

Ladislav Grosman The Shop on Main Street

Translated by Iris Urwin Lewitová



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ladislav Grosman (1921–1981) was born in Humenné, Slovakia to a Jewish family. The son of a tanner father and a shopkeeper mother, Grosman was a talented student but was prevented from graduating secondary school due to anti-Jewish legislation when Slovakia became a puppet state of Nazi Germany in 1939. He worked as a laborer in a brick factory before being conscripted into (unarmed) military service. After an unsuccessful escape attempt, he was sent to a forced labor camp. He went into hiding after the Slovak National Uprising of 1944, the same year his parents and three of his siblings died during the German attack on Ružomberok. After the end of the war, he returned briefly to Humenné in order to obtain his diploma.

He soon moved to Prague to study, earning an advanced degree from the University of Political and Social Sciences. He then went on to work in publishing, while at the same time studying educational psychology. During this time he also began to write seriously – first in Slovak and then in Czech. His novella, *The Shop on Main Street*, was adapted into a film that became the first Czechoslovak movie to win an Academy Award. Ján Kádar, who co-wrote the screenplay with Grosman and directed the movie with Elmar Klos, said the short novel “appealed to Klos and myself by its special angle of truthfulness, the tragicomedy of the story and the author’s humanistic approach.” In 1965 Grosman became a screenwriter for the acclaimed Barrandov Studios; in 1967 he received his doctorate in psychology.

Grosman emigrated to Israel the month following 1968’s Soviet-led invasion and occupation of Czechoslovakia. He spent the rest of his life teaching Slavic literature and creative writing at Bar-Ilan University.

ONE

The clouds dispersed as the anger of the sudden storm departed and the wind made the most of the respite, blowing and veering, buffeting them into odd shapes and chasing them all over the sky. Blue patches appeared above, lit up by the sun and by the reflection of fiery blows rising from the earth below.

Hammers were ringing on the anvil, clear and solemn like weighty bells of precious bronze. The clanging gave a new burst of energy to a flying stork. With joyful flapping of wings, it found a favorable current and took a short cut home to the nest. Swooping over the church steeple, over scattered shingle roofs and tin roofs, it rose in the air for one more view of the little town among the hills and then glided down in a steep dive, straight for the nest, encouraged by the children calling from the road: "Storks are homing, babies coming!" The great black and white bird lowered its legs, gave a last flap of its wings, and settled on the straggly nest near the smithy.

This left the children free to watch the bearded smith in his big leather apron and to admire his bold sleight of hand as he seized a horse's leg. The inexperienced foal jerked its head and reared, struggling to escape the relentless grip. The mare harnessed to a farm cart a few feet away neighed angrily, but the foal resisted the fire and the paring knife.

Wisps of blue smoke twisted up from the scorched hoof. "Scram!" The smith turned on the children. "Get out of here and find someplace else to play." As if they were in his way! Still, it was never wise to be around when Balko the smith got worked up, and so the kids went off.

Hell-fire and brimstone,
Let the smith pass;
The pony's broken loose
And kicked him in the ass!

They chanted in chorus; he wasn't going to get away with it. One voice started and the rest took it up, even the tiniest. There were seven of them at play, barefoot little urchins darting to and fro, grandchildren of the drummer from the yard, the tobacconist's kids, and some from the neighboring cottages. A girl, pigtail flapping and her skirt above her knees, was hopping along with a jump rope.

The children started chasing each other, jumping up and down and squealing as they swerved round the linden trees on the edge of the sidewalk. The smallest of the lot, a freckled boy of six or so with short, bristly hair, tried to get possession of the jump rope by tickling the back of the girl's neck, just under the plait of hair. She hung on to her precious toy, and they started a tug of war, back and forth, pulling and tugging, the others taking sides and shouting encouragement, until all at once the boy jerked backward and fell on his backside. Laughter and wails mingled, and the children disappeared like thieves behind the yard gate.

The little girl was left on the street, skipping first on one foot and then on the other and then both together. She stood still for a minute, pitying a little donkey drawing a huge barrel of stable manure. The poor little thing could hardly put one foot before the other; it was no use the driver's yelling "Gee up! Gee up!" as though testing his voice in order to keep his own spirits up. It was hot, and the sun beat mercilessly down.

The sound of the boys shouting in the yard brought the girl in after them. With a hop, a skip, and a jump she went over to the ladder and the makeshift dog kennel, hens and chickens clucking and flapping round her feet, and didn't stop until she had reached the line of snowy wash hanging between two old walnut trees.

The carpenter appeared in the shadow of the half-open door on the other side of the yard. The children could not be sure Brtko's wife would not appear, too, heftier and more

to be feared. Brtko scratched behind one ear, wondering, probably, whether to bother to hear his wife out to the end.

"It won't cost you anything and they can't bite your head off." Her voice came from within the kitchen.

"We'll see," he answered. "It's no good forcing things, Eveline, and I'm not going on my knees to them, neither."

He stepped out.

The dog squeezed out between his master's felt boots and shot over to the children on the grass. He was a mongrel, white with a yellow smudge over his right eye.

As the door slammed, the little girl's voice rose in greeting: "Praise be to the Lord!"

Brtko the carpenter turned to face the children, one hand making sure his folding rule was in its right place in his back pocket. The children said nothing. The carpenter straightened his baize apron over his chest and scratched his short hair thoughtfully. "For ever and ever, amen," he mumbled in the direction of the little girl crouching on the grass with the rest, watching the scene as though it were a play.

"Nugget!" Brtko called the dog to him, and they went out of the yard together. A train whistled not far off.

The smith at his open forge was too busy to break off and chat with him, even if Brtko had had it in mind to stop; but he was in a hurry, too. As he passed the low cottage windows, he peered into some and found the dark dwellings uncared-for and deserted.

There was something up, although nobody else in the street seemed to notice it. Even the dog looked up at his master, puzzled. Brtko checked on the time, in case he had made a mistake, and shook his head uncomprehendingly. All the years he had lived near the station he had never known them to close the level crossing at this hour of the day.

It was a train—a special train, not in the timetable, and it roared past as though the engine driver were afraid he'd be in for it if he didn't reach the end of the world before sunset.

Brtko and the dog stepped back a few paces. Dust and noise came swirling out from under the wheels, and the military train blocked their view of the main street beyond the line. Nugget gave vent to his dissatisfaction in short barks, but in the dreadful uproar Brtko could not hear him; he could only see the angry jerking, and it irritated him all the more. Trucks loaded with guns and manned by soldiers in camouflage uniforms flashed by as the train clattered past at speed.

At last the brake van at the end of the train roared away out of sight, and they both felt relieved. The sun came out from behind the clouds.

The one-armed tobacconist was sitting beneath his enamel TOBACCONIST AND OFFICIAL STAMPS sign, staring out at the sleepy street. It was all he could do to keep awake in the afternoons; as soon as the days grew warm, he would drag his shabby old cane chair out and sit in the sun. He came to slowly, not realizing at first that the dog was by him. "Naughty dog," he said with a little smile.

"Hi there, Gejza," the carpenter called out.

"Woke me up, he did—the devil take him. You're not getting anything out of me today, mate."

The man was pleased at how the dog pricked up his ears, looking from one to the other as if he knew it was all put on for his benefit.

"Not even a pinch of backy for a pipe?"

"Not a single pinch."

"Not even enough to roll a ciggie?"

"No."

"Oh, come on, just a pinch."

"No."

“Not even a fag end?”

“No, no, no!”

Then the scene reached its climax: as the tobacconist repeated his determined refusal, Nugget gave three short, sharp barks, and the two friends laughed, seeing that their joke had worked yet again.

Nugget had played his role, sitting up and begging in order to soften the tobacconist’s heart. Brtko took three cigarettes from the case generously held out towards him and slipped them into his breast pocket.

Between the butcher’s shop and the municipal weigh-bridge the dogs were waiting for their share of the bones. The horse-drawn cart had come out of the slaughterhouse yard, and it was high time. Today there was a bigger pack than usual—rumors of a generous hand must have been spread from kennel to kennel all over the town. Sensing the greater risk of competition, the dogs were getting irritable and worrying the mare.

Growling angrily and impatiently, the dogs demanded their customary rights.

The butcher’s assistant stood in the doorway in his white apron, a bucket under his arm, and waited for the right moment to throw the next lot of bones into the middle of the pack.

Brtko was uneasy and took good care to keep an eye on Nugget, the only dog not rushing at the prize. He stood there waiting for the word, hard though it was for him. “Go!” Brtko gave the order at a moment when the dogs were all busy with another lot of bones and failed to notice one that had fallen to one side. Nugget leaped through the air and landed right on his target.

“Good times ahead, it seems,” said his master, dreamily watching the busier end of the street, near the square.

Brtko turned impatiently as the sound of a trumpet rang out. The trumpeter—as yet unseen though no one could

miss the sound of him-seemed to be intent on drowning out the noise of the street with his blaring instrument. Obviously this was no ordinary occasion. The dragoons had only been quartered in the town a few days before.

The people on the sidewalks stood still, and the windows were in full bloom with women's heads fair and dark and smiling girls' faces. The trumpet sounded even louder, and round the corner came the village priest riding a bicycle. Behind him, as though the figure in a cassock had a secret mission to show the soldiers which way to follow, rode an officer, erect in the saddle. Then down the narrow trough of the street flowed the stream of hussars, two by two, in time to the march, as though the most important thing in the world was the impression they were making on the onlookers and the remarks being passed on the elegance of their trotting.

With smiling faces, the dragoons returned the greetings waved from the windows and sidewalks, but the trumpeter blew into the sounding brass with cheeks puffed out, no thought for the approving nods and cries of the onlookers, no eye for Brtko and his dog, not even for the barefoot imps of mischief.

Into the thud of hooves, the sound of the church bells fell softly. There were three grey pigeons on the steeple roof, and the hands of the black clock in the shadow of the steeple pointed to five.

In the middle of the busy street, Brtko stopped to compare his watch with the steeple clock and then felt free to enjoy the sight of people strolling up and down Main Street; things were getting livelier by the minute.

For a while he watched the carefree boys with their girls in flowered dresses. Then his gaze came to rest on an extraordinary hat; the wearer was taking her little dog for a walk, and the worst of it was that Brtko had forgotten all about his. The lady was incensed: "Keep him on the lead,

can't you? Tessie, Tessie darling, come along nicely, now. There's a good girl. Shoo!"

It was nothing but a harmless flirtation, limited on the part of Nugget to a few sniffs and longing glances. Brtko begged pardon in endless apologetic bows and embarrassed smiles, backing helplessly until he hit a stroller. Then, seized by a sudden interest in the curly-headed girl in the baby carriage, he tickled it under the chin, making funny noises and snapping his fingers for his own delight as much as for the mother's. Nugget was at his heels, displaying an equally fascinated interest in a black and white flock of nuns tripping with shy feet hidden beneath full skirts and fingers clasped round their rosaries. Eight of them, two by two, passed along Main Street, and the people made way for these women who had forsworn the delights of this world. Brtko ran a finger round under his collar trying to dig out the curiously uneasy feeling it gave him to think about them.

His carpenter's ear detected in the noise around him the familiar ring of axes, the thud of hammers, and the groan of planes. This clatter so dear to his heart was coming from a timber pyramid soaring up in the middle of the square, an amazing monument to pride and arrogance, its gleaming white tip high above the tops of the chestnut trees round the square.

The pyramid thrust up and up like a white tongue eager to lick the blue paint off the sky. Brtko slapped his knee and whistled through his fingers, for this was one of those moments when he wanted the dog by his side.

Nugget seemed to have decided he'd had enough of waiting for his hesitant master and set out to point the way forward himself. Even so, from time to time he turned to make sure he had not gone too far ahead. Bumping against a soldier's jack boot and rubbing softly against a girl's calf, he sat down on his slim rump and pricked up his ears.

“After him, boys!”

“Come on, let’s get ’im!”

They might mean him; he had better be careful. Even Brtko felt in his self-conscious way that they might mean him. In the end it was only a game, the boys showing off in front of their girls. Brtko scratched the dog’s ears and put on a determined, decided expression, tossing his head. “Ice cream, ice cream” came from a sunburned fellow in a red fez, pushing his ice-cream cart almost at the double, and furiously ringing the little brass bell tied to the handlebar. “Ice cream! Ice cream!” Then Brtko left behind him the tinkling bell and the hoarse cries of the local Turk.

He walked around the perimeter of the square with careful attention, as though he and his dog had been given a secret mission to record the smallest detail concerning the building of the pyramid. Brtko seemed to be calling on all his powers of invention and his craftsman’s skill in order to commit to memory the testimony he would later be called upon to provide. He made a conscientious note of the comings and goings on the building site, considered the breadth of the base and the way each storey was being laid on top of the one below. From this distance, he could not recognize the faces of the men working there, but he could see them impatiently passing beams and planks. Against the white of the scaffolding, they looked like big black ants.

Brtko knew well enough what a job it must be to set up a monster like that. The very proportions of this pyramid suggested a pagan Moloch overwhelming mere man with awe. The carpenter made no secret of his admiration; or was it just the uneasiness that we feel when faced with some mighty exotic creature, incalculable and therefore dangerous, that made him walk more quickly?

He had made a tour of the square and suddenly did not know what to do next. He stretched out a hand toward the pyramid and then, catching the eye of a chimney sweep