

GYÖRGY SPIRÓ: TAVASZI TÁRLAT

(SPRING COLLECTION)

Novel, 2010, 288 pages

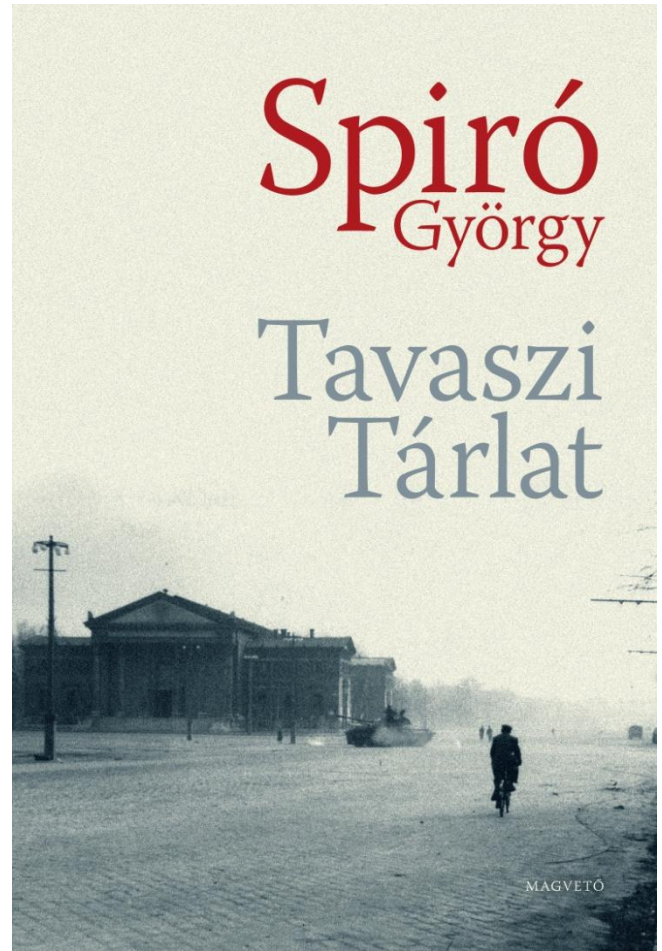
„Never before have we seen depicted with such force the horrible everyday life of the fifties, the breakdown and the compromises of the individual, and the process of a whole society giving up it's integrity.”

“It’s not a bad idea for a man to get admitted to hospital a couple of days before a revolution breaks out, stay in until it’s been quashed and recuperate quietly at home during the ensuing purge.” These are the opening lines of György Spiró’s latest novel, *Spring Collection*, that presents the reader with a shocking picture of the 56 Hungarian Revolution. The main protagonist is an engineer by the name of Gyula Fátray who, like so many other qualified professionals at that time, is trying to get along first as a simple worker before the Second World War, and after it as a communist party member, an idealist, and leader of planning in a newly founded factory. Just days before mass protests begin in October, he is admitted to hospital for an operation for haemorrhoids. He returns home after the fighting to be faced by a Soviet-occupied Budapest.

This novel commemorates the unbearably absurd machinations of the dictatorial regime in which not even those innocent could feel safe. When Gyula’s name appears in a newspaper article alongside some conspirators against the state, he finds himself ostracised by his best friends and closest colleagues virtually overnight. It no longer seems to matter that he was in hospital for the duration of the revolution and that the charges are false. Just as in Kafka’s *Trial*, history marches mercilessly towards an excruciating outcome.

Gyula’s situation is made all the more difficult by the fact that his wife, Kati, a tough communist, seems not to understand a thing because she is so wrapped up in herself and her role in organising an art installation known as the Spring Collection.

This novel recalls the purges that came after 56 with touching authenticity. At the end, on May 1st of 1957 the whole nation, the majority of which had revolted against the system half a year earlier, submitted to the new communist leadership that did not understand that



Hungary had been defeated for decades. Our hero's life hangs by a single thread, and there is a special twist in the story that makes it possible for him to survive. The false charge and ensuing expulsion from society mark the beginning of the process which eventually led to the trial and execution of Imre Nagy. The impossibility of family life provides a dramatic parallel to the historical parody of a failed, conquered country and it is from this double story that one of György Spiró's most exciting novels is born.



GYÖRGY SPIRÓ was born in 1946 in Budapest. He is a writer, a dramatist and a translator and scholar of Polish literature. He is one of the most frequently played contemporary playwrights of Hungary.

OTHER BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR

Fogság (*Captivity*, novel, 2005, 770 pages) The major literary sensation of the year 2005, this historical adventure novel of epic proportions is set in the first century after the birth of Jesus Christ, in the Roman Empire when Christianity was first emerging as a religion. The hero, Uri (Gaius Theodorus), is a Jew who is born and grows up in Rome's Jewish community, and who sets on a journey throughout the Empire, meeting in person such historical figures as Pontius Pilate or Jesus Christ himself.

Az Ikszek (*The X-es*, novel, 2007, 542 pages) Set in a fractured Poland at the end of the 18th century, this novel tells the story of struggling theatre director Osiński and the return of a legendary actor long past his prime, whose pursuit of popularity is disturbed by mysterious critical articles signed simply with „x-es”.

Messiások (*Messiahs*, novel, 2007, 646 pages) In the Polish émigré community of Paris in 1840, a mysterious figure appeared and established a religious sect, claiming to be the Lord himself, and seducing such literary greats as Mickiewicz and Słowacki. This gripping novel tells the story of their social and political machinations. *Rights sold to: Poland, W.A.B.*

Feleségverseny (*Brideride*, novel, 2009, 337 pages) An utopian vision of what Hungary may become in the near future, this satirical novel recounts the events of a country where the communist king elects



György Spiró
SPRING COLLECTION
(excerpt from the novel)

It's not a bad idea for a man to get admitted to hospital a couple of days before a revolution breaks out, stay in until it's been quashed and recuperate quietly at home during the ensuing purge. This way, fate saves him from making bad decisions at critical moments. In fact, it prevents him making any kind of decisions at all and also stops bad decisions being made about him during the revolution or after it is quashed by those who make decisions about the lives of others.

The hero of our tale, an engineer by the name of Gyula Fátray, celebrated his forty-sixth year on this earth on September 2. After starving himself for a whole day, he went into hospital on Wednesday, October 17. Once inside, he was given no food only drink. He received a thorough enema that morning, one at lunchtime and a third in the evening. Then, on October 18, he was operated on by his wife's second cousin, Dr. Zoltán Kállai.

The pain of the first solid bowel movement after a surgery for haemorrhoids is likened to giving birth and they recommend it be done in hospital, lest complications occur. Our hero managed his on the fourth day after the operation, which fell on a Monday. He was duly congratulated by Kállai who told him he could go home the next day.

He still wasn't able to go home on Wednesday because on Tuesday the whole thing kicked off.

Everyone was evacuated to the basement and those injured in the street were taken straight down. Rókus Hospital didn't have the best situation when it came to street battles. It was built earlier than the surrounding six-story tenements and stuck out into Rákóczi Avenue. Its demolition was planned on several occasions but it always ended up remaining where it was. It never occurred to anyone at

the end of the 18th century that Pest might one day become a battle ground although planners were people much like those who came before them and those who followed. The retaking of Buda was hardly a bloodless scuffle and they really might have recalled that a hundred years later. A revolution erupted and civil war broke out only fifty years after the hospital was opened. The whole of Pest could be shot at from the Gellérthegy, and that included Rókus Hospital that stood on what was then the perimeter of the city. The building took several hits during the Second World War and that's when they erected the emergency operating theatre in the basement. There wasn't enough money for a complete renovation and so that's why they only restored the bombed chapel. Bullet holes left in the long wall from shots fired from the National Theatre could still be clearly seen eleven years after the war had ended.

This time, the section of the hospital that stuck out in the street came under pounding fire from Keleti Railway Station, the rusty torso of Elizabeth Bridge that had been bombed in the war, and gun posts set up at the tram terminal. The wounded swore blind that Hungarians were firing at Hungarians although most of the patients and doctors didn't want to believe what they were being told.

Hungarians at Hungarians? Not the Russians at Hungarians?

They're cutting up the Stalin statue only thirty yards from here in front of the National Theatre! Never! How did it get there from Dózsa György Avenue? Did it fly there?! Yeah, they flew it there! They brought in bits of bronze of various shape and size saying they came from the idol's hands, ears, nose.

Unbelievable!

They're shooting at the National Theatre from the Boulevard but that doesn't stick out anywhere. They're shooting at the party's daily newspaper offices and they've looted the presses on the first floor. The paternoster has broken down because someone smashed the plywood wall up between the up bit and the down bit on the ground floor.

Guns banged and stuff crashed and splintered over the patients' heads. Despite a strict ban imposed by hospital management, some of the braver nurses and patients crept back up to the ground and first floors to listen to Kossuth Radio through the earphones that hung from the wall by the head of the beds. All of a sudden Kossuth Radio started to call itself Free Kossuth Radio. Reports kept coming in of contradictory short orders issued by the government and the Party while classical music was broadcasted all the time. The signal went every now and again, the power went off and they lit the basement with candles and spirit lamps and operated like that.

It was Tuesday evening and Gyula Fátray was sitting up in bed eating his supper. He could sit up now and that was quite an achievement after what he'd been through. He heard shots coming from the direction of Bródy Sándor Street and via the black galvanised earphones. He didn't want to believe either of his ears and when he did believe them, he felt insulted. He couldn't remember agreeing to live through yet another war. Those around him either felt petrified or jubilant. He just felt panic. Those who could walk carried the bedridden down to the basement along with bed, bedside cabinet

and stool. A little physical exertion didn't come amiss and at least while he was lifting, he didn't have to think.

Doctor Kállai flew up and down the ward and each time he passed him, he'd shout,

"Gyuszi, don't do that, you'll split your stitches!" and flapped on in his long, white coat.

By Wednesday evening, our hero had managed to run a temperature. Kállai diagnosed a chest infection on Thursday, October 25 by simply placing his ear on our hero's back and then his chest.

"Gyuszi, there's absolutely no way we can let you go home like this! You're going to have to lie this one out."

"I'll lie it out at home."

"They're shooting all down Rákóczi Avenue and the Boulevard!" Doctor Kállai barked. "I can't go home either! You only have to stick your nose out into the street to get shot full of holes!"

Kállai lived within literal spitting distance, over the road from the Uránia Cinema, and he hadn't been able to make it back to his apartment since Tuesday evening. He kept in contact with his wife via the telephone. Unbelievable to imagine telephones working in a city at war but they worked perfectly in Pest.

"Anikó's throwing a tantrum," Kállai said with a sour tone. "She has to go all the way down to the street herself to get bread."

Considered to be something of a beauty, but also rather selfish and awkward, everyone hated Anikó. She could be understood: she had married a wealthy surgeon who was guaranteed to get much wealthier due to his chosen profession and she could hang as much jewellery on her person as she could bear to carry. What couldn't be understood was why Zoltán has taken her for his bride who, just before the big day, informed her that he had no intention of stopping his philandering just because they were to be married. Anikó responded by forcing a supercilious smile on her perfectly-formed face, and then felt terribly hurt when Zoltán kept his promise. She didn't love Zoltán and now she hated him but she wasn't willing to divorce because wealth was worth its weight.

Zoltán also made it clear that he didn't want a child; it had been enough to have one wife and two daughters killed in Auschwitz. Anikó didn't insist on having a baby.

Doctor Kállai spent eighteen hours of every day either operating or assisting in theatre and the rest of his time went on debating and voting with the others on who should be a member of the revolutionary committee and who not. In the end, half of the committee was made up by doctors and the other half by hospital staff.

Kállai had always made it plain, in close family circles, that he despised the system and now he was able to publicly state that the communists should be pushed from power. He'd joined the Communist Party back in 45 but had found Party congresses less to his liking as the years passed. He particularly objected to the Party's political dislike of the intelligencia but he still remained a member.

“Zoltán’s a reactionary,” our hero’s wife, Kati, would state every time they met Zoltán but then, to soften the sharpness out of such an allegation, she would always add, “but then he was a reactionary even as a child.”

Zoltán described the revolution as an historical turning point but his enthusiasm waned somewhat after the first two sittings of the revolutionary committee. A doctor’s vote carries just as much weight as that of a cleaning lady? Isn’t that simply another example of a proletariat dictatorship? Were doctors going to find themselves in a minority in their own hospital?!

The first item for debate was whether they should refer to themselves as a “revolutionary committee” or a “revolutionary council”. This took a good hour and a half to settle when they really should have been carrying out emergency surgery but everyone insisted on saying their part. Those who stood by “council” lambasted those proposing “committee” as turncoats and actively betraying Hungarian tradition and denying the values of 1848 but that lot had been voted in just the same way as the other lot. This was followed by a great many wasted words on whether they should treat all the injured or only Hungarian wounded and then only proven revolutionaries and how such proof could be provided, whether or not two witnesses were sufficient or should something be provided in writing and if so what should be written and by whom. The loudest protests against treating the Soviet wounded came in most part from those who had not only taken the Hippocratic Oath but who’d been the biggest Stalinists just a week before!

“I should defect to Palestine,” Zoltán said. “Milk cows in a kibbutz! There was nothing real under communism but at least they have real communes there! Don’t bother about a thing in the world, just tilling the land! That has to be better because this is hopeless! At least they value doctors there!”

By Palestine he meant Israel, because that was what he’d always known it by and now he was convinced that he should have left in 45.

“It’s too late now, Anikó doesn’t want to go. She likes it here and she’s always going on about how she doesn’t even look Jewish.”

“Then go on your own.”

“I couldn’t leave her here. She’s got no qualifications. She’d starve to death!”

“She’d get work somewhere. She could learn a trade or work in a shop.”

“I couldn’t do that to her.”

“Why not?”

“Because I married her.”

“Then get a divorce!”

“That’s out of the question.”

“Get her into an office somewhere with one of your grateful patients and then you go if you want to. You can leave her the flat and the paintings...”

“I’d leave them for her, of course I would, but that’d only be enough to last her five or six years...”

“She’d pick something up by then.”

“I couldn’t be that mean.”

“But you cheat on her all the time!”

“That’s different. I warned her about that beforehand.”

Our hero got to know very little of the news and horror stories. He was much better off having his body on fire, at least that way he didn’t have to think.

Then his temperature went down.

He couldn’t telephone home because the line was for use by the official hospital management only. There was one public booth and patients crept up to the ground floor despite the ban so the hospital management responded ingeniously by having a padlock fitted to the booth door.

He waited for his wife to come in. She had a nose that hung down to her top lip but she always used to ride in the section of the tram reserved for Christians and she never lost her nerve when she was stopped by the Arrow Cross: she’d stare them straight in the eye and pinch her false papers between long, red, painted fingernails and proffer them with sufficient repulsion and it worked. But Kati didn’t come this time. Conflicts could be going on elsewhere.

It must have been complete chaos out there with the government makeup changing by the day, new political parties being created all the time and a mass of committees being formed. Impossible events were in turn denied or verified by patients, doctors, nurses and new patients. He tried his best to place his faith in no one and not to do any thinking at all.

They’ve stormed Party headquarters on Republic Square, they’ve lynched a couple of people and are digging, digging, digging looking for secret dungeons where they tortured prisoners. And they’re digging outside the Interior Ministry building next to the White House on Jászai Mari square, there were dungeons there too, look, it says so in the newspaper, from where they threw the dead bodies straight into the Danube. The ambulance men brought the newspapers in. They said they pushed their Red Cross flags out of the windows of the ambulance and so neither the revolutionaries nor the troops shot at them.

Zoli Kállai claimed that he managed to get hold of Kati a couple of times on the telephone and that they were fine and sent kisses. He was either telling the truth or not.

Then Kati turned up. She walked on tiptoe like ex-dancers generally tend to. Her wiry ginger hair was bound in a dark grey headscarf and she was wearing the exact sort of putty-coloured Macintosh that the revolutionaries ran around in. It was an old thing that she’d managed to preserve from the thirties and she wore to go on long walks. She wore a broad tricolour armband and she’d brought soup in a billycan. It was a wonder she hadn’t spilt the lot because the can didn’t close properly.

“There’s enough food here, what did you have to bring that for?!” our hero said by way of a thank you.

Kati shrugged. She boasted that she’d had to walk all the way to Oktogon where she’d been given a lift on the back of a military wagon by revolutionaries. She recounted her daring deed and then fell silent because she didn’t have anything else to brag about.

“Haven’t they been looking for me from the factory?”

“No.”

He regretted asking. If they had called, his wife would only save his feelings by denying it.

“What were you doing carrying things with fresh stitches?!” Kati snapped. “Zoltán told me on the telephone. It’s so irresponsible, so careless, so immature! Of course it made you ill! You very nearly died! You never give your family a thought!”

Our hero said nothing.

Kati said her piece and then tidied the top of the bedside cabinet and placed the billycan down.

“Have you got a spoon?” she asked in a stern tone.

“Yes.”

Kati took a seat by the side of the bed and said nothing.

“The child?”

“He’s all right. He plays a lot on his own. Marbles.”

“You’re not letting him go down to the street are you?”

“Of course not!”

“Is everything in order in the building?”

“All’s in order.”

Mr. Kovács, the beer-bellied, neckless, alcoholic caretaker, had stood drunk in front of the building on the morning of October 24 and begun to berate the Jews and the Ruskies. No one told him to stop although they were afraid the Russians might hear. There was no point in upsetting a sick man with such news.

He stroked his wife’s hand and she let him but she didn’t stroke his back instead preferring to inspect the setup in the basement.

“It’s cold down here,” she said.

“They didn’t plan any heating.”

“The nurse said you’ve got a lung infection.”

“My temperature’s gone down.’

“When are they going to move you back upstairs?”

“I don’t know. Soon.”

Kati carried on sitting by the side of the bed and neither of them spoke for a moment.

“Imagine,” she said darkly, “they shot Mrs. Huszár. She was standing in line outside Glázner’s and they shot into the crowd and hit her! Right in the chest! Mazel Tov!”

“Poor thing.”

Kati jumped up.

“I’m going to ask Zoli a thing or two!”

“What do you have to ask him about?”

“About what’s wrong with you.”

“Nothing, I’m just weak that’s all.”

Kati shook her head: she knew that he wouldn’t even tell the truth if he knew what was wrong with him. She was going to ask the doctor.

She went off in search of her cousin. Half an hour passed before she popped back for a second.

“He’s in theatre, I won’t wait. I’ve got to dash.”

“You take good care of yourself!”

He slumped back against his pillow, exhausted by her visit.

Kati came again on Saturday and brought pasta with poppy seeds.

“They’re letting me home on Monday!” our hero informed his spouse.

Kati nodded vacantly. She was in a very flat mood and her eyes stared darkly out of their sockets. The Mindszenty speech must be worrying her, our hero thought. Better not to bring that topic up in the basement in front of strangers. Better to deal with it at home if we must.

So for a while neither of them said anything about the fact that Mindszenty had called for the return of feudalism and capitalism. Then Kati said,

“I’ll take home what I can. I don’t want you carrying anything.”

“The ambulance will take everything tomorrow,” our hero suggested.

Kati went home empty-handed. The man in the next bed got to finish the pasta.

The Russians came in the next morning. The rattle of mortars and machineguns returned along with a new wave of wounded. This time our hero refrained from carrying casualties, his earlier guilty conscience wasn't to be repeated. He hadn't asked for the Soviet battalions to trample roughshod over the country because this, he felt, was not the liberation of eleven years ago. He just lay in his bed and if he could, he would have turned to face the wall but he couldn't because his bed was in the middle row between two narrow corridors and the porters were forever knocking it when they brought new wounded in.

They didn't take him home on Monday, the ambulance men were busy elsewhere.

"They'll take you home tomorrow," Zoltán said on Wednesday, November 7, which in this extraordinary year was not considered a holiday. "Kati will come here in the morning."

"What the hell for?!"

"I told her on the telephone not to go to all the trouble but she wants to come in."

"She's going to get up at the crack of dawn to walk all the way here?! And if she gets shot?!"

It was Thursday, November 8 and Kati managed to arrive at the hospital just as our hero was being helped into the ambulance. They were taking another two patients so there was no room for Kati. Our hero started to make excuses but Kati just shrugged and said not to bother, she could walk home but she was obviously terribly hurt. They'd already put his bag in and she'd come to put it in.

"It'll be no good you ringing the bell with the boy at home," Kati said. "I told him not to answer the door to a soul... Here's my key... Yours is at home in the top drawer of the dresser... I told him to get it out only if there's a fire..."

She passed him the key.

"I'm going to go and have a word with Zoli!"

She hurried into the building and our hero watched her go. Zoli was in theatre and he wouldn't be out before the evening. Kati knew that just as well as he did. Why did she have to playact all the time?

Home was too close. It had been so good to get away even if it was on sick leave. The key would cause hysterics, everything would cause hysterics.

He'd been pardoned marriage in hospital. All right, he'd be a while recovering at home and he was still weak and so there'd be allowances made.

He couldn't see out of the frosted windows of the ambulance and nothing of the city could be seen through the front because the driver had two others sitting next to him. He felt like he'd been locked in a cave that had no way out. He'd been stuck in a cave in the hospital basement and now he'd been thrown into another one and he'd most likely end up vegetating in a cave at home. He knew no more of what was going on around him than prehistoric man knew of the world.

The ambulance men sat in silence.

“What’s wrong, comrades? Holding the tongue?” asked one of his fellow patients, a chubby man with the look of a labourer and his leg in plaster.

The ambulance men didn’t answer.

It was then that our hero had the startling realisation: he’d been fantastically fortunate to have spent the whole time in hospital.

And it had been the whole time because it was over now. If the Soviets once decided to invade, neither man nor the Almighty would be able to shift them. They’d rolled into Budapest again and there was no question of them rolling out again. They’d pulled out of Austria the year before and many had hoped that they’d pull out of Hungary too. That illusion was no more. They had to quash the revolution and there was no way they were leaving now.

Anyone who’d taken part in the revolution would be subject to merciless reprisals.

As there was no way he could have joined the revolution, he’d miss out on the reprisals as well. It’s not a bad idea for a man to get admitted to hospital a couple of days before a revolution breaks out, stay in until it’s been quashed and recuperate quietly at home during the ensuing purge.

It wasn’t that he deserved to be spared anymore than anyone else, he was just lucky.

A freckly young boy with white skin and virtually invisible eyebrows stood and stared in horror when his father opened the hall door. He was so taken aback, he didn’t say a word. His ginger hair was cut close to his scalp what meant the barber on Pozsonyi Road was already open. Our hero flopped down on the freshly-made bed and pulled the eiderdown up over himself.

Kati came home two hours later, burst into floods of tears, knelt down by the side of the bed and didn’t want to let him go. Our hero controlled his temper enough to simply stroke her head with its bristly ginger hair and then he went back to sleep.

Translated by Ralph Berkin

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