

“Outrageous, they still let these people in!?
Where are we, still in the blasted democracy?”



While the book takes place in a near-future Hungary, “Wife Contest” is **definitely a read for non-Hungarians, as well, as it describes general maladies that beset the early 21st century:** declining standards of education, focus on entertainment, extremism in politics, lingering ethnic violence—issues that apply to a great many societies.

The book is a rare mixture of bleak and funny with a Cinderella story line that makes it a spell-binding page turner.

An extremely funny social and political satire which could eerily apply to most of our modern societies!

György Spiró

WIFE CONTEST

FICTION, 337 PAGES, MAGVETŐ PUBLISHING, HUNGARY

ENGLISH EXCERPTS to follow from next page!

Absurdistan is a term sometimes used to **satirically** describe a country in which **absurdity** is the norm, especially in its public authorities and government. **György Spiró’s novel “Wife Contest,” set in the near-future of Hungary, is one of the funniest and most cutting of this genre.** The novel purports to be a biography of the future Queen of Hungary, from her early childhood in a family of slackers, thugs and thieves to her eventual elevation as the winner of a nation-wide TV show “Wife Contest.”

IRRESISTIBLY FUNNY! WEIRDLY FAMILIAR!

Spiró’s Hungary of the near future is bleak but not unrealistic; he simply projects current Hungarian trends to their ultimate developments. **The Hungarians, disappointed by recent forays in democracy (cleptocracy in Hungary), choose to unite the two forms of stable government that worked before, communism and monarchy.**

What is **YOUR COUNTRY** like?

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Wife Contest

By György Spiró

EXCERPTS FROM THE NOVEL

Translation by Laslo Vespremi

1.

Vulnera Renata, beloved and venerated by the entire Hungarian nation, was born in a two-and-a-half-room apartment on the eighth floor of a prefab building badly in need of repair, somewhere in the area bordering Kelenfold and Albertfalva¹, and she was nicknamed Rea, since she did not like to be called Reni.

Of the educational level of her father, Vulnera Bodog, we have no information. On the other hand, her mother, Somondo Emmo, successfully completed elementary school. Those rumors are false that place the family's move from Bekes County to Budapest around the time when the gypsies were forcibly resettled there from Budapest and the western half of Hungary—factually, Renata was already sixteen at that time. On the other hand, it is true that Vulnera Bodog was the recipient of an aid package as a repatriated Hungarian from outside the country's border, a "Hungarian-designated Refugee" as it was called at the time. Many native-born Hungarians used this scheme, untruthfully claiming (and proving with false papers) that they were persecuted in neighboring countries based on their Hungarian origins.

It is possible that Vulnera Bodog had a supporter in the XI District's local government, since he received this aid package, for which he was not qualified, without interruption. Routinely, recipients of this governmental aid would pay approximately thirty to forty percent of the money directly to the permitting official's pocket—we assume Vulnera Bodog did the same.

As our novel is primarily written for young Hungarians abroad, who are not familiar with Hungary or the last 25 years of its history, from time to time we will add short historical and local background notes to enable these readers to appreciate this incredible story in full, while hoping not to interrupt the flow of the narrative.

The Vulneras' flat was disconnected from district heating way before Renata was born, and everyone had to figure out on his own how to survive the winter. Mostly it was done by cutting a hole in the window (there were no flutes or chimneys in prefabs), and running the pipe of an iron-stove, which are now fashionable once again. Because of the unreliable electrical service one couldn't count on a plug-in oil-heater—also there were more electrical blackouts in winter than during warm weather. Needless to say such iron heaters were illegal and dangerous—firemen regularly raided apartments, arriving by the dozens in black raiding trucks for apprehending the malefactors, although, with understandable disdain, judges refused to process the complaints.

¹ Outlying suburbs of Budapest

When there was electricity (the Vulneras stole electricity), they heated the bigger room where the family gathered with a dish-shaped, old-fashioned radiator that had glowing metal webbing inside.

In such apartments people usually heated only one room. Heavy bedcovers came back into fashion. At the feet one would place two things for the night: a heated brick wrapped in a towel, and a rubber bottle called Termofor filled with hot water. The inventor, Mochats Mano, who reapplied for an old, expired patent, recently returned from a Canadian research lab where, with his team, he discovered the matter that transfers gravitation. The four-member team received the Nobel prize, not divided but each three a full prize, with the exception of the Hungarian member who was not mentioned at all. When Mochats learned of the award, he suffered a stroke in his Pesterzsebet flat, and after his recovery, he swore to avenge his former Canadian colleagues, and within five years he made nine times as much money with Termofor than they did with the Nobel prize. Barrabi Rabar, the theoretical physicist behind the gravity bomb, was one of his pupils.

The prefab blocks were patrolled by officials of the State Temperature Institute, enforcing the 14,6 Celsius grade heating allowed by the government. They carried all kinds of modern instruments that the government purchased expensively from abroad. Alas, in entering the buildings they usually encountered shady characters who would mercilessly beat them if they did not receive enough “entering” money.

The Vulneras used to steal hot water from the former Kondoros Street communal swimming pool, as it was revealed by Rea’s younger brother, Vulnera Birs, in his first public statement. The pipe was built according to regulations, but without permits. While the water was only lukewarm due to the distance and the relay pumps, even on the eighth floor it could be used for baths and for cleaning the dishes. The swimming pool was defunct for a very long time, although the building was still heated even in the summer. Vulnera Birs refuted the claim that the family participated in ragweed cultivation. He noted that the growers used the district heating for free (of which the population was disconnected as we noted above), but not the pool building which stood empty for years. To get such insights you needed to be thick with the local government and the police; Vulnera Birs, who was at this time a police sergeant, received his information through the police headquarters.

When Rea was young she often played in the pool area; undernourished and small even at the age of five, she could easily fit through the rusty and crumbling fence. Sometimes she went with Birs, her brother, sometimes with her older sister, Csetra, who normally preferred to hang out at the market where their mother, Somondo Emmo, was working illegally. Once, the two girls were playing in the bush when, next to them, the pool’s alarm went off—not a bell but a regular siren—followed immediately by ten armed guards running from the nearby buildings. They had

ski masks on their faces and ran into the pool building while Csetra hugged a shivering Rea, who was calming her too. They were still hiding when the armed guards led out two apprehended men in handcuffs, carrying behind them the *corpus delicti*, a strand of ragweed.

As Birs told later, the siren is only activated by the removal of a whole bunch of ragweed, which was detected by sensors connected to the plants underground, but one can easily pick a few leaves aboveground without alerting the commandos. The girls did not understand this. Birs told them further that ragweed cannot be planted outdoors, as it would be detected by WEU² satellites—hence it is cultivated indoors with carefully regulated temperatures. Satellites can also measure excess heat, and if they detect such, they will lob bombs at the site. The girls understood even less of this, and even Birs was somewhat unsure, so he did not try to explain it again.

The neighborhood was derelict. On the street, naked kids played in the dirt, just like that, even though large posters in the surrounding building proudly proclaimed the neighborhood as a “Gypsy-free Zone.”

Vulnera Bodog did not make enough money to afford to move to a better neighborhood, but still never stopped to educate his children on how “we don’t sit in the dirt with our naked butts.” This sentence was later made into a national slogan after Rea’s first communiqué.

The miserable state of these flats never deterred the protection rackets that would readily trash and empty someone’s apartment if protection money was not forthcoming. There were some brave souls who did not pay even after their flat was emptied—in this case the hoodlums would destroy the newly repaired entry door, since there was nothing else to take. The insurance companies did not insure against break-ins and so the owner resigned to live without an entry door, and sure enough the racket stopped bothering him after a while.

The Vulnera family did not pay any protection money thanks to the Vulnera boys’ occupations and circle of friends.

Csetra graduated with average grades from high school, got a job at the market and then moved on and rented a place in Jozsefvaros³ and only visited on weekends. Rea, who was twelve years her junior, was hugely impressed with the fancy dresses she displayed in these visits. No one told her about her sister’s occupation. Birs did not mention it, and Vulnera Kolonc, the older brother who lived from occasional theft, was not given to words, and so he also was silent on the subject. Birs cursed Csetra every time her name was mentioned and Rea suffered to hear him call Csetra a “whore,” surmising that it was not a good thing, and covered covering her ears.

² Western European Union

³ An inner city

“Watch with your eyes, bazmeg!”⁴ cursed Birs.

Rea was not watching anything and covered her eyes.

Kolonc was tall, sickly and bent over, with a nose flat as a boxer’s, which everyone thought curious: how two potato-nosed parents could beget a child with such a nose. Birs, in contrast, was blond, potato nosed, stocky and overweight. Kolonc often brought gifts to his sisters and younger brother, saying they were sent by his fiancée; the children loved this lady although they never saw her. Kolonc was a habitual liar, was totally unreliable, tended not to comply with requests even though he loved to promise many things, and he was sly and nasty. As one can read in the files of the Consolidated Library of the Secret Service, “His every first sentence is nonsense, followed by a second sentence of evasion.” They added: “—a sexual coward.”

Rea started elementary school in Albertfalva, which only seemed close to the flat; the tram tracks were stolen a long time ago and the replacement buses were unreliable until they stopped appearing altogether. She was strictly forbidden to hitch a ride, and she couldn’t use a bicycle either, as she, despite pressure from the family, never mastered how to ride. Later she might have learned it but by then all the family’s bicycles were long stolen.

She walked an hour and a half to school and an hour and a half back home, so often she resorted to skipping school and hiding out in the bushes of the abandoned pool’s garden. Most of the time, in winter, she sneaked into the covered area, which was heated for the ragweed, and slept in the pleasant heat. When she had to repeat the second grade, her parents enrolled her into the Budafok Elementary, which was even further, but fortunately the school bus had a nearby stop and in addition she was allowed to skip directly to the third grade.

With the help of the school bus she made it to school, but not necessarily to the class room—she deposited her school bag at the entrance and hit the road. There were others who also deposited their bags and hung out somewhere. It was a good thing too; the school was owned by the district, which had no money to repair the half of the building that had collapsed—as such, the students couldn’t have found a place to sit in class even if they wanted. Subsequent research proved that about one-third of the girls became streetwalkers at the ages of twelve to thirteen; the majority was pimped by their parents or older siblings.

The teachers were only required to teach a cursory knowledge of the curriculum, but not necessarily the presence of students—in fact, they were happy if they did not show up and not just because of the lack of space; the school director encouraged the students to denounce their teachers, mainly the girls to allege sexual attacks, which in turn allowed the school director to fire any teacher at will.

⁴ Bazmeg is short for “Fuck it”

Rea did not denounce her teacher, as she had no idea who he/she was. This explained why her class teacher warmly remembered her even though he could not identify her from photos or the class picture.

Professions that required some education were impossible to fill. Eighty percent of the Hungarian students with elementary school educations could not finish reading a newspaper page in four hours or give a ten-minute overview of the material they'd read. In fact, most of the Hungarian children could not read or write. For this reason, enthusiastic academicians developed Hungarian Sign Language, consisting of 500 signs. They calculated that it should be possible to force kids in the course of eight years to memorize these 500 signs. (Before this, only the traffic signs were accepted.) This idea garnered international acclaim and European Sign Language appropriated 434 signs from Hungarian Sign Language. (The European Union established a minimum of 600 signs, which was later reduced by Italy and Greece to 450 and 420 respectively.) Even today children first learn sign language and only later the alphabet, if at all. A Chinese offer, that the Chinese [logosyllabic](#) be adapted for European use, was rejected by a small majority of the WEU member states.

Today the contemporary Hungarian Sign Language consists of 630 signs, thus surpassing both the WEU's 600 and the EEU's⁵ 540 signs. (We need to mention that in our country students are only required to learn all 630 signs for high school graduation at age 16, while in the WEU sign language is required by the age of 8 and in the EEU by the age of 14. On the other hand, we can proudly point to the fact that in Hungary the traffic signs are NOT part of the 630 signs, unlike in Portugal, Great-Albania and Slovenia.)

In the following years, Rea spent most of her time wandering around the hills of Budafok and observing the villas of the newly rich, or to be precise, the 20- to 24-foot-tall fences that hid both the villas and the large gardens. She did manage to gain entrance to a dilapidated house in Budafok where she could watch TV undisturbed and was even given supper. Aunty Ibuska, the lonely pensioner, kept six cats and four dogs—from the leftover dog food the cats and Rea could share equally. Aunty sometimes caressed her hair and asked about the TV shows, which she could no longer see, and Rea told her (or later made up all kinds of stories) about what was on. Ibuska listened with rapt attention, which gave Rea more inspiration. Aunty Ibuska lived to see the Great Change; Rea remembered her fondly and sent a wreath to her funeral complete with a giant silver crow.

Despite all the missed classes Rea was only expelled after sixth grade, up to that point, she was allowed to pass with D- grades. Her father hit her regularly for the Ds, but later forgot about it. The school received money based on the number of students, so the teachers were reluctant to fail any student and the school director allowed this only in the worst cases, which usually

⁵ Eastern European Union

included attacks on teachers and serial theft. Budafok Elementary was a conservative, elite school, of which there were few left in the country; in such schools students actually had to learn the curriculum. In such an elite school, the teacher was responsible for the exam and the grades; students could not appeal against poor grades.

By contrast the normal school was organized with the then fashionable democratic principles, which held that the goal is not learning but rather that teachers avoid interference with the formation of the child's personality. If the majority of the children in such a school voted that the sun was circling the Earth, and not the other way around, then the teacher had to accept this going forward as a fact and adapt the curriculum, including the high-school graduation, to this standard. If the majority of the kids voted that the Earth was flat, then the teacher was required to teach this. If the kids later voted that the Earth was tetrahedron-shaped, then everyone was required to accept this as the truth, even a teacher who was forced by another class into a different or opposing definition.

If the kids wanted so, they could vote to adapt the view that Hungary won both the First and Second World Wars. With a vote, we could have been victorious against the Turks in Mohács.⁶ Kids could vote to award the Hungarians the discovery of America led by King Mátyas, whose famous lead ship, Kolombo Korvino, was decorated with the sign of the crow and could agree how His Majesty, using a spyglass, ferried his trusted Black Army over to New York, which army then fought valiantly against the cannibal Indians. (This example is directly taken from a graduation essay of the best normal school, the Fazekas Gymnasium.)

Mathematical formulas, transformations in physics or chemistry, could be voted on, and if the teacher ended up in the minority view, he was not allowed to give bad grades to those representing the majority view. This practice was also adapted by the TV quiz shows; the answers were not evaluated by the host, who had the correct answers, but by the audience, whose majority opinion was then binding on the TV host.

The Hungarian Parliament, which pioneered the voting system, acted similarly; the majority of the 996 congressmen could simply vote that they refused to read a referendum or proposed law, although in practice this was not even needed, as they were told beforehand which button to push, and if they were not too drunk, they usually did not mess up. The majority vote became the norm, regardless of whether it made sense or not. This practice extended to the local governments, although it must be said that it was not a Hungarian phenomenon only, as it was practiced all over the world under the label Democracy.

⁶ Hungary was devastated by Turkish forces in Mohács in 1526, which was followed by 150 years of Turkish occupation

Rea did not tell her parents that she failed six subjects—five failures would have been forgivable—and that, as such, she could not even take a make-up test; she only told Birs about this.

This was about the time Birs joined the police, as they had been wanting to recruit him for some time. The cops were busy stealing cars for additional income and needed a good specialist. They got in touch with Birs through his brother, Kolonc, the thief, who was from time to time in their custody and so naturally they knew about Birs and the fact that he had been successfully breaking into cars since the age of fourteen.

Birs' advice to Rea was to pretend; go away every morning and return in the afternoon as if coming back from school. We learned this from Birs, as Rea remembered or genuinely believed that she was still going to school. There was no big difference anyway; she just had to bring her backpack. It took two years until her mother smelled a rat and promptly beat her, although she did not mention this to her husband and then decided to take Rea with her to the market where she was selling at a vegetable stand. It seems that Vulnera Bodog did not learn in his lifetime that his daughter was not going to school when she left the flat each morning.

Emmo was not a grower, having no land or garden in which to grow. The other sellers at the market tried a few times to cut her out but gave up after incidents involving Bodog, or later Birs, ruining their produce with acid or breaking into their store rooms, or Birs stealing their cars. Emmo either genuinely did not know of this affair or preferred not to know; she told Rea that she was basically blessed with a sunny personality and that this was why she was so popular with the sellers and that her nice disposition with customers resulted in tangible profits for her employers, even though she was grossly underpaid. Mrs. Jakuba, wife of farmer Jakuba Horho, who was pressured into employing Emmo, did in fact underpay her, but at least Emmo did not have to pay income tax on her earnings.

Rea was skinny yet shapeless, her hair of an undefined color was tied up in a pigtail with a rubber band, her colorless little eyes blinking ceaselessly, her wide doughy face well sprinkled with acne, add to this very bad posture, the pushing out of a non-existent belly, hanging shoulders, constant nail-biting and the appearance of remarkably large teeth framed by thickset lips when she was smiling in embarrassment.

She was not even fourteen when her father passed away.

Vulnera Bodog was using his beat-up car—because of the huge number of refurbished or spare parts the original make of the car was no longer apparent—to curbside pickup of old furniture and other discarded household items. The Hungarian mafia was trying to force out the Gypsy mafia around this time and Vulnera was one of their delivery guys. His older son, Kolonc,

sometimes helped him with the loading. The younger son, Birs, was working two shifts and seldom had time to help his father.

Earlier, Vulnera Bodog was working hard as a construction worker if he could find employment, which did not happen too often. It is defamation from the emigrant Hungarian press to maintain that no one in Rea's family ever held down an honest job. In fact, once, Bodog even landed a well-paid cement-mixer job at the Western section of the M-10 freeway construction, between Solymár and Nagykovácsi. As usual, the director of the Hungarian construction company made a deal with the politicians on who gets how much bribe from the millions of state subsidies when the French bought out the construction company. It is possible that the French promised even larger bribes, but someone maybe forgot to tell the new French director about this and when they did he simply refused to pay the bribes. It took nine months until they managed to get the French director fired, but then the new Algerian director also refused to pay bribes. At this point the Hungarian government bought back the enterprise paying twice as much as the original sale price, and so finally the politicians could get their well-deserved bribes and let the work commence, alas without Bodog, who needed the money to support his family and quit months before.

One day as Vulnera Bodog went to curbside pickup on Bucharest Street, a cop gave him a parking ticket. Vulnera Bodog noticed it and ran to his car while the cop was enjoying the scene from a few steps away. Vulnera Bodog screamed that it was legal to park on this section of Bucharest Street. The cop maintained that this was illegal. This all happened in the front of a park that was now used by the residents as a garbage dump, even though once a decade the district planted new trees and repaired the walkways with small granite blocks, best used as ammunition for the various protest parades when such was needed.

Vulnera screamed that this part of the street was designated as free parking on the internet. The cop maintained that this was not so. Bodog did not have a cell phone with data service, and while Kolonc had about eight of these that he hid in a storage room in Fehervári Avenue, they were very far from Bucharest Street.

The upset Vulnera Bodog grabbed the pink ticket from behind the windshield wiper, looked at it and saw that the actual address was printed as 2 Bucharest Street, where parking was indeed illegal. The fact was however that he had parked in front of 12 Bucarest Street. The now purple-colored Vulnera Bodog screamed some more while the cop gave him the finger and left.

Vulnera Kolonc noticed that his father had fallen down, gasping for air on the ground, and by the time he reached him, he was no longer alive.

Thus it happened that Rea became a half-orphan, although she did not comprehend it.

At the funeral Rea walked beside her mother while Emmo cried and was supported by Kolonc and Birs on either side. Rea was not supported by Csetra, who was out to pick up a John even now, wearing spiked high heels, which constantly got stuck in the mud.

Then Emmo cried some more. Rea also cried and then they had a big supper at home with even the remote relatives present, including Uncle and Aunt Bator, the neighbors, some co-workers from the market with husbands and kids, and also Lieutenant Dr. Patho Karpat, Birs' boss from the police. The large and mustached Uncle Karpat entertained everyone with funny stories about funerals and the various ways people were murdered. Everyone was enjoying them and getting drunk, except Rea, who refused to drink.

After the wake, Emmo confided in Rea that Bodog had not died but left to work in the country and would come home. "You just have to be patient."

Rea was consoled, though she suspected that the whole thing was a trick anyway.

(...)

8.

While Rea was taken away in a paddy van, Emmo was waiting in vain by the EMKE corner; finally she decided to board tram number 4, carrying with her the red-and-white-striped flag*⁷. She got off the tram at the market, still holding on to the flag for a while and then finally abandoning it on the roadside at the far end of Fehervari Avenue.

⁷ The Arpad-flag, preferred by the Hungarian Right to the red-white-green national flag.

Meanwhile Kolonc made a friend at the demonstration, a super nice, conservative, Gypsy-hating old lady, who spent the whole time worrying about her dog she left alone at home.

“While you are demonstrating, dear lady,” said Kolonc, deploying his juvenile charm, “I would be happy to take care of your doggy.”

The old lady gladly handed over her apartment keys, told Kolonc which way to go to her flat, how to take a shortcut from Bimbo Street to Aranka Street through a set of steep steps, gave him the code to the entry door and money to buy dog food, then satisfied that doggy was taken care of, she continued to demonstrate. Kolonc immediately called Birs who quickly stole a car and bought a kilo of sliced bologna; they entered the flat, fed Horsefly, the 110-pound Bernese Mountain Dog, and while the dog happily inhaled all the cold cuts, they emptied the apartment of everything that was small and shiny.

That night the Vulnera family was blissfully unaware that this demonstration started the first significant confrontation between the Hungarians and the Gypsies.

The Gypsy demonstrators, supported by the blonde Gypsies, made an attempt to enter Kossuth Square in front of the Parliament, but were pushed back by the Hungarians and the cops first toward the Jaszai Mari Square, then further from the Margit Bridge to Pozsonyi Avenue. This coincided with the collapse of the underpass connecting the two sides of the bridgehead; hit possibly by a poorly aimed mortar, or as the official version claimed, by an unexploded, Second World War aerial bomb that decided to detonate exactly at this time.

After a job well done the cops left the scene, which in turn encouraged the Hungarian demonstrators to chase the Gypsies further toward the St. Istvan Park.⁸

The Gypsies made a stand at the park and dug ditches in front of the park’s Great Basin. The Hungarians lacked shovels, but they quickly retrieved ancient hand-grenades and shaved-off shotguns; they fired at the Gypsies, who then threw back unexploded hand-grenades at them. Opposition TV stations hurried to the park in order to whip up resentment with live coverage, which made the cops decide to rejoin the battle, but they were stopped by the overturned and burning vehicles. When the cops changed tactics and tried to approach the park from the river banks they were turned back again, this time by automatic weapon fire coming from motorboats on the river.

It was never established whether it was the Gypsies or the Hungarians who opened fire from these boats called “monitors,” and the question remains open who called the boats there in the first place; without doubt it was a provocation either by the government or by the opposition. The

⁸ St. Istvan Park is a district of luxury apartments built in the 1930s that surrounds a lovely large park bordering the River Danube. The residents of the district tend to be top artists and other prominent people like the philosopher Gyorgy Lukacs or the popular actor Tamas Major.

“battle” of the St. Istvan Park lasted two and a half days, at which point the warring parties started to get hungry and thirsty and pulled out. Café Dunapark suffered several hits and two other buildings nearby had their lower floors collapsed, while the upper floors remained relatively unaffected after sliding down two stories from their original height to occupy the space where the first and second stories once stood. The bauxitbeton⁹ material of the buildings, which was once thought to be inferior, performed admirably; tenants were largely uninjured and were later moved to railway boxcars that idled on a dead-end track at the Western Railway Station. Many were to spend four to five years there, still occupying these boxcars, when the Great Change came. They could count themselves lucky; unlike other apartments after the Great Change, these boxcars were not nationalized by the new government. The buildings destroyed in this or subsequent battles in the St. Istvan Park were left as ruins by His Benevolent Grace as a reminder; there were tours organized for schoolchildren from both the capitol and the country to visit these mementos.

To this day there is a debate among historians about the origins of the demonstration and whether it was caused by accidentally wrong slogans that were given out either by the government or by the opposition; and whether the armed conflict was possibly provoked solely to distract the public from the ongoing debate about the “Kamaty-tax.”

What happened was that the Constitutional Court, prompted by a veto from the president, rejected the proposed Kamaty-tax and returned it for revisions to the Parliament, which now could rewrite it and submit a new proposal. This second version of the “Kamaty-tax” deviated from the first in two ways; it included a statement on the parity of the different religions and also an authorization, for the banks to collect the tax, where SparMaBank was mentioned for the first time. This second version of the Kamaty-tax gained a better than two-third approval, unsurprisingly, since both the government and the opposition were financed by the same business interest; still, to maintain the illusion of independent debate, congressmen engaged in intense sham fights, and some even suspect that this was the real cause that provoked the battle of St. Istvan Park. They may have calculated that the centrally provoked Gypsy conflict would divert attention from the Kamaty-tax. This scheme actually worked out well, except that like all schemes, it went out of control and started a bona fide war.

The last joint action between Gypsies and Hungarians took place shortly before the war during a demonstration by prostitutes, which was characterized by the solidarity showed by all the demonstrators. To this day there’s scarcely a mention of this in either the Hungarian or Gypsy histories, in either language. We feel an obligation to include it here even though Rea was not participating in this demonstration.

⁹ A type of concrete made of the leftovers of bauxite used in aluminum production

In preparation for the demonstration both Hungarians and Gypsies—the girls and their pimps—distributed leaflets, notes on the internet and even paid radio ads, so even at the market people knew about it.

“Csetra should not go there,” worried Emo.

“She won’t,” assured her Birs.

“I have not seen her for a long time,” said Emmo, troubled.

“We have not seen her either,” replied Birs.

“Rea shouldn’t go either,” worried Emmo. “She just got back from jail.”

“She won’t be there either,” assured Birs.

“Have you seen her lately?” asked an upset Emmo.

“Of course I have, Mama. We came here together this morning, me, you and her,” exclaimed Birs.

“Yep, that’s true,” conceded Emmo, becalmed.

From all the contemporary reports in Budapest, this last joint Hungarian–Gypsy demonstration was best recorded by an eyewitness who did not even speak Hungarian.

Dr. March Fooley, a former archeologist, was just appointed the United States Ambassador to Budapest right around the time when the Kamaty-tax was debated in the Hungarian Parliament. We have videos of Mr. Fooley—graying hair, tall but slightly stooped, with a full black beard but no mustache—as he submits his credentials to the Hungarian president at the Trophy Hall of the Hungarian Parliament; he is wearing an oversized jacket, while the president, Vegvarrhy Adoran, is sporting a polka-dot bow tie. As he gives the president’s shoulders a friendly slap, the president’s mouth forms words. He is telling the ambassador something while the ambassador nods in agreement. (This video is from a contemporary newscast. It became standard that the people shown on TV were inaudible—the commentator was providing the content of their comments, often in complete contradiction to what was actually said; professional lip-readers made serious money by analyzing the tape for the actual text. The Constitutional Court, which in reality acted more as the upper chambers of the Parliament, found this practice on TV compliant with the Constitution, deciding that “there’s freedom of speech in Hungary, so the TV commentators are also protected by this law as provided by the Constitution.”)

President Vegvarrhy would have been surprised to learn that the black full beard was fake and the ambassador only wore it to official business.

Dr. March Fooley became a close friend of the US president through a mistake; he donated \$100,000 to a foundation that researched the origins of Native Americans, but he accidentally misprinted the last digit of the bank account number and so it ended up as a donation to the election campaign of one of the presidential candidates. As the two other, more qualified presidential candidates, had just ruined each other's chances at the last presidential debate, this third candidate of half-Burmese, half-Spanish origin won the election, and he was immediately intrigued by a to-him-unknown donor.

Following a heartfelt invitation, Fooley visited the White House, where he confessed to the new president about the clerical mistake causing the president to break into a half-hour of uncontrolled giggling, to the point that the chief of staff considered calling the presidential physician; after recovering, the president offered Fooley the post of the Ambassador to Hungary. Fooley protested saying that he was not a diplomat. But why, this was a post that had just opened up, pleaded the president. Well, he was not interested in Asia. He was informed that Hungary was located in Europe. Still, he was not interested. Finally they offered him a salary that was simply too much to refuse, so he consented and was given the appointment along with a language book from the State Department. Later, State found out that he was not married, which would have disqualified him; the president ordered a sham marriage with a foreign-service secretary, and so the couple soon arrived at the Budapest Airport.

We know all this from Fooley's English memoir; a Hungarian translation is not yet available.

As Fooley and the secretary disembarked from the plane, the assembled Hungarian foreign service diplomats surrounded the couple, greeting them in fluent English. Fooley shook his head and gave an impromptu speech in a foreign language that no one understood. The Hungarians stood there stunned, the secretary-wife likewise; finally it was her who asked Fooley what language he was speaking. Czech, of course, he was learning it day and night. Did the Hungarians not all speak Czech? Turns out, the language book provided by the State Department, which he was spending serious effort learning, was in Czech.

Fooley, in his memoir, confesses to be very disheartened by the fact that the Hungarians did not speak Czech, and even though everyone around him spoke good English, he lost interest in speaking to anyone.

This was the reason he shaved his beard and used the shavings plus some wild boar hair to have someone create a fake beard for him; he used it for official receptions but otherwise he appeared clean shaven and in a paint-stained overall as he left the embassy incognito every noon and only returned at night, posing as a deaf-mute janitor with a permanent entry pass. Not even his fake wife noticed this ruse, and as for the rest of the embassy employees, they just got used to the fact that he was reachable only during the morning hours.

Fooley did not go too far in his paint-stained overalls; usually he walked to the Hold Street market, where he sat on an empty crate while downing a couple of wine coolers and wearing the vacuous smile of a deaf-mute. If he was spoken to, he replied with head shaking, performing his role to perfection. People got used to him and in a few weeks he became just another feature of the market, as he even took on casual ad-hoc work, blending in very well with the exception of his bright blue eyes, which did seem somewhat unusual at the place. No one knew his name nor his profession, but he was accepted all the same. Fooley remembers this time at the Hold Street market as the happiest year and a half of his entire life. Sitting around, he entertained himself, guessing at the meaning of the Hungarian conversations around him. Still he did not learn a single word; he remained unable to read signs, but he adored the Hungarian language all the same—as he recounts in his memoir.

He imagined a universe of fascinating dialogs between the Hungarians frequenting the market, and at night when he returned to his study he wrote these down and he collected them in a book titled “The Dialogs of the Hold Utca Market.”

The Hold Utca did not become Hold Street in his memoir, as Fooley did not bother to look up “utca” in a dictionary; saw no point to it; it made sense to him this way. This was exactly his goal, to stay ignorant of the language and avoid being influenced by actual facts.

At the Hold Street market one could encounter elegant bank clerks, investment sharks, top athletes, small renters, homeless, whores and many other types, including unemployed from the nearby underground garage shelter for Hungarian-designated Refugees who were Hungarians fleeing persecution in nearby countries. These imagined dialogs attained an incredible variety and depth. Dr. Fooley, who spoke seven dead Native American languages in addition to Ancient Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Italian, Spanish, French, Portuguese and Romanian, and also was fluent in Swahili and several Arab dialects—and of course spoke Czech—took an enormous pride in NOT learning Hungarian. “Last time I possessed this great and miraculous freedom I was one year old,” he wrote, “when I managed to convince myself and my parents that I could not talk.”

Fooley maintains that he had not seen anything from Budapest with the exception of the area surrounding the embassy and the nearby Parliament; he never got as far as the adjacent Deak Square nor saw the Western Railway Station a few blocks away. He slept at night at the embassy, avoiding the assigned residency across the river. His sham-wife did not seem to miss him, nightly she won a lot of money on internet poker with the help of software that was designed to cheat against other, naïve poker players.

In Fooley’s writing you can look in vain for things one was likely to encounter in other contemporary chronicles: “the bleak, penetrating stink of the city,” for example, and he also neglects to mention the appearance of malaria-carrying mosquitoes, which excited both the residents and the authorities around this time. He seems to have overlooked the garbage piling up

all over the city even though the Hold Street market was no exception in this. *“Fooley was not looking with his eyes nor smelling with his nose—an adoring review observed—he developed a fine inner sensitivity to distill the essential positive characteristics of the Hungarian people, to ‘smell’ the soul of the population.”*

“The Dialogs of the Hold Utca Market” was unlikely to be published before the Great Change, as it was not finished at that time; after the Great Change there were more urgent things Hungarians had to do than spend time with the translation of this particular book. However, recently His Benevolent Grace issued a statement to the effect that “The Dialogs of the Hold Utca Market” seem to do an outstanding job in demonstrating the sublime nature of the Hungarian spirit to the world and so we can expect a Hungarian translation within the next few months.

We don’t want to preempt the publication of this book but would like to call attention to another, shorter piece, deservedly judged as one of the most beautiful Hungarian-themed novellas of all times, titled “The Persuasion.”

The story-teller is sitting on a green couch, sucking on a cigarette, also imbibing his second large torkolypalinka¹⁰ of the morning as he becomes aware of a conversation between a silver-haired fragile old lady and a muscular, large, delivery guy at the market. The old lady carries the argument convincingly while the brute listens closely with rapt attention. The lady goes on to praise the man’s large body, displaying a great knowledge of anatomy as she compliments each of the various muscles bulging out of his one-size-too-small T-shirt (it is possible that the old lady was a retired surgeon or coroner), as she is trying to talk him into marrying her malformed and wheel-chair-bound, sixteen-year-old granddaughter who was missing all four of her limbs. She details the virtues of this girl and answers questions like “Can she cook or clean?” and after each negative answer her expression grows more concerned. At the end of the novella the delivery guy agrees to the marriage and the old lady, grasping a bundle of radishes, exits happily.

It is no wonder that this novella received an important part in the Hollywood movie “Hold Street” that made a clean sweep of Oscars (15) and was also shown in Hungary under the title “Tartos Utca.”¹¹ His Benevolent Grace agreed that the next version of the movie should be filmed at its original location, in the Hold Street market, which would be rebuilt for the occasion.

Another wonderful story is titled “The Statue.” Fooley noticed that people often gathered in the front of the Batthanyi statue waving all kinds of flags while loudly singing or shouting slogans and he deduced that this was a shamanistic chant aimed at making the statue disappear. The statue did in fact disappear after each demonstration, no doubt chased away by shame, but came back to its pedestal every night, given that there was its home. Fooley did not look up that the statue was

¹⁰ Another strong Hungarian liquor distilled of grape skins

¹¹ Enduring Street

erected in honor of the prime minister of the first independent Hungarian government, and that this was the reason demonstrators assembled here before going on to the Parliament. (The origin of this custom is largely forgotten). Based on this story a very popular manga book was created in Japan; in this version the story is a mash-up with parts from a well-known Grimm fairy tale and the Manneken Pis statue in Brussels, which, following a vote by Western European citizens, became the symbol of WEU. From the royalties of the book Fooley was able to purchase a five-story luxury mansion in Costa Rica surrounded by a 4,500-acre garden with a mile-and-a-half-long private beach.

One warm summer night Dr. March Fooley followed his fellow drinkers from the market to a torchlight demonstration that had the Parliament as its destination; except that the crowd was intercepted by a line of mounted police. For a short while Fooley thought that he was hallucinating, but in fact what he saw was really happening: crowds of women were marching along wearing only one clothing item, some a scarf, some only panties, some just shoes, and others only a hat—otherwise they marched completely naked. Some were flying diamond-shaped kites with tufted sides; others were flying elongated pink balloons with a somewhat rounded top. It was in the middle of the Prostitute demonstration against the planned Kamaty-tax that the disguised American Ambassador landed; of course he did not grasp this at the time or later. He did not realize that his writing was destined to be a most significant historical document; this produced an eye-witness report of the blonde, brown, black or red hair of these women and contained a thorough description of their other body parts as well. Many professional and amateur movie-makers and photographers recorded the event in movies and still images and these were posted shortly, either in full length or in smaller segments, on YouTube where everyone could download, enlarge or edit them at will. Magazines and the boulevard press lived off these naked ladies for years to come, printing one or other piquant images on front covers from time to time. Fooley's description however contains such an emotional account that no image could possibly surpass it.

In the crowd Fooley ended up marching next to a black-haired sixteen-year-old Gypsy girl who wore a long black glove up to her elbows but nothing else. Out of discretion Fooley avoided describing her other body parts. Fooley did not disclose to the girl that he was not really a deaf-mute who could only communicate through signs, and not much later he had intercourse with her in an unlocked storage room at the Hold Street market; they married in Costa Rica and had eight children and counting.

Dr. Fooley also made history by being the only US Ambassador who was not fooled by his own government; this is why he won the title “the most vigilant ambassador” along with a forced retirement.

As it happened one night—sometime before the Hungarian–Gypsy whore protest—as he was drunkenly ambling toward the heavily fortified building of the embassy, he noticed that in front of

the beautiful Art Deco building at the nearby Percel Mor Street, repairmen were digging a hole in front of a bank. He got suspicious, as it seemed unusual to see a team tunneling under a bank and yet no one calling the cops. Fooley had no idea what they were up to, but he started to get apprehensive about this business. So he approached the men and looked on. They did not chase him away and to his surprise he found that these workers conversed in Texan and Nebraskan accents with each other. When they made some disparaging jokes at the drunken, stupid, Hungarian janitor watching them, he did not react and continued to stand there. He even observed that they kept their shovels and provisions in a beat-up old truck sporting Hungarian plates that they had parked nearby.

As an archeologist in his youth he was intimately familiar with digging, so he acquired a shovel and started to dig at night inside the embassy in the opposite direction. He carried away the excavated dirt in big burlap bags every morning as he left for his usual excursions disguised as a janitor and then deposited the bags unseen at the Hold Street market. One night the two digging parties met unexpectedly in the middle, causing Fooley to scream at the Americans with his imposing South Dakota accent, which sent the fellows in a wild flight.

In the tunnel Fooley found plastic explosives and strange little fountain pens. He did not attempt to defuse the explosives but sent an immediate report to the State Department. State dispatched the Secret Service to defuse the bombs, especially the small fountain pens, which were in reality miniature versions of the gravity bomb discovered by Barrabi Rabar; one would have been sufficient to blow up the entire city. With that, the ambassador was immediately recalled from his post and, as he was arriving in Washington, already waiting for him was the “Most Vigilant Ambassador” certificate and his retirement package. He was luckier than his fellow ambassadors elsewhere, where the bombs did blow up the embassies, proving both the worldwide spread of anti-American sentiment and the unfit ambassadors’ failure to detect them.

(We have to set the record straight about the gravity bombs; they were never used, as they were too powerful to have any utility. The inventor, Barrabi Rabar, who in the meantime received the Nobel prize, became very famous for his manifestos against the use of the bomb. Stark naked he gave one of his seminars in Boston to better publicize his cause but was unable to stop the manufacture and stockpiling of this weapon, which by more than five-times exceeded the largest hydrogen bombs in destructive power. As he sold the patent of the gravitational wave energy to a corporation in Texas, Hungary ended up not benefiting at all from this original product of typical Hungarian ingenuity.)

Fooley had the foresight to get a green card for his lover before they left; he even got a visa for her even though there was no visa requirement between the two countries. After that he only needed to finalize a divorce from his sham-wife, but because she was not agreeable and demanded half of

Fooley's fortune it took two and a half years to finalize it; thanks to a clever lawyer, his wife did end up getting one-third of his money.

Because of the civil war and the Gypsy conflict, the ambassador was not replaced at the embassy, which was now led by a charge d'affaires, none other than the commander of the CIA tunnel-diggers, who was promoted despite the failure of the mission. He also received a citation and the Medal of Bravery by Hungarian President Murometz, barely two days before the latter escaped from Hungary.

We Hungarians have been lucky with Dr. March Fooley. Among all the Hungarian and foreign authors, he painted the most poetic and positively appealing portrait of the Hungarian people. Following the American publication of "The Dialogs of the Hold Utca Market" readers of *Time Magazine* voted Hungary as the world's most sympathetic nation; as a result our tourist industry could have grown tenfold if it weren't for the sealing of the country's borders based on justified caution. For his eternal services we could even forgive Fooley that he, without doubt influenced by his Gypsy wife, took sides against the Hungarians at the time of the Hungarian–Gypsy conflict.

Many believed Fooley's assertion that he only visited the Hold Street market during his stay in Hungary. Subsequent research after the Great Change showed this to be untrue. We don't know whether he visited all of the markets in the city, but we can prove that some of his stories took place in the Fehervari Avenue market and that he even included some of the main characters of our story long before they took their significant roles in Hungarian history.

The short story "The Smoking Room" describes that in the basement of the market there was a doctor's office that cured flatfeet with psychic powers; patients left the place in dazed happiness, throwing away their metal, leather or plastic arch supports.

This could not have been observed in the Hold Street market, as it has no basement area. As Hungarian researchers maintain, the story must be a depiction of the practice of Dr. Hajdina in the basement of the Fehervari Avenue market.

What is even more fascinating is that the same researchers discovered a character in the novella that was in all likelihood Rea; she is the character named "unattractive dreamer"!

In the novella two women are side by side, either sisters or mother and daughter, dressed in green down vests and floral-pattern skirts worn over threadbare blue jogging pants, one also wearing a dark-gray scarf and extra-large eyeglass frames, standing patiently in line at the fast-food place without speaking a single word to each other. (This is strangely different from Fooley's many other novellas where we usually encounter a great deal of conversation between his characters.) The woman with the eyeglass frames is also wearing headphones, eyes half closed (she is not sleep walking but sleep standing, explains the writer), and when she opens her eyes, she looks woozy.

Using this specific word makes it hard to give credence to Fooley's assertion that he did not understand a single word of Hungarian and so did not catch the Hungarian jest-name "Woozy."

The other woman was looking around, studying the menu or the pickpockets as they were successfully stealing from patrons, then observing the other folks around and again looking at the menu; the author assumes that she is deaf-mute. "Where is a third woman who can only get around by smelling things?" asks the author. Murdered, run over, sent to the corner to pick up Johns, or was she not yet born?

Stunning that Fooley was even envisioning Csetra next to the two other women.

"The Missing Third" is the title and only we Hungarians can fully appreciate the value of this novella. In one passage he wrote about Rea: "She stood there with bad posture, pushing her belly out and bending down her weak neck *as a queen carrying the weight of an invisible crown.*"

Fooley was able to discern in her the quality which only the harsh, burdensome Hungarian history can produce in a person.

We must pause to admit: this is a great author.

(...)

19.

Rea continued to miss the broadcast of Wife Contest on TV; she was already promoted to the next phase, the duel, which was still months away, *so why get excited?* she thought. She would simply talk it over with Spiritual Support. She understood that there would be a draw to determine the pairs of the duel and that depending on the draw she could be called in at either the beginning, the middle or the end of this phase.

People around her started to discuss the contest more and more. members of the Fortike family were regular viewers. they had even seen the broadcast where the clown was one of the contestants, but they did not recognize Rea as the clown, and in the general din, they did not hear her name either.

Kolonc was conferring with Birs, whispering lengthily, after which Birs screamed at Rea: "Don't tell anyone, you moron, or I will kick your ass!"

A frightened Rea agreed.

Fortunately around the railway station, where people knew her from sight, no one made the connection between Rea and the clown on TV. Those who knew her did not know her name and those who did hear her name on TV had never met her in person.

When Zsanna made her first appearance on the show the next Friday, both Birs and Kolonc were watching.

“It’s over,” moaned Birs, depressed.

“Why, you dickhead, you thought Rea would win?”

“Go fuck yourself,” said Birs dispiritedly.

Wife Contest really became fascinating when Wonder Woman showed up.

Viewers met her first in the ninth segment, and everyone knew at once that she was unstoppable. She advanced from her group of ten girls—the national character specialist who supervised from the back had no choice—and the whole nation was already making bets that she would triumph in every one of the duels. She would repeal her adversaries like a stone-hard defensive player repeals a slim striker in soccer, like the heavyweight boxing champion annihilates a featherweight intruder. And so it happened; in the fifth segment of round two, she was there again, and from there on she beat all opponents with unstoppable ease.

Dr. Serbori Zsanna was a beautiful girl—we hope that she remains so in the far, foreign land she lives now—and she was frighteningly smart. She was twenty-three, freshly graduated from the Medical University with honors, and the recipient of another degree, in history, also with honors. She spoke fluent English, German, French, Russian and Albanian, having learned the last one out of curiosity last summer. During the time she was on Wife Contest she also started to learn Chinese, she was secluded in a language camp between her first and second appearances on the show, where she was also sheltered from curious eyes—this was all arranged and it was ensured that the location of the language camp was kept secret—and she made considerable progress speaking and reading Chinese when she gave it all up in order to marry the Arab.

Her tall, 5’ 9” frame was adorned with long, naturally blond, wavy hair that reached down to her midsection with her blue eyes, it was like Botticelli’s Venus had stepped out of the frame. Her perfect figure was set in songs; her very long legs enthralled half the country, or possibly even more if we count the lesbians who were adoring her in vain. Her full, although never overly exposed breasts, were greeted with animalistic screams from teenage boys, and her graceful movement was appreciated even by the sight-impaired who watched the show on Braille televisions.

We will not describe all her dazzling achievements but only mention a few of the more memorable of her performances.

In her first appearance she performed mental arithmetic and ballet dancing. She enthralled everyone, making the acerbic Fartin Gogo tongue-tied. He was grasping for words, sweating and acting foolishly. Hajdina took off his dark glasses, something that he had never done before and gaped at her with eyes wide open, causing quite a stir in the boulevard press. Greta Margo stretched out on her chair looking like an overlong snake, mouth wide open. Homongya Togyer's left eye started to flicker and he could not stop it (the producer, smartly improvising, had a close-up of this inserted in the show, for which he was applauded later by Tsombor). Zsabo Bebi started to cry openly, and went on crying quietly until the end. An impressed Krul Manna was chewing her lips in and shaking her head admiringly.

Zsanna was extracting cube roots of random four-digit numbers to the third decimal; to this day we don't know how a human brain can accomplish this. The jury was generating these four-digit numbers on a computer and checked the results using the same; Zsanna, her gorgeous head slightly tilted to the side, was listening to the next number. Her tongue appeared briefly as she wrinkled her perfect forehead for a moment and then supplied the correct results within seconds. Many viewers complained later that it was a scam; they were wrong, experts confirmed independently.

Her dance was performed with utmost charm; the catchy tune was composed and played by her on a synthesizer; the next day she was offered a position by the National Opera, which she decorously but firmly refused just as she evaded other offers to compose.

In the second season, in the much anticipated part six in October, she defeated a girl who was up to that point a frontrunner, and following this victory, she was drafted against the winners of the other groups as well. These rivals then performed with deathly foreboding, and after losing, went home without the slightest protest.

Her first victory in the duel phase happened this way: she showed up on stage with a normal-looking tabby cat and introduced her as Genie cat. She explained that the cat was a half-year old and was given to her as a gift by a friend upon her advancement to the next round and that she spent the summer training the cat.

She put the cat down on the left side of the stage; the cat sat and stared. Zsanna then walked over with small dancing steps to the right side and, turning toward the audience, she said: "Cic!" Not too loud, just with a normal speaking voice. The cat jumped up and ran to her. She repeated the same production, this time from right to left.

Then with inimitable charm she asked a member of the audience from the first row to come up to the stage and summon the cat the same way. The stunned man came up and said "Cic" to the cat. The cat sat and nothing happened. He repeated "Cic" and still no result.

A few others from the audience volunteered to try; they came up on stage and called the cat, but no one could move her.

After these volunteers left, Zsanna strolled to the back of the stage and said “Cic” in a low voice the cat jumped up and ran to her.

Applause and ovation. Fartin Gogo commented that this was phenomenal with a cat, although with a dog, anyone could do this.

Zsanna nodded in agreement, stretched out her right hand and stuck out her index finger. She had exceptionally long fingers as was shown via a close-up on TV. The cat stood up, curved its back and, taking a running start, landed on Zsanna’s index finger. It wasn’t only that the cat grasped the extended finger but swung from it a few times, then even let go with its right paw and, holding on only with the left, she was swinging some more. The cat was doing a trapeze number on her finger!

On the jumbotrons over the stage you could see in a close-up that the cat was now swinging on the index finger, holding on with only one paw. Deafening applause. Zsanna lifted her left arm and demanded silence. Everyone fell silent. Now Zsanna said “Ksst!” The cat briefly stopped swinging, but then starting again with wider swings, finally rotating all the way around her finger.

The audience was screeching. The cat looked briefly at the audience and then, grasping the finger with the paw of one of her back legs, let go the front paw and hung upside down. It continued swinging and produced another full rotation.

Zsanna pressed the cat to her bosom and bowed to the audience.

She did not have to do anything else; she had won hands down.

As an aside, we were informed that Genie cat is alive and adjusted well to her new environment.

Zsanna’s third appearance a week later triggered bets by hundreds of thousands of fans. The majority was betting on her advancing to the next round, although those who bet against her could have made a fortune if she failed. Zsanna of course advanced; Kabar Mato was not mistaken.

Next time, Zsanna had a glass-wall swimming pool brought to the stage and, jumping from a trampoline, she managed three full rotations and two back flips before landing in the water. Before she resurfaced, she spent two more minutes underwater performing somersaults and twists. When she reemerged, there was thunderous applause. Zsanna bowed and dried herself with a towel, after which she climbed on a jumping platform and performed various flips to further entertain the audience.

On her sixth victory she introduced a special magic trick. She became the first in the world to disappear from one moment to the next without the use of any physical prop at all. Members of

the jury along with Fartin Gogo climbed the stage and examined every inch but could not find anything. They stood there puzzled without finding a hidden trapdoor or invisible pulley. They were still looking in vain when Zsanna suddenly reappeared in the last row of the audience. No one among the audience had to let her in, no one noticed anything. Fartin Gogo, followed by an unnerved Krul Manna, made the people stand up and leave and spent the next ten minutes looking at the chairs, the floor and the back wall of the theater, along with the cameras that scanned close-ups of the entire area without finding any passageway or hole. To this day we still don't know how the trick was performed; when Zsanna was asked, she modestly smiled and turning charmingly red, remaining silent on the subject.

For four months the entire nation was waiting for Zsanna or, without embellishment, perhaps the entire region of Eastern Europe. The contestants who had to compete with her fell into depression and sleeplessness, some barely clinging to life. In this period Zsanna received one million two hundred thousand marriage proposals, more than a hundred thousand wanted to adopt her even though she quite clearly stated that her parents were alive and in good health, and the provost of the Budapest Medical University was at hand to certify that Zsanna indeed graduated in May with top honors and was a recipient of the dean's golden ring.

"You have a rare good set of genes," summarized the general consensus, Fartin Gogo. To which Zsanna replied, charmingly but maybe with a hint of false modesty: "Everyone can have good genes without being aware of it. Even you, dear Gogo, probably have them but choose to ignore them."

The jury usually did not comment on Zsanna's production. There was no evaluation, no discussion. They just admired her like everyone else. There was no point in trying to give her a score.

There was no one left who doubted Zsanna's winning the contest. She deserved the Regina Hungarissima title. there was no point in going on with the contest. no similar contestant would ever emerge. you have talent like this happen only once every thousand year, if then.

After each segment Kabar Mato wrote a report; he had no choice. Zsanna needed to be voted the winner. One such report survived:

"Divine Lord, my Sovereign, dear Joseph III, the apple of our eyes! Not only can I feel it, but I see it and hear it at home, on the streets, on the trams, in the museums, in churches, that our Hungarian brothers and sisters want Zsanna. Even if we counted the votes we would get the same results. I simply cannot promote any other contestant. Please forgive your servant but if this continues, Zsanna will become the Regina Hungarissima and I even suspect that the folk will insist that you marry her in reality.

Kabar Mato, your loyal subject."

It was at this point that His Benevolent Grace intervened in the contest. He acted royally, honestly and publicly.

The Crown Council was debating the establishment of a mine-field around Bekes County when the plenary session was interrupted and the black-gowned Constitutional Court, led by the king, entered the chambers. This noble body that was inherited from the parliamentary democracy now fulfilled another function in the monarchy; it was their honor to announce the king's decrees. Every one of these decrees started in Latin, like "*Nos, Iosephus Tertius, Rex Hungariae...*" but then luckily continued in Hungarian.

In this occasion the following statement was read by the president of the Constitutional Court:

"Nos, Iosephus Tertius, Rex Hungariae hereby order that the Wife Contest obey its original rules with the provision that contestants who won more than ten times will sit out subsequent contests and will be allowed to compete again only before the last of the three contests take place. In the meantime they will let other contestants compete and so give them a chance to let their talents emerge. We do this to even the field and ensure that each contestant has a chance of winning."

The council members clapped and applauded for ten minutes.

There were numerous theories on why His Benevolent Grace got involved and why he took this unexpected step. The emigrant circles, who never stop putting down our homeland and our system, maintain that His Benevolent Grace acted as a politician who had seen in the popularity of Dr. Serbori Zsanna a potential competitor, and that he also suffered from the severest castration anxiety a man could experience. According to these rumor-mongers Joseph III was scared of Wonder Woman, with whom he could not compete as a statesman or a man. He was horrified of the idea—speculated the emigrant press—that Zsanna would train him just as she had trained Genie cat and would grab the power from him, leaving him a pliable hairy pet and nothing else.

These were truly absurd accusations that had no grounding in reality!

A monarchy can take care of its internal conflicts far more directly and effectively than a democracy. The faithless, craven democrats lack the imagination to even dream of the extent of accomplishments that a real, future-planning, generous and elegant king can be capable of delivering.

If, as they say, His Benevolent Grace had been afraid as a man of Zsanna, he could have simply banned her from future appearances. Hadn't he stood up against more potent adversaries? After a few months on the throne he dug in and had the entire Crown Council arrested. why would it be different when it came to Zsanna? Only the miserable, placid, emigration circles, so used to their democratic anarchy, could come up with such naïve ideas, fancy that the Royal Secret Service wouldn't have followed Zsanna as she was training her cat and, in case that she met disapproval,

would not have poisoned her in time, before she had a chance to captivate the nation. Wouldn't they have surveyed her flat with hidden cameras as she was practicing the disappearing trick? Couldn't they have prevented the trick from succeeding if they wanted to? Imagine, she would announce that she would disappear and then stay there impotent and visible on the stage for the disappointed viewers—or rather Kabar Mato—to vote her out. The slightest sign from His Benevolent Grace would have sufficed to have Zsanna disappear forever!

If it were true what the emigrants maintained, then Dr. Serbori Zsanna would not have been among the living after her second or third performance.

The Office of the Royal Censor, along with the producer and the editor of the contest, regularly previewed every Wednesday night how the girls performed, and if they noticed any irregularity, they would invite another girl to appear in the broadcast for Friday, as they had all Thursday to make changes and edit the tapes. The viewers would notice nothing, since they would only learn at the broadcast on Friday who the contestants were. As we recall, there was only one such instance (of course not with Zsanna). The girl in question had at one point of the taping relieved herself from all garments, and although the Communist Monarchy is free of prudery, it is still humanly puritan. Only in the weather report is it allowed that the good-looking female weather reporter appear stark naked, and then only to illustrate an upcoming heat-wave, and even then, only with special permission and with the display of the entire body, but not any parts in close-ups.

So, definitely no!

Joseph III was not afraid of Zsanna. Let's not forget what the emigrant circles neglect to mention: that at this time it was not a foregone conclusion that the king would marry the winner, the Regina Hungarissima, in real life.

This was how Rea received the invitation to the second to last duel, and as fate would have it, she was to compete against Zsanna, who had just won again last week.

Birs was asking Kolonc what to do.

"She should watch Wonder Woman at least one time," Bir's thought.

"Sure," said Kolonc, and after coloring his hair blond, he left.

Another time Bir's asked:

"Shouldn't Rea watch Wonder Woman?"

"Hmm," said Kolonc and left.

Meanwhile, Wonder Woman went on a hiatus and couldn't be seen on TV. As such Rea couldn't have watched her, even though everyone knew that she would be back and that she would win again, so Birs proposed again:

"I got a disc showing Wonder Woman. Go and steal a player!"

"Why the fuck?"

"For Rea, you moron!"

Kolonc colored his hair again and stole a player. Birs loaded the disc, placed the player in Rea's seat and they left to get drunk.

In their compartment Rea was sleeping with her back to the imaginary travel direction, Birs across from her, and Kolonc, who was long but narrow, slept in the luggage rack over Birs' seat. Their belongings were stored over Rea's seat and under the seats. Once, Rea sewed a curtain for the glass of the compartment's sliding door. She even started to embroider it but somehow took offense about one thing or another and stopped the work; you could recognize their compartment by the half-finished embroidery. Several of Birs' female companions offered to finish it, scaring Birs with the offer to the point that he did not sleep with those girls again.

After cleaning the loo Rea went back to the compartment and seeing the player started to cry from happiness. She had not had a player since the last one was stolen in the storeroom. She turned it on, stuck the earphones in her ears and all of a sudden she was overwhelmed by the smells of the market, the smells of her innocent happy childhood. She was watching Zsanna with an open mouth. Amazing girl. Wonderful. That there are girls like this!

After watching it the second time it dawned on her why she got the player. Her brothers thought that she would compete with her.

A loud sigh left her lips: "Aaa!"

Then she received her invitation.

She was allowed to bring four companions with her to the contest. There was a long discussion between Birs and Kolonc about who else should go with them.

"Aunt Fortike?" asked Kolonc.

"The fucking bitch," exclaimed Birs.

"Yup," said Kolonc.

They could not agree on who to take.

Another time Birs said:

“Aunt Fortike and Karmancs Oli?”

“Fucking assholes!” said Kolonc.

“Exactly,” said Birs.

They came to an impasse again.

Another time Kolonc weighed in:

“If we don’t take Aunt Fortike, she will find out from the others!...”

Birs sighed, as he could well see this happening.

In the end they told Aunt Fortike that she and Karmancs Oli had tickets to the National Theater for the duel.

“Who is the other?” she wanted to know. “Do you know who Zsanna is going to compete against?”

“We know,” said Kolonc and fell silent.

“Yes, we know,” confirmed Birs.

“We won’t just go for any contestant,” said Aunt Fortike, who wanted to appear very discerning in everything.

“Tell her,” shouted Birs at Kolonc.

“Why should I tell her, bazmeg!” Kolonc shouted back.

“Because I said so, bazmeg,” cried Birs and ran out.

This took Kolonc by surprise, because usually it was his tactic to run out. He was now faced with Aunt Fortike, defenseless. Fortike wore curlers in her hair and a shapeless robe, with white socks under decorative red slippers, as she wanted to appear very discerning in her clothing as well.

“Out with it, I don’t have all day,” growled Fortike at Kolonc.

“Rea,” blurted out Kolonc.

“What about Rea?”

“She is the other contestant.”

Aunt Fortike did not understand it. Kolonc, sensing an opportunity, quickly slinked out the door; he was not seen again that day.

Fortike just stood there for a while, shaking her head, then returned to her compartment which was adjacent with Karmancs Oli's, stopped and started to giggle. She had an ungodly giggle, or as Birs said, she giggled unlawfully.

She went on giggling for days.

"Her." She pointed at Rea when they met, and giggled again.

When Karmancs Oli pushed his enormous bulk through the compartment door, Fortike pointed at Rea and said: "Her. Her." Rea started to cry, ran to the end of the train car, jumped off and ran out of the train station, ran through Makovetz Avenue to Jany Gustav Avenue, ran into the hair salon and continued to sob, on and on. Birs found her there when he returned at night to the train and found a message about where to pick up his sister.

So the five of them ended up going to the contest; Karmancs Oli and Aunt Fortike in one rickshaw, Rea and her brothers in another. The three-wheeled rickshaws were only twice as fast as walking, but arriving in a rickshaw was considered more stylish.

This duel was not taped on Wednesday as before; this time they really did it live; the censors realized that girls who made it this far, like Zsanna, were not likely to cause embarrassment and that the spontaneous reaction provided by a real audience would improve the broadcast. This was discussed in several letters exchanged between the Office of the Royal Censor and the king. His Benevolent Grace was in favor of the live broadcast on Friday and got what he wanted—understandably his censors were more concerned with protecting his interest than the king was himself.

Although the live broadcast only started at eight, right after the evening news, the contestants were required to show up by no later than 5:00 pm. There was a great deal of activity surrounding the National Theater, so they reached the building with considerable difficulties; then Rea was to enter the stage through an entry in a side street while the chaperons were sent to the main entrance. Birs was trying hard to make Rea understand that if anything happened they were to meet at the stage entry on the side street.

"Don't be disappointed," he said to Rea. "It's a wonder you came this far..."

"I will win," said Rea.

Birs sighed, and for the first time in his life, he caressed his sister's hair briefly.

"Wait for us at the stage door," repeated Kolonc, avoiding saying anything that could encourage Rea.

The four of them spent three long hours lounging around in the entrance hall, since there was no one there yet to let them pass even to the wardrobe area. There was another group of four waiting; a middle aged couple and two elderly ladies. Birs figured out first that they were the relatives of Wonder Woman.

“Check them out,” said Birs to Kolonc.

“Sure,” replied Kolonc.

“What’ll you say?” asked Birs.

“Sure,” answered Kolonc sagely.

Zsanna’s mom was a pretty woman; her dad also looked quite distinguished. The elderly ladies were in all likelihood the grandmothers of Zsanna. They were dressed elegantly as if we were still living in the times of the past democracy. Aunt Fortike could not let it pass without remarking:

“Outrageous, they still let these people in!? Where are we, still in the blasted democracy?”

“Hihihi,” said Karmancs Oli. He pronounced the “i” sound as a deep “u,” but in an even lower register.

The other party noticed Rea’s relatives. Then they pretended that they did not notice them. They turned their heads away even though they did not appear to be turning.

Aunt Fortike was outraged.

“The nerve of these people!” she exclaimed.

Karmancs Oli furrowed his brow.

“Should I whack them?” he asked slowly, like he was doing everything. “I could whack them, just give me the word.”

“No need,” said Kolonc, so quietly that he was barely audible, then leisurely disappeared in the direction of the men’s room.

Placating, Birs placed his hand on Oli’s arm. Karmancs Oli slowly turned and observed Birs’ hand, then slowly took it in his own terrifying paws, then slowly started to twist it so that Birs required a doctor’s visit the following day and was walking around in a plaster cast for six more weeks. The relatives of Wonder Woman came to no harm; fundamentally Oli was a slow-witted and friendly soul, and also breaking Birs’ arm calmed him down some.

We don’t know how Rea spent these last idle hours. For her part, we cannot assume that she was preparing for the show. We do know that she was given a separate dressing room where she sat

alone and could have rung a bell if she needed anything; there's no record to indicate that she did. She did not see Zsanna, who was three dressing rooms down the corridor.

As we discovered on a visit to the theater that we undertook as part of our research, the dressing room window offered a view of the Buda side of the city and the connecting Lagymanyos Bridge, and one could also see the former ELTE*¹² buildings—today the Crown Science Institute—on the other side, and behind them the low line of the mountains of Buda. This is not exactly the best view of the city, but also not the worst; many other capitols would have been proud to have at least such a panorama as this.

Further, we made a resolution in this dressing room that we would tell only the truth and nothing but the truth in this book, and we took an oath to this while solemnly tossing back a little palinka¹³ that we carried for just such an occasion. This oath proved to be born under a favorable constellation, as six months later our work was chosen as the winner of a competition for books honoring Regina Hungarissima. We were also lucky that the Royal Censors Institute chose to make us rewrite a mere one-third of this present book.

Our best idea turned out to be the decision we took early to publish this book in audio format, which made it accessible to illiterate readers as well—thus we easily eclipsed other written historical or philosophical works about the life of Vulnera Renata. The jury, led by His Benevolent Grace himself, valued especially the facility of the genre to provide easy-to-understand content to everyone. As His Benevolent Grace summed it up in the final evaluation:

“This book can be understood even by a moron and that is a big fucking deal to me.”

When the theater was jammed at capacity with spectators, who even occupied the stairs—and when the ticket scalpers finally ran out of tickets to sell in exchange for gold, jewelry or foreign currency—so exactly at eight, at the start of the broadcast, the jury was seated at the jury table on stage right, which was then promptly lifted up nine feet in the air via hydraulics. While the jury was being elevated, the pioneer band on stage left noisily performed a raising fanfare composition.

From stage center, seemingly from below, Gogo ran toward the audience, with his great black cape flying and swirling around him, and was greeted by a thunderous applause.

Like in previous broadcasts three sets of cameras were on stage, except now they transmitted live, without the convenience of being able to edit the feed afterwards. There was no room for mistake; it was all real-time.

The back wall of the stage was adorned with a huge projected image of the red velvet throne awaiting Regina Hungarissima. Also, just like in previous contests, there were two somewhat smaller

¹² Eotvos Lorant Tudományos Egyetem – Hungarian University for Science

¹³ A typical Hungarian spirit

red velvet chairs on both sides of the stage, slightly turned away from the audience; this was the place where Fartin Gogo led the two contestants of the duel with great reverence. As a contestant was sitting in her chair watching the other perform, her face was constantly scanned by at least one of the cameras, transmitting every movement and twitch to two giant jumbotrons hanging above the stage. TV critics were in complete agreement that although one could follow a contestant's performance, it was much more gratifying to watch her opponent's face close up for each expression of concern, sarcasm, fear or malicious gloating.

Fartin Gogo escorted Zsanna to the armchair on the left amid great ovation and applause, and then Rea to the right chair to a much more subdued applause.

This time Zsanna was dressed in black riding pants and a tight riding jacket, complete with boots and a riding crop. Her outfit was made even more attractive in that she wore a black, curly-haired fur cap, from under which her long wavy blond hair flowed down in great abundance. She also wore a strange long-sleeved glove that seemed to be made of the same, curly-haired fur as her cap. The audience released an audible moan, reacting to the uniqueness of her outfit. Fartin Gogo could also not hold back a comment:

“My lovely, tonight you look like a beautiful puli!”¹⁴

To which her reply was a smile and a brief curtsy.

Most of the audience craned their head upwards toward the giant jumbotrons; Zsanna's head with her fur cap seemed six feet tall and could be seen in every glorious detail. Even the slightest movement of her face was visible on the giant screen, the contestant's emotions, fears and hopes were shared real-time with the entire audience.

Rea was greeted with a deep bow by Fartin Gogo. She felt uncomfortable in her too-small dress, itching all over her body, and with weakened ankles and burning ears she did not even know who pushed her onto the stage. All three cameras focused on her face. The nearest cameraman zoomed in to focus solely on her small piggy-eyes and thickset lips. The audience moaned once again; they'd never seen such an unattractive contestant before.

The draw at the jury table was done by Krul Manna, who wore a gold-laced silk dress, the design showing small crowns against a black background.

“Dr. Serbori Zsanna starts the contest,” she announced.

Zsanna stood and, walking with little dancing steps, approached stage center.

¹⁴ Black, curly-haired, Hungarian sheep dog

Fartin Gogo withdrew to stage left and they signaled Rea to take her seat, except that Rea remained standing and had no idea what was expected of her. Fartin Gogo ran across the stage to her and, holding her hand, led Rea to the waiting armchair.

“I wish to ask the little lady to take a seat!” he whispered.

Rea sat down. She was adjusting her position, craning her head this way and that. With furrowed brows Zsanna was waiting to start. Fartin Gogo leaned over once more and by gently pushing Rea’s shoulder succeeded to stop Rea from moving around. Then he nodded to Zsanna, who lifted her riding crop and gestured to the band.

The band started to play and from the left side nine whitish, shaggy-haired sheep ambled on stage. Noise, giggle. Rea was straining her small piggy-eyes; you could clearly see her face on one of the giant screens.

Zsanna was trotting around to the music, almost as if imitating a puli. She put her riding crop behind her backside and moved it as if it were a tail. The sheep were watching Zsanna, and as she was circling them, they also turned in a circle. Laughing, applause.

Zsanna stopped, the sheep likewise. She was doing knee bends. The sheep—as was shown on two of the three cameras—tried to do the same, and eight of them defecated on the stage. Ovation, huge applause. Rea opened her mouth, her irregular big set of teeth in full display. Laughing. Zsanna starts to circle counterclockwise. The sheep follow her.

All of a sudden, Zsanna broke out in a quick run around the flock and started to bark. In response the sheep pressed together in a tight formation and started to move in unison. Zsanna led them in widening circles and, sometimes hanging back, she barked at them; the sheep moved swiftly, all eighteen ears and thirty-six legs working feverishly. It seemed that the sheep were moving to the music—Zsanna’s own composition—dancing.

Rea was elated and clapped her hands. Her face was now shown by two of the three cameras. People forgot the sheep and watched her, mesmerized. Rea was now grinning in mirth.

The three-minute production earned Zsanna a two-minute applause, by far the shortest she received so far. Zsanna took a bow, the sheep likewise. Rea stood up and happily jumped up and down as she applauded.

Everyone was watching Rea.

They saw it right; there was a tear dwelling in her eye.

Zsanna left the stage followed by the sheep. her face was dark, and the sheep were gloomy too. As if they’d had a premonition.

After the applause stopped, Fartin Gogo led Rea by her elbow to the center of the stage.

“This is the first that we have seen you in a duel. What is your name?”

“Renata,” said Rea, and fell silent.

Fartin Gogo was waiting for Renata to add something, but she remained quiet.

“I see,” he smiled as if he had just heard a good joke. “So, what will you perform?”

Rea stood there, embarrassed.

“I mean, what is your production? Want to start right away?”

“I don’t have a production,” said Rea.

There was silence. Fartin Gogo was not prepared for this. He waited. The audience waited.

“What do you mean exactly, when you say you don’t have a production?” inquired Fartin Gogo, and it seemed that his perfectly shaved face grew a blue five-o-clock shadow in an instant.

“Just that,” said Rea.

She fell silent. There was silence all around.

“I was just—” started Rea but then got confused and stopped again.

“Yes, you were...?” urged Fartin Gogo.

Rea did not speak.

“What is going on?” sounded the grating voice of a woman from the jury’s table, the voice of Greta Margo.

“Well,” said Fartin Gogo, starting to realize that something was amiss, “You did have some production that helped you advance to this stage. Maybe you want to show one of those?”

“I did not have a prod...a thing...what’d you call it?...”

“Production?”

“Yes!”

There was complete silence in the audience. Zsanna—she was picked up by one of the cameras in a close-up—was rigidly staring at Rea from the side.

“You came this far without a production? Hard to believe!”

Suddenly Rea started to cry. It surprised everyone and people stared at her, frozen to their seats.

“All I wanted was to marry the king,” howled Rea, tears flooding from her eyes like a rain shower. Her mouth was deformed to an almost square shape, her irregular teeth snarling between the thickset lips, her piggy-eyes squeezed to the point of disappearance, and head tucked into her short neck, she was rubbing her eyes with the back of her hand, managing to smear her lipstick to her eyelids and forehead. Fartin Gogo was looking at the jury panic-stricken, then looked at the producer just behind the curtains who was busy adjusting his earphones, hoping to get some instruction from anyone, but Tsombor Zilan was not ready to instruct.

Then he did issue an order.

“Take her out! Take her out!” whisper-shouted the producer into his headset.

Fartin Gogo grabbed Rea’s elbow and dragged her behind the curtains.

Kabar Mato was sitting way in the back with the stage-light crew and almost fainted. What could he do now? How could he now vote for the audience against Zsanna? He decided to count the votes he received so far. But what if he was wrong? If this was impossible?...They are not prepared for such calamity...There’s no one here...If he made a mistake now, they would take his head!

Later psychologists, historians and sociologists analyzed what happened in those moments. Actually, we do know what happened. His Benevolent Grace already phoned during Zsanna’s sheep production that this time they should make an exception and actually count the votes of the TV audiences. All five branches of the Hungarian Intelligence Agencies were alerted and by midnight the votes were tallied.

Viewers overwhelmingly voted to advance Rea, and dump Zsanna, the Wonder Woman. They tossed away Zsanna, who was up to that moment the nation’s darling, like a used Kleenex.

Experts maintain that people had enough of the wonder-female, and this was inevitable, if not during the contest, soon thereafter. Other experts agreed that in Rea the contest finally gained a missing spontaneity, simplicity and honesty, which are the hallmarks of the Hungarian people.

Ill-wishers and emigrants suggested that the Hungarian viewers finally found someone who was even more stupid than they were and this was the reason they voted for her. Their argument is that at the base of all human sympathy lies an unbridled malevolence toward someone else. Thus, if we find someone who is even more miserable and defenseless than we are, we tend to love that person because they’re harmless and not threatening. “In this contest,” they said, “love conquered over veneration.”

The Hungarians never loved Zsanna, maintain our ill-wishers. she was too much for Hungarians. she was admired as we admire the snow-capped mountains of the Alps, but not loved; they left her at the first chance and ran back to the endlessly stretching flat lands of the Puszta¹⁵. In reality Zsanna was despised by the Hungarians; that's why they passed her over for the ugly idiot.

Our adversaries, the emigrants, argue falsely, but not entirely without merit. As was observed by social phycologists, Zsanna miscalculated in the last round. She assumed that she could get away with anything. She did not count the possibility that the majority of the viewers would identify with the sheep and revolt against their trainer at the first opportunity.

Of course it is again a misstatement by our foes that viewers recognized a similarity in the relationship between Zsanna and the sheep and the relationship between Joseph III and his subjects—false. Joseph III would have never lowered himself and performed as a puli.

Rea's life was saved by the fact that both Birs and Kolonc knew well how to fight. The stage door of the National Theater was mobbed by viewers; everyone wanted to see and touch the person who had knocked out Wonder Woman. This attack was also shown live and thus made the regular broadcast longer than usual by an additional half-hour. Rea suffered serious injury to her face, while the now one-armed Birs used his switch-blade, and Kolonc the viper he always carried, to rescue their sister from the mob's clutches. We also need to note for the record that Aunt Fortike's screeching deterred many who attempted to touch Rea as well, and Karmancs Oli caused injuries to eight people that required hospitalization.

Dr. Serbori Zsanna learned her lesson and accepted Sheik Ahmarradin Zahraddi's offer of marriage with the provision that the sheik get rid of his 43-women harem. The sheik complied and the 43 women were distributed among his closest friends. The couple wedded and they are blessed with two children so far, in a reportedly harmonious marriage.

¹⁵ The Great Plains in Eastern Hungary, associated with herds of cattle

Absurdistan is a term sometimes used to [satirically](#) describe a country in which [absurdity](#) is the norm, especially in its public authorities and government. Gyorgy Spiro's novel "Wife Contest," set in the near-future of Hungary, is one of the funniest and most cutting of this genre. The novel purports to be a biography of the future Queen of Hungary, from her early childhood in a family of slackers, thugs and thieves to her eventual elevation as the winner of a nation-wide TV show "Wife Contest."

Spiro employs several ironical devices that make translation of this book not only rewarding but challenging as well. These notes will serve to offer some background to non-Hungarian speakers to better understand and enjoy this unique novel.

The best is to start with the phantasy names Spiro is using in the novel. While all names sound "plausibly" Hungarian, there is not a single name in the book that is an actual Hungarian name but rather approximations of similar sounding names, often laden with double meaning and satirical comment. By doing so the writer creates a clever device to denote the near-future, where although one seems to recognize names and places, it is sufficiently changed to invoke near-term evolution of things (a little like the futuristic cars one sees in sci-fi movies that almost look like current cars just weirder and more advanced).

A few names in the book are English derivatives that well illustrate the point: Dr. March Fooley, the US Ambassador is a playful take on the word "fool" (as in April's Fool), and the buffoonish TV host Fartin Gogo's name is also self-explanatory. It was more difficult to decide whether to attempt translating nonsensical Hungarian names like Rea's brothers Birs and Kolonc. The name "Birs" straightforwardly translates to "Quince", which, while it is correct does not sound very Hungarian. "Kolonc" is even more challenging; the word translates to "Burden", but when translated will lose associative values such as "kolomp –cow bell" or "tolonc – expel". Rea's father's name, Vulnera Bodog is less complex; "Vulnera" resembles "vulnerable" while his given (first or Christian) name "Bodog" is one syllable short of "boldog" which means happy (also means "blessed" or "sainted"). (As with all Hungarian names, the family name comes first followed by the given name). Aunt Fortike is a nickname from the word "fortelmes", which means "dreadful".

Just as ironic is the use of names that hint at a noble lineage by adding a "y" at the end of a name as in President Vegvarhhy. The substitution of an "i" at the end of a name with "y" fulfills the same function as the use of "de" in French (Dominique de Villepin) or "von" in German (Wernher von Braun), both meaning "from" a certain place, presumably the ancestry's noble seat. Of course in many cases it is an artifact and was added later for effect. (The translator's own name, Veszpremi means someone from the city of Veszprem, and had the translator be so pretentiously inclined, he could have fancied it up to Veszpremy). The writer here even went the extra step to add two silent "h" to the name Vegvarhhy to add patina and make it more ancient sounding.

At the end we made a decision not to attempt to change names in the novel from the original as it would have diminished the Hungarian "look and feel" of the book and rather use footnotes wherever it was possible.

Those readers who are not familiar with Hungarian history only need to know that the Hungarians founded their country in the year 895 in the relatively flat Pannonian Basin surrounded by the Eastern Alps. This fortunate/unfortunate location provided with good soil for cultivation but also a highway for invading armies from the East and West. Thus Hungary was occupied by the hordes of Tartars, followed by a 150 year of Ottoman rule and a 300 year long Austrian occupation. Even in the past century Hungary lost 60% of its territory following WWI, was seized by the Germans in WWII and then by the Soviets for another 45 years. This accounts for the pessimistic tone of the novel

and the depiction of many of the characters as representative of a people accustomed to oppression and evasion. Many of the better known Hungarians left the country and achieved their success abroad. The book contains subtle allusions of some of these achievements like the invention of the gravity bomb by Barrabi Rabar that can be seen as a hint at the handful of Jewish Hungarian scientists who played an essential role in building the atomic bomb in the Manhattan project in the 1940's.

Then there is the issue of whether to translate the “Kamaty-tax” which plays a central role in the novel. “Kamaty” is a newish slang for “fornication” or “screwing”, but in Hungarian it is just one syllable different from “Kamat” which means “bank interest”. The logic of the tax is thus deduced from the similarity of these two words; the deposition of one’s seed is a value producing exercise, same as the deposit of interest generating money in a bank, and as such subject to taxation. Attempting to translate “Kamaty-tax” would lose the duality of this word and would diminish the concept.

We also kept much of the locales in original; the Budapest described by the writer resembles the actual and beautiful city, a much loved tourist destination and one of the grand European cities. However, in this dystopia the city also suffers and transforms due to government graft and inaptitude. The two principal locations of the city in this novel are the south-western, mostly working-class district of “Budafok” and the posh Szent-Istvan Park across from the Margaret-Island on the Pest side. The translator is intimately familiar with both and can attest to the veracity of these locals as mirrored through the dystopic lens of the novel. The near future projections of these locales are funny and very poignant and simply extend trends that are already apparent to observers.

This holds true for the rest of the novel as well – while Spiro’s Hungary of the near future is bleak it is not unrealistic; he simply projects current Hungarian trends to their ultimate developments. For example: the Hungarians, disappointed by recent forays in democracy (cleptocracy in Hungary), choose to unite the two forms of stable government that worked before, communism and monarchy. They elect an electrician with a close DNA match to one of the past royal families to be the King of Hungary. The new state form, “Communist Monarchy” does little to ease Hungary’s woes, which include the sale of the country’s resources to foreign companies, the ongoing dysfunction caused by corruption and the escalating hostilities between Hungarians and Gypsies, who represent 10% of the population. What the new kingdom accomplishes is to lend a degree of “kitschy” decorum of the operetta-sort to a society that indulges in TV shows and cheap entertainment.

In summary: while the book takes place in a near-future Hungary, “Wife Contest” may be a satisfying read for non-Hungarians, as it describes general maladies that beset the early 21st century: declining standards of education, focus on entertainment, extremism in politics, lingering ethnic violence—issues that apply to a great many societies. The book is a rare mixture of bleak and funny with a Cinderella story line that makes it a spell-binding page turner.