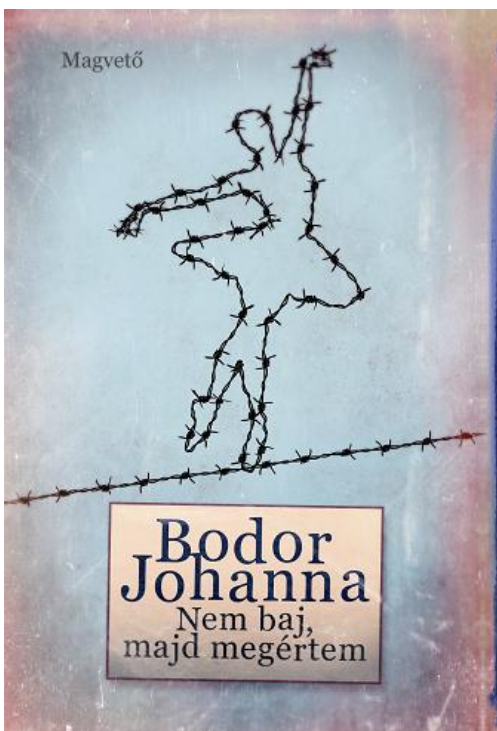


“...you had to salvage your true ability to think in some hidden corner of your mind.”

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JOHANNA BODOR:

It's OK, I Will Understand

A literary witness' account, 224 pages, Magvető Publishing, Hungary, 2014

A young girl and an artist's Eastern European memoir and witness account of a dark era

Johanna Bodor

Johanna Bodor was born in 1965 in Cluj-Napoca (Kolozsvár), in the Transylvanian region of Romania. She was a student of the National Ballet Institute of Bucharest, Romania, between 1975 and 1984.



She has lived in Hungary since 1985.

Her book, newly published, is the story of the year she spent on her own in dictator Ceausescu's Romania after her parents moved to Hungary.

She is a dancer, a choreographer and a university teacher.

She is only 18.

She wants to become a ballet dancer.

As Romanian citizens of Hungarian nationality, they have a plan: she enters into a fictive marriage with a Hungarian and her parents will soon follow her to Hungary and its relative freedom

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JOHANNA BODOR:

It's OK, I Will Understand

A young girl and performing artist's Eastern European memoir and witness account of a dark era

Excerpt from the book

Not long after the concert examination an official letter appeared in my mail box. It advised me about the place and time for interview relating to my marriage and intention to emigrate. My mind raced through all the stories you hear about cases like this. I knew any of these terrible things could happen to me as well.

In the time that followed, besides my schoolmates and teachers I told my friends and acquaintances when, where, what date and time I had been summoned. I did this by telephone too, and informed my parents of the news. I thought the more public the event, the more protected I would be.

I went up to Letitia to chat as befits people being questioned and bugged. Not just because we had a persecution complex. Letitia wasn't actually particularly bothered by the knowledge and the fact that the Internal Committee used underhand methods to check up on her, just as they did on society as a whole.

We knew the devilish machinery worked like a dream.

Politics based on fear, the brazen and often inhuman way they dealt with people, was rehearsed and mechanized in manner. The Ministry of the Interior and Securitate often deliberately leaked the bad, blood-curdling news. This was part of the trick, as a result of which millions switched to humiliating self-discipline and to behaviour in line with the system. Fear, jealousy of family members, and vulnerability drove many people to vile deeds. Before our very eyes we saw poor decisions and unbearable compromises wreck destinies and drive people to their wits' end.

Letitia knew the system well and how it worked. That was precisely why she had left her job and taken early retirement. She made expert use of her knowledge, experience and professional contacts.

As a matter of fact I went to her for a training session. The game was simple: I had to give a blow-by-blow account of the day in the enquiries office in the Palace building when I handed in the documents containing my application for permission to marry and

emigrate. She even asked about the precise contents of the documents, going beyond the usual questions about information in files.

The purpose of the session was twofold. Partly I had to pay great attention to Letitia's wordless reactions when I described the information, the questions and my answers. If she signalled something, I tried to decode and understand it, and attempted to hone my story until I saw on Letitia's face that I was fine from the official's point of view. The other purpose was for me to hold my ground nerve-wise. She put me under a crossfire of possible questions so I could learn how to behave in such a situation, and what to concentrate on.

I touched on the moment when the official in the Palace asked how and when I met my intended husband. I recalled my answer, which was a story constructed especially for the censors. Letitia made me recount my answer again, saying that she hadn't understood the beginning of the story... I felt I was supposed to alter something. I realized I needed to transfer the place we had met to a neutral area, to guarantee that no names would be uttered unnecessarily. She had me work out every minute detail of the stories. She knew I needed a story that I could tell convincingly for two years, that was unassailable in terms of geography, time, and logic.

Then I had to tell of the time I had spent in Budapest. She asked about details of what show we had seen together, when, and in which theatre. How long had we spent together each day, how many friends had I met? Where did I stay in Budapest, at whose place? I realized this too would come up in questioning. I had to watch what I answered, and whenever she asked a follow-up question, she expected me to give the correct answer. She asked about my parents, about Father's condition, and how Mother was. This meant that even this kind of question needed a sensible, logically acceptable answer: she prepared me for that too.

It was obvious that the story we'd made up had to be shared with István and my parents, so that the same story would be told by all involved. I wrote the finalized story down, and with the help of the Hungarian Embassy had it sent to my parents in Hungary. It would have been a gross and foolish error to choose the postal service.

Letitia's expert training gave me a sly confidence.

The day of the Interview arrived. I attended to every last detail: I dressed unprovocatively, but so as to suggest an elegance that would have a positive influence on the tone in which they addressed me. My make-up merely emphasized my natural and likeable features. The only objects to remain in my bag were utterly ordinary. My heels weren't too high, because I worried my nervousness would make me clumsy. The route I took to the given address didn't last long enough. I had the odd, arduous task of

brushing away the fearsome images circling in my head. I sat on the bus, looking at the dirty grey city, the miserable faces, the colourless world, and thought to myself: ‘What I see means that I still live, and still come and go freely in the city.’ I panicked. I was scared.

I memorized everything I saw and sensed from the entrance to the designated office: the path through the corridors, the number of steps, the number of doors, the noises. I thought: if they take me out of the building with a sack on my head, at least I’ll have points of reference inside the building.

In the waiting room sat people anxious and quaking within, just like me. Everyone was scared, and everyone tried to cover their true feelings with confident reserve.

I was summoned. It was an ordinary office, where the Official spoke to me in a quiet, determined voice. I took a seat. In his hand and on the table lay the papers I had submitted. Doing a random check, he asked about data and details. I realized the aim was to check the data. He asked for my ID card, and compared it with the data. He was annoyingly formal and slow. He behaved like someone not remotely interested in his own work, as if he didn’t hold a scrap of power. It was when he gave a mild smile that I was most scared. I felt that in a situation like this a smile could only be a cynical spontaneous reaction to the dangerous internal monologue, part of the prelude to evil. In these situations I used my detached (but not arrogant) expression. I radiated cool and apparently calm determination. I didn’t lift a finger without cause. I switched on the same concentration technique I had learned from dancing. It was a fantastic feeling. A grotesque link between life and art. I didn’t want to upset the unerring rhythm of the quiet terror of power. He took his time, and this heightened my anxiety. Anxiety could activate their hunting instinct. I had to watch that. I pulled myself together. I took control of my nerves once more. Letitia came to mind. I watched the Official’s face: what was he gazing at so intently? When would I be able to leave the office? When would I be able to light up on the street? When would I be able to get on the bus? I stayed put, disciplined and not too rigid, and continued to appear calm and remained helpful right to the end.

The Official looked at me, and paused a little longer. He closed my file, gave a wan smile, and told me I would be informed in due course. It was as if he meant: we’ll decide how convincing you were.

I asked when I could expect the next meeting. The Official replied: ‘That is never communicated in advance. We shall see. Goodbye.’ I politely said goodbye. I tried to leave the office at a perfectly normal speed, while inside I wanted to hurry.

I went out into the waiting room. Then I started to tremble. I gave an encouraging look to those waiting outside, and set off to leave the building. I looked back a couple of times, unable to prevent myself checking if the ground was clear behind me. Still I didn't rush. I got out onto the street, and set off home at a calm pace. I kept this measured tempo to the corner. After the corner I quickened my steps, looking back again repeatedly, and lit a cigarette. I was dying for a swig of vodka.

I had promised Letitia I would phone her from a telephone booth immediately after the event. All she asked was how long I had spent inside. When I told her, all she said was 'That's good.' I hung up and continued my journey, looking back often. From that day on I paid far more heed to the strangers who surrounded me on the streets. I was over the first hurdle. I felt slightly dirty.

On arriving home the role I was playing required me to phone my fiancé and coo to him that our case was moving forward. I recounted events in detail, emphasizing how civilized and kind the Official had been. I enjoyed exploiting the bugged apparatus and the circulation of information. My polite comment was intended for the Official, and I hoped to win good treatment through it. István played along with the scenario very well. I was grateful when he listened patiently, asked the right questions and promised to inform my parents and tell them what had happened.

That evening I lit a candle, and stayed at home. From that evening on I always shut the front and back doors carefully, and looked a little more often through the curtain to the quiet street; even in the bathroom I was reluctant to strip naked. I felt I was no longer ever alone.

*

Several times a year in Romania there were events extolling the party. To put on these productions they mobilized students from art schools, sports schools, university students, soldiers, adult and children's choirs, students and drama college, orchestras, singers, folk dancers, children at kindergarten, pioneers, and schoolchildren. They were grandiose productions on which millions were spent. Flags were made, stages were built with pleated cladding, and all manner of decoration, enormous curtains, portraits of Ceaușescu in ornamental frames, processions with banners and posters.

Every participant received orders about what to do, practised, and the performers were given a week to practise together. It was then that the final order of the productions was drawn up, linking elements were inserted, excerpts of films, reciters of poems, the

prepared elements were carried in procession, until the whole thing was like a communist carnival. Rigorous, highly respected, successful directors recognized for their party allegiance could perform these duties. With coordination from the disciplinarian helpers, and with enthusiasm from teachers and coaches, they always managed to reel out the megalomaniac Productions Extolling the Great Leader.

Our Romanian literature teacher classified these productions as commissioned art. She never put her scathing opinion into words, but through the emphasis of her sentences and her facial expressions she encouraged us to cling to our sense of good taste, and never to burden our souls with these superfluous brainchildren. I always wondered why she wasn't fired. In a dictatorship that kind of thinking was tantamount to treason. Any pupil could have squealed on her at any time.

For years, this literature teacher taught only in the music school. During the political streamlining of the art world, the music school was merged with the ballet institute. This damaged the functioning of the two schools, but it was undoubtedly an advantage to me that thanks to this daft merger our class met this brilliant teacher.

One of her surprising tactics in preparing us for the maturity exam was to set us unexpected essays. The tactic wasn't too cruel, because she wrote an excerpt from a work by the writer on the blackboard, and gave us thirty minutes to analyse it. That thirty minutes was enough for her to assess our ability to think spontaneously and to see how we had mastered the basics of Romanian literature. One day she wrote excerpts from two writers on the board. The work of one writer had made it through the censor's filter. His work was part of the curriculum. But the quotation from the other writer was forbidden material. Even his name couldn't be pronounced, and his works couldn't be found even in libraries or second-hand bookshops. Obviously, there were many such works. For instance works by Mircea Eliade, Orwell, Edgar Allan Poe, Kafka, and Kundera couldn't be found in official places. In line with the political rules relating to cultural life, books published before 1965 were screened, and certain writers were put on the blacklist.

Our literature teacher wrote on the board a quotation from a book by Mircea Eliade. A couple of pupils exchanged looks of shock. We knew exactly who Mircea Eliade was, and we were well aware that what our teacher dared to do was audaciously bold and worthy of respect. She shared her own resistance, her own revolution and courage with us. Mircea Eliade was a controversial person. Her conscience as a teacher wouldn't leave her in peace. She decided to draw our attention to certain literary treasures because she believed it important that we, fledgling artists, should receive from her intelligent, valuable and truly inspiring footholds. The behaviour, opinion and teaching

method of our Romanian literature teacher was a real touchstone for many of us in that terrible, dark, withered, stupefying, and dangerous political hypnosis.

When you had participated for the umpteenth time in a party political frenzy, then you realized you had to salvage your true ability to think in some hidden corner of your mind. You had to take care to hide thoroughly all signs of your independence of mind and intellect, your individuality, and particularly your true opinion. In compulsory productions, the recommended and only recipe for survival was humour.

Through the spectrum of humour you could observe them all: those desperately hard-working, those labouring under the compulsion to fit in, those who feared for their lives, and those who served party and regime with enthusiasm. You were dropped into a crazy and tumultuous world where the unfortunate populace was trained to feel patriotic and then expected to perform accordingly. People who adored the Party and its Leader were raised. An assembly in national colours radiating plastic emotions, in which thanks to the inspecting faces which instilled terror, they were able to persuade individuals to polish to perfection their mendacious behaviour, or as the case may be, the appearance thereof.

Teachers, who regularly turned out the symmetric and overpoweringly stupid choreographies. Head teachers, who didn't want to forgo a pat on the head. Gymnasts, who undertook to play the game of 'anything for the Olympics, if necessary, unfurl a flag while standing doing the splits, holding Ceaușescu's portrait in my teeth, indefinitely.' Singers in choirs, whose blood vessels bulged in their necks as they blasted out the polyphonic patriotic songs, with a yearning gaze. Soldiers, who played the patriotic ecstasy very authentically because at least for the time being they weren't breathing the stench of the barracks. Everyone who took part in these events was checked up on. Members of the Communist Youth Organisation with excellent behaviour, good students, promising talents who had been given to understand it was an honour to be able to participate in such a production. It was styled as a mass honour: the celebration of the 'Duce'.

Translated by Richard Robinson