

Zsuzsa Bánk

Death in Summer (Sterben im Sommer)



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Zsuzsa Bánk writes about the death of her father. He spends one last summer in the Balaton in his former Hungarian homeland; one last time he goes swimming in the lake. Yet his return lands him in a German hospital with his daughter at his bedside. What happens to us when a loved one dies? What happens in the year of loss and the one after?

“I began to accept it. I have put a great deal of work in this book and much devotion.”

Zsuzsa Bánk

Zsuzsa Bánk was born in 1965. While studying journalism, political science, and literature in Mainz and Washington, she worked as a bookseller. She currently lives with her husband and two children in Frankfurt am Main. She was awarded a.o. the Aspekte Literaturpreis, the German Book Prize, the Jürgen Ponto Prize and the Mara Cassens Prize for her first novel, *Der Schwimmer* (The Swimmer). Her last novel to be published was *Schlafen werden wir später* (We'll Sleep Later).

Bánk's work has been translated into 20 languages.

Zsuzsa Bánk's father László was born in Hidasnémeti, Hungary, in 1933 and died in September 2018.

Translated by Tess Lewis

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Summer casts its strongest shade of yellow on us but we are speaking of winter. On the drive southeast—Würzburg, Regensburg, Passau, Vienna, then Hungary, Sopron, Sárvár—my mother talks about winter. It's sweltering outside but she recalls the ice and snow of January 1973 when a telegram was being dictated to my parents over the telephone in their small Frankfurt apartment. This telegram from Hungary, in Hungarian, was spelled out in a neutral tone by someone in a German telegraph office, letter by letter, without judgment, without any interpretation or knowledge because the words made no sense to a German ear. My father had picked up the receiver, set out pen and paper, and repeated every letter. My mother looked at him anxiously because she could guess and perhaps already knew what was coming; this was not something unexpected but something that had filled them with apprehension for weeks. My father started writing but soon put the pen down. The first four letters were enough for him to grasp the entire message, to recognize its magnitude immediately: m-e-g-h. He needed no more letters know how they all fit together, how the message was written, where it was headed, what it meant, and what it would bring, *meghalt*—dead.

My mother recalls leaving on that long, dark trip back to her village, which she had left on the spur of the moment sixteen years earlier during the Hungarian revolution. Friends had advised her not to delay her departure on this journey into the unknown with all its unpredictability, so she took the night train from Frankfurt to Vienna and in the morning, she went to get a visa from the *Ibusz*, the national tourist agency, the port of call during the Cold War for everyone who wanted to travel from the West to the East, from Austria to Hungary, against the current, in the direction, that is, in which no one else wanted to travel. As the sun beats down on our car and the fields around us wither in the heat, my mother evokes that bleak, bitterly cold winter, its dark, icy days and clear, snowy nights, and her mixture of grief, torpor, and nervous fear that she would not arrive in time for the funeral or to see her father one last time, even if dead.

One day later, we are sitting in her village, outside my aunt and cousin's house, in the garden with a view of the nearby vineyards, surrounded by oleander and cherry trees that have already shed their fruit, in a garden paradise where the memory of that winter in 1973 seems eternal. My cousin tells us that

she believed at the time the end of the world had come, the *vége a világnak*. She had parted the curtains. The snow was falling in thick flakes and she saw her father in coat and hat with a somber expression walking through the driving snow more slowly than usual, reluctant to bring the news he had for her. She knew at once that the end of the world had come. Grandfather had died and his death had rung in the end of our world.

Although we have come to Hungary in search of bright summer weather, this time too we find sickness and death. Once this closely entwined pair intrudes in your life, there is no escape. It sticks to you like a burr, it clings, it wants to belong and to dance with you, it sinks its hooks in and won't release you from its grip. Everyone has their own story of sickness and death, everyone has their losses, their indelible black, branching images. The deceased are never dead. They are present in the first sentences exchanged in an encounter, in a conversation; they sit in the gardens, at the tables, in front of the soup bowls and baskets of sliced white bread and command: well, now talk about me, don't let up, don't stop talking about me. The wound has healed but the scar reports back, here under the cherry tree, under the acacia, whenever it wants to or feels that the moment, the time is right. After all these years, my mother still weeps for her father. After all these years, my cousin and I, we still weep for our grandfather. The pain has simply become something mundane; it seeps into everyone those around the table; each person is served a helping and consumes it with the soup and bread.

I set out to drive my ailing father to his Hungarian summer: to drop him off in the village and perhaps bring him along to Lake Balaton; to let him experience his walnut tree-summer one more time, to sit with him once more in a café on Kisfaludy Beach and order him a cold Soproni as we look out over the blue expanse. But since we've arrived, his condition has deteriorated, every night we are filled with worry. He has caught a fever that will not break; the clinic at home tells me on the telephone that he must get treatment immediately. My cousin forbids me to take him to a Hungarian hospital. No one is any help there, she says, people die in the emergency room. So we drive to Eisenstadt, to the nearest hospital on the Austrian side of the border. More than sixty years ago, my father fled across the border not far from here.

In Eisenstadt we wait until evening, but there are no beds available; an ambulance will take him to another clinic in Lower Austria. When we say goodbye, I tell him that I will collect him in a few days then we'll sit together on the shore of Lake Balaton and order two Sopronis. I feign confidence, fill my voice with normalcy and refuse to allow fear in. I refuse to let it take hold of my words, to bind them, cloud them, cripple them. For some time now, I've been



gaining experience in playing things down, in pushing away and passing over their horror, in taking away their edge. But the fever keeps us on tenterhooks, it drops every day around noon yet returns in the evening and rises. I am constantly waiting for a telephone call, from the clinic, on the doctor, the nurses, on my cousin in her garden paradise, my mother in her summer house two streets over, my brother in Berlin—they all are part of this dance between fear and tension, part of our network of distress. While my children jump in the lake and tire themselves out playing water polo, hitting the ball into the air with their fists, I stand on the shore and take calls, fear rushing into my throat with every ring. In this dazzling summer with all its dependable pleasures and blandishments, I have started to expect the worst.

We wanted a grand summer, perhaps our last. Days that would be carefree, perhaps even painless. Days in which the cancer would abate, would go to sleep and not wake up. Just sleep through. Not stir. At the most, it would turn onto its other side—then continue sleeping. Yes, the summer is grand, like it always is here: the crickets chirr with abandon, the temperature climbs every morning and the forests rustle louder as soon as the wind picks up. The streets, the endless veins of asphalt are mine alone in the evening when I drive from the hospital to the village or from the village to Lake Balaton. I drive three thousand miles this summer. I buy toll stickers, I travel from one country to the next, from border to border—Slovakia, Austria, Hungary—from city to city, from village to village. I switch languages, Hungarian, German, English, I get mixed up. My father moves from one hospital to the next, through a series of stations. On the shore in Balatonfüred, where I'm standing in a bathing suit under the hot sun, his doctor reaches me and tells me that my father needs an operation, that in a few minutes a helicopter will take him to the nearest hospital, an hour north of Vienna. While my children yell, wave, jump, slap the surface of the water, dive down and do handstands underwater, somewhere past Bratislava a helicopter rises into the air, carrying my father. I press my hands together and send my prayer over the blue lake.

It's nothing new and it's not surprising. Illness and death have always been a part of Hungary for me, ever since I can remember, ever since we started spending summers in this country, illness and death have been at home here. Only this time *we* are the protagonists, not others. In every year that we look back on, someone left us, every year we had to say goodbye to someone, to give them up and let them go. Illness and death were the uninvited guests, they knocked and sat down at our table, ate from our plates. People died in their kitchens, in their beds, while working in the garden or in the fields, while picking cherries, while slopping the pigs, on the way to church, to the tavern, on

bicycles, on mopeds, while running, playing, or in a rage. Never in hospital, actually. Death wasn't outsourced, it came surrounded with witnesses. Not only did the elderly die but also the young, children died, infants. Medical care was inadequate, there was not enough medication. On one of these loud evenings, my cousin tells us that she and her brother were the only children in the village to be vaccinated against polio, only they and the village doctor's children. My mother had bought the vaccines with the first money she earned in Germany and sent them to her sister in the mail.

My parents had always surrounded me so naturally, so effortlessly with their easy manner—that I never took too seriously the fact that in the last year, any day could have been the last, but I suspected it, I sensed it with a few remote, hidden nerve endings. That's why I traveled to Hungary to visit them in their summer house the prior year, that's why my brother traveled to Hungary the prior year to visit them in their summer house, to drive my father to Lake Balaton and swim far out in the water with him. For such a *jó úszás*, as they say on shore, for such a good swim, a nice stretch of swimming, a proper stretch of water, swimming crawl and diving, floating on your back, scanning the sky and then continuing on, a good, long swim through lake and sky, water and air. It can't be perfectly translated; in Hungarian there's an echo of something no translation can capture. 'Good' for '*jó*' is too small, too meager, too thin. This *jó úszás* is the keystone of our Hungarian summers, the summer's core summer, the point towards which everything flows. You jump into the lake and swim far out past the last marker, past the lifeguard's boat. It's more than swimming. It's a way of leaving things behind, not just the beach and all the activity there, but also the things that make up a life and hold it together, as well as the world in which all these things come together and this life takes its course. Far out in the lake where the blue of the water catches and rivals the blue of the sky, the world seems irrelevant, forgotten. So one of the first questions we ask in the morning, as soon as we've checked to see if the lake is green, blue, or turquoise, if it is calm or ruffled by the wind is: will the lake offer me a *jó úszás* today?

One afternoon in Balatonfüred, after I had swum out far and then climbed out of the water, someone on shore, on the steps leading to the lake, called out appreciatively: Now that was a *jó úszás*! I laughed and answered: Yes, indeed, that's exactly what it was, a *jó úszás*! It means that feeling, that sense of expansiveness, freedom and weightlessness, the effortless hours in water warmed by the sun, it means the sense of endless, timeless luxuriating in water. Our father had taught us this early: this way of being together, of being next to each other in the water. It was probably the first thing he taught me and my brother, brought home to us and, without a word, without explanation, it always

bound us together naturally. Every summer here he had practiced and shared with us his love of water, of a good swim, of this marvelous, fantastic swimming—this *jó úszás*.

Is he playing a crazy game with us? Has he decided to keep us here? Stretched out a net in which we would keep getting caught? Is he chasing me back and forth across this country that was once his homeland? Not long ago we spoke of his death, he wants to be buried in Hungary, but we want to know him nearby. Maybe that's why he's stuck in the middle, half-way between our two worlds as if he had it all planned, as if he could influence it. He doesn't trust me as far as his grave is concerned, so he has implored my cousin to fight for him—a term which sound stronger in Hungarian than it does in German. The Hungarian word *harcolni* not only evokes a fight but also a blood-soaked battle that will leave you with nothing. In her garden paradise I say to my cousin, let's not fight, please, not over this, I also need a place where I can visit my father when he is no longer alive.

After the operation in Mistelbach, he is hooked up to tubes and high-tech machines. I stand at his bedside and hold his trembling hands, I talk to him, even though I don't know if he can hear, if he is at all aware that we are here. I look at the wooden cross on the wall and the murmur in my head keeps repeating, take him now and skip the rest, spare him the suffering, I can stand it, we'll be able to stand it. But death waits. Dying apparently doesn't go with this shade of blue spreading under the sparse clouds between Pannonhalma and Zirc on my drive back. I listen to Stevie Nicks, an American is bringing tears to my eyes in Hungary, an American is making me cry in a German car under a Hungarian sky by asking *can I handle the seasons of my life?* And I have to answer, no, I can't, I just can't handle them. Rather, I can't handle this particular season of my life. I repeat to myself: Death doesn't go with summer. Death belongs in winter.

It also belonged in the winter of 1973, when my mother traveled to her father's funeral. No one in the village knew she was coming, no one knew that the Iron Curtain would part in time for her to slip through. There was no telephone and therefore no one had received notice. My mother drove into the darkness, waited impatiently on freezing train platforms, stared at the station clocks' slowly moving hands. In Vienna, she boarded the train to Győr and in Győr she caught the next train, which took her close to her village. She arrived late in the evening. All the roads were icy, as if covered by a thick layer of glass. The snow had been pushed to the side, forming high walls. There were no buses. The nearest house was her brother's. She wanted to spend the night there, waiting for the following morning, but the door was locked and no one heard her knocking. The cold attacked her, her suitcase dragged on her arm. She walked

tentatively, feeling her way step by step over the ice, slowly crossing the small, sleeping town, then she walked along the country road to her village under a large moon that shone brightly overhead. When she turned onto her street, she saw a light still burning in the farmhouse. My mother let the suitcase drop and ran the last few steps calling loudly. My grandmother opened the door. My golden girl, *arany lányom*, she said, I knew you would say goodbye to your father, I knew you would come.

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