity satisfied a real need, that at the time Christianity was born, something was missing from the world, something that other religions were incapable of satisfying. Luckily — and I was quite surprised to realize that — the first century was pretty unreligious. Although there were lots of religions, they were not really spiritual, they were unable to solve people's problems. People living in that era were rationally religious, Latins, Jews, and Greeks alike.

### **The reader wants to recognize themselves**

**EC:** *Captivity* is almost 800 pages long. Why is it so long-winded?

**GS:** I planned a 450-page novel. I thought that since world politics was done in Rome at the time, the novel would have to take place there. Pilate was too unimportant a figure to represent Rome, I had to take a look at the person who was behind him in Rome. So I thought I would write a tripartite novel: Rome, Jerusalem, Rome. Then I saw that it would not work unless the action was set in everyday life. I did not know yet that I had to take the protagonist to Alexandria.

**EC:** Why?

**GS:** I have read excellent historical works, but scholars are obsessed by their own subject, and fail to see the context. I noticed that, strangely enough, Alexandria does not appear in the story, although Alexandrian Jewry was very strong at the time, and Christianity must have spread there quickly.

**EC:** Finally the novel came out in four parts.

**GS:** Yes, because Alexandria had to enter the picture. And then I was in trouble. Four books?! In Europe, the representative form consists of three parts, like the sonata, the triptych, and so on. Or the Hegelian dialectic: thesis–antithesis–synthesis. Or the Holy Trinity. This form presupposes progress and redemption. Yet there are also four–part works, like the mature dramas of Chekhov or Wyspianski and some Russian formalists, geniuses all of them. I have been thinking a lot about this — why some people prefer eternal return and lack of change to progress.

**EC:** The four parts take forty years altogether.

**GS:** The novel starts in 35, when Jesus was crucified, and ends in 74, after the Jewish War. I must say I was quite happy with the number 40. The Bible is full of 40 days and 40 years... And I realized that I needed a protagonist, because the reader wants to clutch to somebody. In truly great novels — *Don Quixote*, *Svejk*, *Tom Jones* — there is usually a strong central character. It is important for the reader to have an at least somewhat loveable central character.

**EC:** Why?

**GS:** People are incapable of experiencing the sense of community any more, their life is not like that. Therefore they are unable to accept books written in a communal form. They prefer lyrical novels to epics. They experience the outer world as hostile, and if there is an absolute protagonist, they go with him. And they even prefer if the protagonist is the narrator himself who lectures to them. This gives ample space to the lyricization and the ideologization of prose. This is generally called postmodern, but it could as well be called sentimentalism. To put it differently: today people cannot read the *Iliad* — they can perhaps still read the *Odyssey* — but in their heart they desire Rousseau in whom they recognize themselves. So I thought I should create a mediocre figure who is sometimes up and sometimes down, like people — the readers — in general. Then I decided to endow him with some of my qualities and deficiencies, so that I could perhaps be able to guess his reactions, even though he experiences things that are foreign to me. I tried to guess, for example, what would have happened if I had been born short–sighted two thousand years ago...

### **"To be born a human being is captivity"**

**EC:** I have counted at least ten possible meanings for the title. Uri becomes a prisoner several times. When he is expelled to a Judean village, he realizes that he cannot escape because the whole state is a prison. His debt inherited from his father is a prison, his family...

**GS:** ...his Jewishness...

**EC:** ...The Law as a prison. In a memorable scene that takes place during the pogrom in Alexandria, the Jews who have escaped to the cemetery have a debate about whether they can be considered to be in life danger, whether they are entitled to eat unclean food...

**GS:** His sicknesses, the loss of his teeth, these are all captivities. It was important to present him as a biological being to make him more authentic. Ideological novelists usually create purely spiritual beings. But we are born as flesh and blood creatures and have to struggle with our body all our lives.

**EC:**The body as a prison.

**GS:** To be born a human being is captivity. There are no *Übermensch*-es. As Attila József says: "...the stars are bars of a prison". Or Kafka: "The bars of the prison are within us." I don't know more than they do. But one has to know as much.

**EC:** In the first few parts, you describe the happenings of a few weeks: the Pesach tax is taken to Jerusalem from Rome. The second part, Uri's exile in Judea, covers three months; the third, the Alexandrian part, covers two years; the last chapter, Rome, a whole decade. As we proceed in time, the number of characters and conflicts grows. Was this a consequence of the nature of the material?

**GS:** Not really. It starts slowly, then accelerates gradually, and toward the end it becomes extremely fast. In the beginning, we witness personal deaths, in the end we have only massacres. Two million people are executed in the Jewish war, and we hardly even shed a tear. But this must be preceded by slow pace, by personalized deaths.

It was obvious to me that *Captivity* would eventually have to be a novel of initiation, a novel of adventures. I wanted to start with a naive child, and make him a wise man by the end, and I hoped that the reader would proceed together with the protagonist. It must be a youth novel, not in the conventional sense, of course, but rather like Kertész's *Fatelessness*. It is a novel of education, but without Rousseau's limitless egoism. That's why it had to be so slow in the beginning. I left out a lot. For example, I hardly tell the reader anything about Uri's thoughts. Ever since, I have realized that if I let the reader's imagination work freely, then he will draw the consequences for himself, and find out how Uri would act... Such reception is active and leaves deeper traces in the reader than if I tell him what the hero thinks and feels. *Captivity* is also a novel of adventure, with a linear structure, and it is also very pictorial. This was a compromise on my part: today one must descend to the most primitive forms and make it as easy as possible for the reader. Actually, *Captivity* is a soap opera — a powerful genre, as we can see...

### **It's Uri's novel, not Jesus's**

**EC:** Yes, the novel is linear, but it is a great idea that Christ is a minor character, and Uri realizes only toward the end that he had met him by chance in the prison of Jerusalem.

**GS:** I realized that my protagonist simply *had* to meet Jesus. I was very scared of the Jesus scene, but when I finished it I knew I was going to finish the novel. It was actually not my idea that the two thieves and Jesus were together in the prison. My idea was only to put Uri into the prison together with all three of them.

**EC:** Your description of Jesus is somewhat irreverent. A chubby, fortyish guy — we usually think of him as being 33.

**GS:** According to the New Testament, Jesus suffered three hours on the cross, and then died. People usually took longer to die on the cross. This means that he was weak and not very young. Scholars also reckon that he was fat.

**EC:** But you were writing a novel: you could have made him as thin as a pin.

**GS:** But I didn't want him to be thin. For me, the important thing was that he should remind Uri of his father. A sensitive reader probably thinks at this point that Uri will become a Christian. Finally he doesn't, even though his morality anticipates that of Christianity all through. For me, the fact that Jesus is a father figure for him was more important than anything else. This is Uri's, not Jesus' novel after all — Uri's, for whom fatherhood is problematic.

**EC:** The strongest, though very problematic love relation in the novel is that between father and son. Uri regards his firstborn as a spiritual reincarnation of his father, and is incapable of loving his second-born, because he takes after his mother — and this is how you account for the fact that Marcellus is absorbed by the sect of the Nazarenes (the Christians).

**GS:** Firstborns — Jews, Greeks, and Latins alike — were in a much better position at the time. The rest of the sons were not considered important, and the girls were absolutely not to be reckoned with. Generally speaking, it is not successful firstborns who tend to join movements and sects. Revolutions are made by assistant professors rather than professors.

### **The first Christians: A middle-class movement**

**EC:** When Uri attends the meeting of the Nazarenes, headed by Priscilla, a priestess, it seems that you present it in an ironic light.

**GS:** Uri is surprised why he had such a bad time with these people. These people are not poor, they are well-dressed. There is an interesting book that says that the religion of the Nazarenes was an urban movement, the religion of the well-off. This, by the way, tallies with what modern sociologists of religion say about new religions like that of the Mormons or the Baha'i. I don't think that this scene is ironic, though it may strike us today as strange, because it is not how we imagine the first Christians. We imagine them as poor, downtrodden slaves.

**EC:** The structure of *Captivity* suggests that when Jesus turns up, he simply fits into a ready-made historical mould; that it practically does not matter who he is, because the role is there, waiting for him or whoever would take it.

**GS:** I don't think *Captivity* suggests that. Jesus was probably an exceptional person, and I do not get into characterizing him or his sect, I merely show that there was a need for a more deeply spiritual religion than the ones existing at the time. Of course, when there is a role to be taken, it *is* usually taken by somebody. We always need to adore someone as a God, and the person who fits our needs will be divinified. This is apparently part of being human.

**EC:** Reading *Captivity*, we realize that the horrors committed by the emperors are quite similar to each other, that the characters of Tiberius, Nero, Caligula, and Claudius are hardly distinguishable after they have become emperors.

**GS:** This is what power does to the human being, unfortunately. All the emperors imitated Tiberius' methods, and I presume that Stalin, who studied history in the seminary, never forgot what he had learnt, even though he had failed his exams. In the first century, every Roman emperor faced the same problems and reacted by using the same techniques — techniques that were available at the time. Some of them were geniuses, like Tiberius and Vespasian, some were sly, like Caligula, some idiots like Nero, some naive, like Vitellius — but they all had to be equal to their role. If they weren't, they

were murdered immediately.

**EC:** It is one of Uri's crucial experiences as an adolescent that he witnesses the execution of Seian's children. Since virgins could not be executed, the executioner rapes Seian's small daughter so that he can kill her.

**GS:** I did not invent this, I cannot invent such horrors. This scene is described by Suetonius. The greatest horrors are always produced by real life. I dramatized the scene, of course, and added an element or two to shock the unsuspecting reader, who has just started to read the story.

**EC:** This is a crucial scene, because it sets the standard: after a certain time, the reader realizes that he is becoming more and more dull as the horrors increase.

**GS:** Yes, Uri himself reflects on this in Alexandria, when he understands why he is not shocked by the massacre — because he had experienced it before, when the little girl was executed. The reason I didn't take Uri to Judea at the time of the Jewish War is that massacre on such a scale cannot be described adequately. You can experience the death of one person, but not the death of two million people.

### **Creating an Everyman**

**EC:** Uri is an outsider in every community, that's why he is not biased. The seeing–blindness dichotomy is a crucial theme in your novel. We, the readers see everything through Uri's eyes.

**GS:** This was absolutely a conscious choice: the reader should not see what Uri cannot see. Since Uri is short–sighted, he must think and remember in order to see. His almost–blindness forces him into a situation that could be called that of an intellectual, although there were no intellectuals at the time. He is capable of anything and nothing. He starts to walk in various directions, but never goes all the way.

**EC:** He writes distichs, makes mosaics, even invents an air–pump.

**GS:** I wanted to create an Everyman, capable of anything that humankind is capable of; a character in whom the reader can love the whole of humankind.

**EC:** Uri's blindness is a sign of his chosenness. God created him with bad eyes because he wanted him to see deeper. To study the Book. And books.

**GS:** This is how we usually turn our deficiencies into advantages. This is a healthy reaction. He is not chosen, he only thinks so, because that notion keeps him alive for some time.

### **The facts of fiction**

**EC:** In one of your essays, you claim that "those who have a well–based vision about history will be supported by the facts of history". In *Captivity*, you write that it was Tiberius who invented state bank financing...

**GS:** This is actually true, you can look it up in the works of Latin historiographers. Bank financing was invented because there was a problem to be solved urgently, and since the problem remained, banks remained.

**EC:** Yes, but the similarity with our age is striking.

**GS:** This is not my fault. I also mention political analysts — the word did not exist at the time, but the function did. Also insurance fraud — some people claimed that their ships were wrecked, others set their tenement houses on fire. These economic and power structures were the same then as now. It is quite reassuring to get into such details, to see that life on this earth was always the same.

The main character and his family are completely fictitious, while there are lots of minor characters who are not fictitious and about whom we — or at least academics — know a lot. This is quite common in this genre: Walter Scott, Stendhal, or Tolstoy used the same method, and ever since many writers have. However, if the reader cannot accept the fictitious main character, the whole edifice collapses. There is also a danger that the fictitious main character brings ulterior notions into the story — in the same way as Heisenberg claims that we manipulate all physical experiments with our instruments, that we cannot examine the state of things without our interference, and thus we will never know how things are without us. But even if the main character is not fictitious, there is an interference, and it is dubious because the author was born in a later age. The way to resolve this problem is perhaps to admit that it is all a fairy tale, even if it is based on historical facts. Wyspianski says that we do not know much about history, only the framework of the events, but that is enough to fill in the blanks by our imagination. For some reason, we like fairy tales; we even learn from them. Who knows what the real Ulysses, Patroclus, Hector, or Helena, what the real Romeo and Juliet were like? They were probably much more plain than what the artist — happily — made out of them.

**EC:** In the part of the novel that takes place in Judea you describe the everyday life of a community and the heroism involved in it. Uri has to live in the henhouse and fight for his daily bread.

**GS:** It was impossible not to make *Captivity* a novel about peasant life as well. The work of peasants can never be left out of a novel because it is the daily basis of our lives. Moreover, it is the peasants, two million of them, who are massacred in the Jewish War, they are the real victims of this war.

**EC:** The meaning of Uri's — Uriel's — name is "God is my light". While sifting wheat with the Judean women, Uri reads to them from the book of Henoch, in which there is an archangel called Uriel.

**GS:** The Book of Henoch was very popular at the time, because it talked about the Messiah who was soon to come. Without this book, the Revelations of St John or Dante's works could not have been written.

### **Taking the writer out of the writing**

**EC:** Do you try to draw a line between being a writer and a private person?

**GS:** Yes, for some time I have tried to do this consciously. In Hungary, people's minds are still dominated by Romantic notions of poets and writers. They regard literature as a substitute for religion. In our country, even the anti-prophet becomes a prophet, and I wanted to avoid this fate. People in Hungary tend to think that the writer should be identical to what he is writing about. If you are a writer, you are denied your basic freedom. Represent this or

that social group, class, nation, minority, whatever, just don't be yourself! You are not allowed to play. This is an extremely primitive, social realist or fascist idea. And I am quite surprised that it is still alive.

**EC:** Why do you say so often that being born a Hungarian is a disadvantage? Why is it easier for an English writer?

**GS:** Today, an English writer is in no better situation. He also lives in a small, unimportant country. Today it is only Russians and Americans who do not lack spiritual means. Being born a Hungarian writer after the Versailles Treaty means a narrow existence from the beginning. Nineteenth-century Hungarian writers were born into a different world. This is a big problem, and we tend not to realize it, or when we do, we think it is a political question, whereas in fact it is a spiritual question.

**EC:** Thus, you regard *Captivity* as successful emigration?

**GS:** How successful it is remains to be seen. But it was definitely a conscious emigration into the great events of a great era. Our world here, the world we were socialized into, is a small and shabby world. Being part of a small nation is usually not favourable for great prose and drama. Poetry is our strongest, that's where our greatest literary potential lies. I am surprised that readers and critics alike ignore poetry, and compel wonderful poets like Parti Nagy or Rakovszky to write novels. Not that their prose is not good; still, it is sad that they cannot live on their poetry alone.

**EC:** Your drama *Chickenhead* was translated into Czech, English, and German; *Soap Opera* into English; and both were set on stage. Your novel *The X-es* was translated into French. I don't think that all your books are easily translatable, but *Captivity* is.

**GS:** The problem is not translating, but publishing them. Who wants to read a thick novel by an unknown writer from somewhere in the Balkans, which is absolutely uninteresting nowadays politically? If he was thirty, perhaps... It takes ten years to build his image, and twenty more to make it a rentable business. He hasn't got a Jewish identity and he is not imprisoned — and even if he was, that wouldn't be such a big deal.

**EC:** Yet top lists show that in Hungary lots of people have bought *Captivity*. Do you attribute this to the marketing strategy of the publisher?

**GS:** Well, yes, of course, not to myself, definitely. The readers will decide whether the book is good or not, but they bought it because the publisher, Magvető, invested great energies into the campaign. I am happy, of course, because there is a slight chance that some people might even read it.

---

Published 2006-01-30  
 Original in Hungarian  
 Translation by Agnes Orzoy  
 Contribution by Magyar Lettre Internationale  
 First published in [Hungarian Literature Online](#)  
 © György Spiró, Erika Csontos/Hungarian Literature Online  
 © Eurozine