

Ferenc Temesi
Amsterdam Etc.

Trip Zero

(In which our hero, Lozer Farkas, watched over by German shepherds armed with machine guns, steps onto the stage, is acquainted with success, and also with Jaap and his family, takes his Dutch friend to the tavern named Bartók, Bartók's house in Rákosmákos, and the alternative cellar club known as the Black Hole.)

God has already dictated every book. So what are we humans doing here, plying this trade? Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were amateurs compared our Lord Jesus Christ. Who was a storyteller – and he didn't even write – alongside the best of them.

Perhaps this is why I joined the neoneoneo-transtranstrans-avantgardes. We spoke the texts, the paper remained white, like a door painted door which does not open onto anything.

(Let me forewarn you, you who still read, my compatriots, that the things which I have borrowed from my old works are not here by accident, for all my life I have only been writing one book, the title of which, at the moment, is what it is.)

The whole thing began with me as a beat musician in the sixties. At fourteen years of age there I stood in front of the microphone (tape-recorder), and I did this for four years (with better and better microphones). Lead singer, they English say. Solo singers, we say in Hungarian. And anyone who was a solo singer once is a solo singer for good, no matter what happens to him in the meantime. I would not have gone so far as to say musician.

The first trip: staying at home. So trip zero. On the eve of the non-departure at least you don't have to pack your bag, as Pessoa wrote. And how did this come to pass? A rabbit pulled out of an old short story cycle of mine (a hat) will tell.

That's the way it is.

Yes, yes. You can't say the same thing the same way anyway.

And of course I jumped at the first mention of a "Beat Festival" evening in March 1979 at the Young Saws' Club, of which at one time I was the artistic director. That's where I met Köbcsi, the guy who recruited me. This fidgety little Jewish man, with his sea-blue eyes, sensitive nose, and pugnacious belly masterminded the whole thing. If there was trouble, he was there. If there wasn't, he made it. His hair was shorter than mine, but he still didn't wash it. Maybe precisely for that reason. My shags reached the middle of my shoulders. His were medium-long. (And why did I bother mentioning this? Who the hell knows.)

There were three men with beards there too, and one girl. They stood at the edge of the stage so awkwardly and out of place, like phantoms. They did not look "avantgarde" in the slightest, and that calmed me. We shook hands. Köbcsi was the principal organizer, but who could be – apart from me – the brain? I was guessing Ákos, who was maybe half a head shorter than me, and who was staring at the floor. You could tell by looking at him that he had spent more time in the library than the rest of us combined. He had trouble handling the fact that he was losing his hair early. (We won't learn much else about him) know-it-alls, maybe that he liked sweets, he hated Sándor Weöres, because he himself recorded pretty ditties with puns and twists on tape while all the while teaching aesthetics etc., and he was the second person to leave the group after me. What does that have to do with Amsterdam? That is the question. But not the answer.)

And Balázs the pious was there, with his pope beard, he was writing a volume of poetry at the time, but none of us could have known that someday he would begin to write quite good prose, taking courage from the example I set.

And there was Endre, who had not yet begun putting his red hair in a braid, and who also did “sound poetry,” lest someone try to compare him to Ady.

But most of all there was Judit. At the time, she was the only person whose poems I would read. In a Janis Joplin role-playing poem, she wrote, “I can do it with two at once.” I never did anything like that, but I got the title from the editors of *Új Írás*. (It was a good little journal, does anyone remember it?) I could tell that she was bothering me, because she combined blondness with brown-eyed-ness. Though I always got good vibes from her. True, not love. But without her, I would not have stuck with the band, *Extra Copy*. Where’d the name come from? Judit and Balázs worked in the cellar of the Szécsényi Library and they had to stamp those two words into the poor book (keep as extra copy).

The band called Beatrice was already on stage. Of them, I knew Feró Nagy, the gutsy Székely band leader, from his cotton candy disco days. The band was great, all in black leather. They had enough pins and chains on to confuse a whole truck full of compasses. The audience, every last member of which was able to imagine they were standing on stage, heckled the whole time. Only the band’s music, which sounded like a bullwhip cracking and a plane taking off, stifled them a bit.

So, this was the beginning, which is totally superfluous in a story, but without it, we wouldn’t have this book. Everything for a price.

Letz jump: we had a performance advertised as a literary concert in July with th eszögecsesekkel in the Jókai (!) Cultural Center in Budaörs. (Imagine, children, there was such a thing at the time.) Two more years, then I leave the band, and ten years later I finally write what I was born to write about. But who knew this at the time?

Now this performance was a biggie. We began to have something of a reputation in the city, the name of which, for an outsider, looks like a mix of the words Buddha and Pestilence. Which means that the inbred intellectual world of the capital, which was always hungry for scandal, would have liked to have known how you can combine elite culture and punk. Briefly: you can’t. Or fleetingly. Cause bout a year later Feró gave up the ghost (in the snack-bar of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences). The Common Knowledge Top Secret Security Service of the Kahnmunist Juvenile Cooperative dangles the possibility of an LP in front of us, of which, today it’s all too obvious, nothing came. No worries: then came the Albert Einstein Committee band (originally the Central Committee band).

But there we were in Budaörs, where every member of Extra Copy was dressed up, a maharajah, a throw pillow, a kaiserlich und königlich general, etc. I asked what I should dress up as. They said nothing, cause the way you dress is already... So I pulled a pair of denim overalls over my naked body and my first and last wife wove me a laurel wreath from one of the branches of the hedges that encircles the garden. I was the only person to put on the band’s red polka dotted scarf. That was my costume.

And I began. They always dump that on me, because that’s the hardest part. It was dangerous because the audience consisted of three parts: 1) fans of the group Beatrice, vagrants, punks, and bums; 2) the semi, pseudo, and elite intellectuals of the capital; 3) gawping denizens of Budaörsi who suspected not a thing; and 4) machine-gun toting police with German shepherds. The regime feared nothing more than the very thing it advocated: the meeting of the young intelligentsia (unintelligentsia) and the (unemployed) working class. TV cameras were even on call to film the whole audience for the police.

It was hard to begin. But Balász and I had downed two shots of vodka to keep our legs from shaking. Then came the band, then us again, and something namelessly new began to come together: music – literature – theater – painting. At the time, they called it performance. The various layers blurred together for a time. At one point of the concert, I felt as if, had I suddenly said let's set the place on fire into the mic, they would have set the place on fire. When this impression made it from my gut to my brain, I grasped what tremendous responsibility there is in addressing them people with the living word. And the very same moment it dawned on me: never again would we have such a tremendous success.

After the party, one of the great figures of contemporary Hungarian classical music came up on stage to congratulate us. Then I shook hands with a guy my age, same height, hair curly, like mine, but short.

Hi there, call me Jaap.

Nice to meet you. Call me Farkash.

Turned out he was Dutch. Had a little publishing house (Red Swan) in Amsterdam, and had no idea where he and his family were going to sleep that night.

Well, my place, I said.

We had a four-story villa in Rákosmákos. The fourth story was still just an attic, where I dried wild hemp that I had mixed with Indian hemp. The whole gang (including the bad) would come to play soccer, barbeque some fatback bacon, shoot hoops, chit chat, and drink swill wine made from grape cordons left behind.

And so we went. They had come by car from Holland. Wasn't a Mercedes. His wife was small, but hardheaded, like mine. Anneke. They had two children, a teenage boy and a little girl. Half the family had curly hair, half had straight. As if they were two different families. Turned out they were. Second cohabitation for both Jaap and Anneke. Anneke's daughter was Minna, Jaap's son was Pim.

Nadine, my wife (the last?), was not overjoyed to have guests, because our little boy had just turned one, and with a one-year-old you have to leap out of bed at night.

They stayed for three days. They got a bed in the living room, three by four meters, for all four of them. Way back when Nadine and I slept on a bed that was so narrow that we had to roll over at once. By the time the upholsterer had finished the king-sized bed we were already sleeping in separate rooms.

Jaap and Anneke thought we were rich. In Holland, anyone with a house and a garden that big was rich. The chief architect of the Károlyi family had had the villa built as a summer place, it had been the first house in Rákosmákos, with church steeple pine trees. And a wine cellar in the middle of the garden! Out of compassion, I did not offer them any wine. Instead, I dragged Jaap off to a place heavy with the stench of belches and cigarettes, rowdy with yammering, the crack of billiard balls, and the TV, stinking of piss. The Bartok tavern.

What does this have to do with the composer? Jaap asked, with his pockmarked face and flickering brown eyes.

Nothing, I said. Bartók is a very common name in Hungary. The old owner was named Bartók. But the man you're thinking of, he lived here for ten years, in Rákosmákos.

Really? And is the memorial building far away?

The one here? Maybe two streets down, three at most. Hunyadi Street 50.

Then what are we waiting for?

And so we ambled off. Jaap was clearly disappointed with the house, which was a little bit bigger than a petit bourgeois summer place, but still...

Imagine, according to Rákosmákos legend, once, during a storm, Bartók climbed up that walnut tree, completely naked, and wrote his compositions.

And where did he really write them?

In peace and quiet, sitting at his piano. He would teach for three days at the Music Academy, then hop on the train and come home. Back then, you could taste the silence around here. That's why he came here. In the winter, if there was a deep snow, he wouldn't let his son go to school. He would teach him at home.

We strolled sadly home. Partly to sooth Jaap's disappointment, we sat down in the garden and smoked pipes. Or rather Jaap rolled a cigarette with the papers that had been left by my American friends. (Rizla.) He did it quite masterfully. I couldn't roll a single one. Once we had had a good smoke, Jaap said:

"The sunflower was his favorite flower. The placid, shy, stern man."

And he also said, "I like music, and I compose. And I will as long as I live."

"This music should stand up for itself and speak for itself," I said.

"Doesn't need my help." Jaap concluded his thoughts on Bartók, put out the stub, and put it into a cigarette case, put the cigarette case in his pocket.

I cooked for my family, so I cooked for them too. Just needed a larger pot for the meat soup and the pork chops. Jaap came with me to the butcher's, to the vegetable stand, he wanted to see everything.

"You can tell how good it will be when you buy it," I said. "But if you put too much salt in the soup, say, then put two peeled potatoes in, cause they'll soak it up."

"You have to cook the soup and leave it sitting for two days so that the flavors will mix," Jaap said firmly.

I took Jaap to Golgota Street, to the Black Hole alternative cellar club, and the Dutchman was totally blown away.

"How can you have punks and new wavers and skinheads and drifters and bums and dagos all in the same place?"

"Well," I replied, "easier for the police to keep an eye on people if they're all in once place. And the working kids and the slacker kids and the high school kids and the college kids

and everybody has to put up with one another cause the bands all play here. They can't play anywhere else. They've got no past, no future, their message is passed on by pirated cassette tapes stretched till they whine."

At that moment, someone, don't know who anymore, struck a chord and we couldn't hear each other anymore. We stood swaying, beers in hand, in the stench of pot and sweat. The bass guitar resounded in our stomachs.

Before they left, Jaap commented:

"The best place was the Black Hole, where everything was read, and brown and gray."

"Like life. That's Józsefváros, where the dregs of Pest gather, and music is the broom."

Lost in reverie, he scratched my dog Shaggy's belly.

"Hey, wanna hear a joke? It's about a dog."

"Sure," I replied, thinking his clog-wearing tribe was not famous for its mind-blowing humor.

"A small business puts a sign in its window: HELP WANTED! Must be able to type, have basic computer skills, speak at least two languages. WE ARE AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER!"

"Soon after the sign goes up, a dog stands up on its hind legs, reads the sign, and goes in. He looks at the receptionist and wags his tail. Walks over to the sign, looks at it, and whimpers. The receptionist understands he wants to see the boss, so she takes him in. The boss is surprised, to put it mildly. But the dog seems quite determined.

"Once in the boss' office, the dog jumps up on a chair and stares at the boss in the eyes. The boss says, 'I'm sorry, I can't hire you. The sign says you have to be able to type.'

"The dog jumps down from the chair, walks over to the typewriter, and produces a flawless letter in no time flat. He pulls the paper from the roller and takes it to the boss. The boss is taken aback, but still he says, 'yes, indeed, but as the sign says, you also need basic computer skills.'

"The dog walks over to the computer and writes a circular letter. Then he uses the spreadsheet software to make a pie chart. He gives both to the boss."

(In the meantime, Shaggy was groaning with delight and panting gratefully as Jaap scratched her erogenous zones. You must know, my compatriots, that all dogs are bisexual. Including the part above their tails, even in the case of male dogs. But back to Jaap.)

"I see you are a very intelligent dog, with unusual abilities. But I still cannot give you the position.' The dog jumped down from the chair again and walked over to a copy of the sign and put one paw on the part that said 'We are an equal opportunity employer.'

"True,' said the boss, 'but the ad also says that you have to speak at least two languages.'

"Meow."

"Shit happens," I said. That's more than a joke. That's almost a story. It seems you know the melody that dwells in my heart."

Jaap and his family left for home the next day.