

Zsófia Bán

A box of photos

(Captions on the back)

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A man looks at photographs of his youth in pre-war Budapest. Above all he remembers his love, the seductive Jolika. Yet memory is tainted by sorrow as it becomes clear that this is a story of loss and displacement.

Jolika wearing a hat. Why take a photo of this: a hatmaker's apprentice, wearing her first hat? Who cares? Why be touched? Just because she put it on so jauntily, askew? Just because strands of her glistening black hair peek from underneath? Because her coy look made the camera shake in my hand? Could that have made the snapshot a little blurry? The slight movement? But who moved, was it her or me? Who took the first step towards the other?

Jolika with her mother. When she smiles, her pointy little chin is exactly like her dear Mama's. Jolika should have been chased away the moment she aimed her pointy little chin at me in the hat store, like some lethal weapon. No, thank you, Miss, I most certainly would not like a hat. Anything you had in mind at all? Nothing, as a matter of fact. Least of all a hat. If I had anything in mind, ever, it was a jaunty hatmaker's apprentice with a pointy chin. Jaunty, but with sad eyes. Who can be loved. And who can see with her sad eyes that I am capable of being loved too. Who laughs at my jokes. Who doesn't care if I'm fat. Who wants to bear my pointy-chinned kids. Should have been chased away, that Jolika.

Jolika in Esztergom, at the Maria Valeria Bridge. We walked over and visited



grandpa on the Slovak side. The sun was shining; it was nice on the Slovak side. I spoke Slovak too; we had *bei uns* a maid. *Ne kric, ne bodaj, alle bude rid bozai*. Not to shout or else she kicks me in the ass. Or in the *pica*. But little boys have no pussy, do they. And what am I now? And what have I got? I've got these photos. Fuck.

Jolika at the Herkulesbad spa. If it was good enough for Franz Joseph and his Bessy, it should be good enough for us, I thought. And damn suitable for a honeymoon, I realized while poring over the map, located as it was at the intersection of 45 52' latitude north and 23 52' longitude east, thus happily lying on the same parallel as Venice. So by going to Herkulesbad, you also symbolically go to Venice. I like symbols and coincidences. It is in the valley of the Cerna River that the loveliest spa of the continent can be found, said Franz Joseph. And it is here, in the valley of the Cerna River, that the loveliest Jolika of the continent can be found. Said I. The photo implies this view of mine. Performs it, as it were. And now, what does it perform now? Thanks to the westerly, southwesterly winds, the average temperature is 10.5 C. The air has a bite. Jolika has a bite. Let us not neglect to mention the presence of *pinus nigra* on the lonely summits (what is the lumberyard manager looking at?), and the view of the rather widespread *syringa vulgaris* or common lilac. A lilac is never common. Jolika is also never common. And I proved to be a real Hercules, if I may say so.

Jolika in the foyer of the opera. My mother would always pronounce it like foaah-yer, as if in awe. Jolika is wearing my mother's mink shawl. Not a bad mink shawl either; I sent it to the Red Cross last year so the homeless can keep themselves warm in the cold. My mother would never say *homeless*, no such thing at the time; it was the land of three million beggars (operetta). The land of three million beggars did not frequent the opera, no matter how warm it was in the foyer. Too warm for me, in fact. I prefer the cold, those crunching, snowy winter nights. Jolika could stand the heat even in a shawl. She could stand anything and never complained. She only complained once, about putting a yellow star on the shawl, the way that would look. Jolika had a sense of style, something a hatmaker needs. I wanted to be a conductor, but was a lumberyard manager, for the time being. This is why we went to the opera, so that I could observe the conductor. Jolika liked the stories, and the foyer. *La bohème*. What a cold little hand, and yes, they call me Mimi. That sort of thing.

Jolika with her younger brother, little Ernö. Little Ernö was naughty as hell;



one time, for example, he cut up her latest hat design with a hedge cutter he had stolen from the gardener at the zoo. He was a sensitive kid, this little Ernö, and did not like to lose. When he was found in hide-and-seek, he had a fit. When he lost in poker, he got drunk. When he was outswum, he went home and cut his bathing trunk into shreds. He couldn't lose, so he did his best not to. In '38, for instance, he got on a boat and never looked back till Australia. He hated to lose so much that he could feel he was about to lose when others were still happily playing. Jolika and little Ernö were inseparable. He begged her to go to Australia with him. To which she replied: now, of all times, when business is so good? And what about Mama? And what about Dezsö? (That would be me.) And what about the season ticket to the opera already paid for? Little Ernö had a fit. He could feel he was about to lose. Next day, he got on the train to Lisbon. The day after that, the hat store had to be closed. And we couldn't go to the opera. That hurt.

Jolika packing. She is packing my backpack, because she had a God-given gift for packing; she was no less than a secret packing artist. I did not make an effort to keep the task for myself, as her superiority was so obvious. I was in great demand and was called all the time, so Jolika was constantly packing. Every single time she outdid herself. She must have had a perception of space above the average. Unlike other lowly mortals, she never had to do a trial packing. She just glanced at something and could estimate its size and how much it could hold. That came handy for hatmaking. What head fits into which hat, and what kind of hat suits which head. That sort of thing. The guys were amazed every time: who on earth packed yours so neatly with enough room to squeeze the folding spade in? I proudly showed off my bag. Of course, some people cared more about sausage and cigarettes than about an efficient use of space. There will always be such blockheads. They don't know about art and don't care either. What do such people live for.

Jolika reading a letter, mine (who could have taken the picture?). Ordinarily, only postcards were allowed, but one could write a letter, properly censored, once a month. I was racking my brain about writing her something that wouldn't catch the eye of the censors, but would make her eyes gleam with happiness. Something that would not only speak of my infinite devotion to her, but somehow also about our life over there. Suddenly, on a march (a somewhat forced one, I admit), I had an idea. This is what I wrote to her that night (the letter is here, in the box):



I kept myself amused by surveying the various headpieces worn in front of me. Gray hats and beige hats; beige was the most numerous, this colour having been the fashion for the past few years. One or two elderly gentlemen wore hats with those very narrow brims, such as worn by young punks. But there were a few black hats visible – strange, in warm October weather. You could see plenty of caps as well: golfers' caps, touring caps for the sportier types. Oh, those fine wool travel caps, once in my foolish youth I bought one of those for a trip abroad. But I saw ahead of me many other types of caps, cheaper kinds worn by so-called 'little men' – retailers, artisans, workers, street vendors and poor peasants. [words indistinct] If you were to hold a headcount you would find that more people on earth wore caps than hats. I kiss your hands: D. [1]

I was hoping she might get the message, and starts making caps along with the secretly manufactured hats, since those were apparently selling much better. About the slightly unpleasant or, as my mother would say, *untam* smell of humans I preferred to remain silent. Why upset my Jolika. And there were the censors, too. Writing is such a complicated affair. Music is my thing.

Jolika on Pozsonyi Street, in front of our building. A star adorns the gate, very stylish. Jolika smiles as she looks into the camera, waving with one hand (to me) and holding her belly. Not holding it, just letting her hand softly rest on it, as if involuntarily checking it's still there. A proud bulge in the skirt of her cocktail suit. It is made of fine English tweed, for which I had traded some firewood. Smart man, our Dezső, said Mama approvingly. Mama also liked nice things. But Jolika looked stunning even in the plainest clothes. Let alone when she dressed up like here. Only one thing mars the general picture. She is laughing, but her eyes give her away.

Jolika on the bank of the Danube (newspaper clipping). Jolika loved the Danube. Sometimes we swam over, when visiting grandpa on the Slovak side. I was not a bad swimmer, I swear – as a matter of fact, I played water polo for the Esztergom Sports Club – but Jolika glided along underwater like a little otter, leaving me in her wake and shouting back, laughing, daring me to catch her. The droplets glistened on Jolika's black curls in the summer sunlight. I finally made my way to the shore, caught her, and we rolled on the sand exhausted. In the afternoon, grandpa was expecting us for potato



pancakes with sour cream. Jolika is standing at the near end of a long line on the embankment, her coat, shopping bag, and shoes beside her like everyone else's. The bag is full; she had been shopping. I know the shoes well; I bought them for her in Vienna, on the *Kärtnerstrasse*. Chestnut-brown, reverse-welted, with a suede upper and leather sole. They really flatter your feet, Jolika said delightedly, when she first put them on. Not that she needed a pair of shoes to flatter her feet. You can always tell a lady by her hat, gloves, and shoes, she would say. The *accessoire* is what matters, she would say, the rest is incidental. Not a surprising philosophy for a master hatmaker. She stands gracefully even in her stockings, the way she always did, softly resting one hand on her belly. Strangely enough, she is looking directly into the lens, as if she had noticed the stealthy photographer. She looks slightly upwards, towards the side of the line, against the backdrop of Margaret Bridge. Her face is closed, serious, but there is an almost mischievous light in her eyes. As if she had pursued a train of thought and come to a decision. I know what she's planning. She'll jump. Jolika will jump and then swim underwater, gliding like an otter. She'll outswim everyone. Then she'll hit the surface at Csepel Island and swim on towards the Iron Gate, down to the Black Sea. The droplets will glisten on her wild black curls.

That is what I thought when I got home, bought the paper, and saw this photo in it. One has all kinds of thoughts. And then one doesn't.

Burn them all.

Questions:

1. If you can shoot 5 targets in a second without reloading and no one disturbs you, at what hour in the afternoon will the colour of the water begin to change?
2. Do you ever secretly play with Daddy's gun? Do you always make sure the safety is on? Huh?

This is a short story excerpted from Esti iskola: olvasokönyv felnötteknek [Evening School: A Reader for Adults], Budapest: Kalligram 2007. Read a review of the novel in Hungarian Literature Online.



Footnotes

1. Translator's note: a quotation (unmarked in the original) from Ernő Szép's memoir, *The Smell of Humans*, en trans. John Batki, Budapest, CEU Press-Corvina, 1994, 64-65.