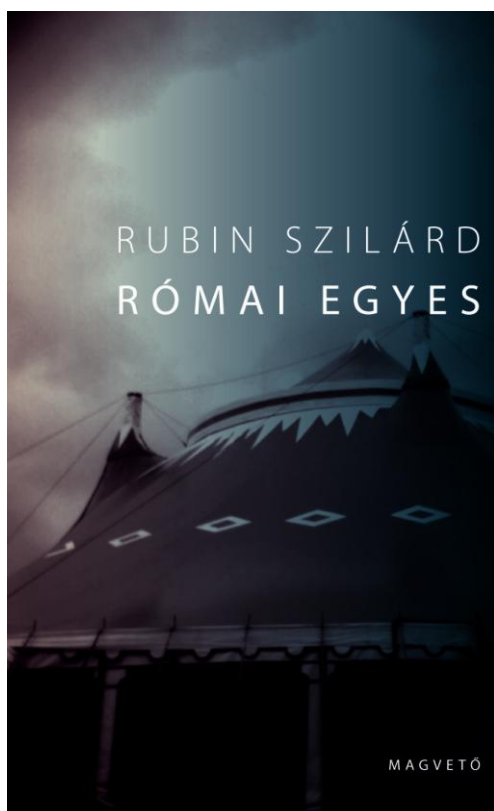




SZILÁRD RUBIN

Szilárd Rubin (1927-2010) has written five books, two of which have earned him a late, but worldwide recognition: his unique and concise writing, mixing sentimentality with cruel self-examination has been compared to works of Marcel Proust, William Faulkner and F. Scott Fitzgerald. (Portrait by Gábor Gáspár.)



RÓMAI EGYES

Roman Numeral One
Novel, 1985 / 2010, 130 pages

Rights sold to: Germany, Rowohlt

Originally published in 1985 and republished in 2010 with great critical acclaim, *Roman Numeral One* is a poetic recollection of an impossible love story between a middle-aged writer who „has grown old but has never managed to grow up”, and an enigmatic, fiercely independent and frivolous dentist called Piroska. As the narrator waits for the long hoped-for return of his lover in a provincial thermal bath, he recalls in carefully ordered fragments his youth in war-torn Hungary, the poor but glamorous life of artists in the seventies – including his long therapeutic stay at Karlovy Vary during the film festival – and the curious events of his love with Piroska, constantly changing between sheer

hopelessness and ruthless joy. The novel can also be read as a *roman à clef*, since in the two friends of the protagonist, one can easily identify the world-renowned poet János Pilinszky and internationally acclaimed Hungarian film director Miklós Jancsó. A sort of sequel, or sister-book to Rubin's *Csirkejáték*, despite its concise size, this short novel gives a unique panorama of after-war and socialist Hungary, and presents a deeply touching story of ageing, of giving up on our greatest hopes and finding redemption in silence and simplicity – all this in a beautifully weaved prose that mixes the melancholy of Proustian recollections with the grotesque images of Central Europe's kafkaesque experiences.



EXCERPT FROM THE NOVEL

He knew that it would be only a matter of minutes before the question was asked. “Christa?”

He made a broad sweep with his hand. “She’s working! Her thousand-page book has just been published. The history of religion in Russia...” His tone managed to combine sarcasm and accusation with understanding just as it had when I was the topic of conversation.

Academics, he said, you know. Their kind are forever working and can’t stand it when someone they live with does nothing all day but smoke cigarettes and stare into space. Sooner or later such behaviour is guaranteed to bring on a fit of hysterics. And now he always had paper at hand and quite recently, after a night spent arguing, he wrote out Reviczky’s poem, *Death of Pan*, that he always liked as a child and could still recite from memory. Of

course, he made sure to pace himself so that it took the whole of the afternoon with a great deal of erasing, crossing-out, rewriting and correction. He might well still be at it if he hadn’t realised that he was doing practically the same as a famous footballer had when he was sent to the World Peace Congress and ended up writing swearwords on a receipt so everyone would think he was paying attention and taking notes. In other words, he and Christa still experienced the same kind of Ingeborg-Holm-and-Tonio-Kröger tension between them, which he would never feel if he were with a black woman or a Japanese girl. It was then that he mentioned Bob Wilson’s black actress for the first time who nursed him, cooked and cleaned for him when he had pneumonia in Paris and Christa was with her husband in Bremen. The actress was the one he wanted to call from his hotel in Sevastopol between six and seven.

“I hope I can find the number...” he muttered as he searched through his pocketbook and gave a tired sigh. “What is this place? Nothing in Europe has any integrity left. Perhaps Ireland, Poland. Maybe the English countryside? I don’t know. Maybe even Transylvania. This is place is more like Lillafüred blown up to the size of Berlin. I think this is it... I’m off!”

He waved goodbye with an expression plummeted to freezing point so typical of a depressive and his mood swings. It was as if he’d wiped me from the blackboard of his view with a wet sponge: he was still looking but he couldn’t see me anymore.

I watched the revolving door continue to spin after him and I was sure that only Ali and Pirooska would make it to the film screening in the concert hall at the Pupp Hotel because Laci would be drinking in the bistro then stumbling through the woods where he'd most likely end up losing the middle button on his jacket that was only hanging on by a thread.

I was just drifting off to sleep in the spa hotel later that night when I suddenly thought of that button. If he does lose it, he's bound to turn back to look for it. And he'll spend hours searching, staring into the darkness and patting the earth and the dewy grass in the vague hope of stumbling across it. This wasn't because he was so pedantic but because he'd been drinking and he'd be totally ruled by the guilt of his childhood that he had experienced during the summer vacation when he was supposed to be on holiday but actually staying in a castle operating as a correctional institution, where his mother-superior aunt asked a young prostitute to account for a lost needle, thimble or length of cotton, which the sinner had in effect received from God, and which she should have guarded as if it were a fragment of holy wafer. This guilt will come back to him and grow into panic on the woodland walk as he gropes around on the ground and fingers the scar in the fabric until he almost feels it bleed. He'll end up lost like a blind dog thrown from a night train searching for its master who, by some mysterious twist of fortune, has turned into a jacket button.

But if this is true, I thought with surprise, then what's the difference, where's the boundary, how much more important is it for him what he felt towards some unattainable girls from the past, or what binds him to Christa now?

Or even our friendship?

When he was at Valsainte a couple of years ago, he took photos of the graveyard at Karthuzy Monastery with its black and nameless crosses barely visible through the fine muslin mist and he gave me a print that hung all alone on the wall of my room until it was joined a picture of a bronzed young woman sunbathing in a tiny bikini.

He told me all about it when he got back from Valsainte.

"You know they normally tell all the new rivals, 'Out there in the world, everyone only ever thinks of themselves. Don't you believe them when they tell you that everyone here lives for the others! No. The truth is that only one Somebody is important to us.'"

From this perspective, it no longer appeared ludicrous to see friendship as a button about to be lost. Neither ours nor that he held with others. Not even his lovers. In fact the opposite, it was now obvious that he was really nothing more to me than an acquaintance. And he was that to everybody including those whom he regularly laughed at because they hurt him.

He stopped smoking for several months after his visit because he would have liked to return to the monastery.

"This is the most difficult part for me," he said in the coffee bar when I blew the smoke right under his nose because he made a such a play out of saying I wasn't to worry, he wasn't the least bit bothered, people could smoke as much as they wanted. "If a man can drop the habit after thirty years of smoking two packets of cheap fags a day then maybe he can start to have faith in himself."

He was still dizzy from a lack of nicotine a good six months later but he kept it up. That was until he met Christa at a conference in Poigny just outside Paris whom he photographed the following summer in the overgrown garden of a villa in Óbuda and the image was just as beautiful as the monastery graveyard. He sent me a copy of that one too because he claimed I was the one who helped him realise that the beautiful young body draped on a sun-lounger was strangely reminiscent of a carved form on a grave. I didn't help him. If anything, the opposite was true. It irritated me the way that he was always staring at the picture while my words appeared unimportant to him. Then I'd only just got home and he called me to say

that he was writing a play about the photograph and he wanted to read me the first line because he'd got that far already. It was something about the model's face looking like the face of a young soldier. But it didn't. However, it was true that the first woman he ever desired was a soldier and she'd been actively serving in the SS until a couple of days before they met, but being Estonian she was classified as a political refugee in the American zone. She'd been snuggled up in a haystack not far from the fence of the Frankfurt racetrack, and Laci, a former gunner who no more deserved to be locked up, slumped down next to her in the field. He did this with the kind of hopeless and uninhibited ease of a smelly tramp joining another for a quick nap or a couple of swigs. Why should he feel inhibited by such a genderless creature as a girl? This is how he accepted the moist and sparkling lump of chewing gum from her that she later asked back and carried on chewing so she'd be able to lend to him again. He began to listen and nod along to the girl's account of a most disturbing event she'd experienced in a dark station building in eastern Prussia where Hitler's private train had rattled past a platform emptied of potential witnesses and flooded in light. Although no one was allowed to go anywhere near the windows, she looked out and caught sight of the pale Führer poring over a huge map table, almost at the point of collapse, in superhuman isolation, the loneliest creature on earth.

How the young Martinszky's face must have burned when he responded to this sudden subject of his desire with a confession of his own emotional homelessness ended forever in that moment by this homeless young girl! He was convinced that he had been delivered from a hell of godless desire into heaven itself! And what became of that trusting face? That was the only one I knew and loved, the one he gave to Oscar who was plotting to kill and described in his poem inspired by *Nights of Cabiria*. Half destroyed in the sinister and unforgiving light of the water's depths. The sea in the poem, and the silvery surface of Lake Albano in the film.

Translated by Ralph Berkin.

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