

The Shop on Main Street (Obchod na korze)

Author: Ladislav Grosman

First Published: 1965

Translations: German (*Der Laden auf dem Korso*, 1967), Hebrew (1969), English (*The Shop on Main Street*, 1970), Swedish (*Butiken vid storgatan*, 1981), Polish (*Sklep przy głównej ulicy*, 1993)

Film Adaptation: *Obchod na korze* (The Shop on Main Street/The Shop on the High Street); feature film, screenplay Ladislav Grosman, Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos; film directors Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos, premiered 7 October 1965

About the Author: Ladislav Grosman (1921–1981), came from a Slovak Jewish family, went through various labor camps during the WW II and eventually, escaped before being transported to the extermination camps and thus had to hide-out for the rest of the war. After 1945, he studied in Prague and worked as an editor and screenwriter, publishing in both Slovak and Czech. In October 1968 Grosman emigrated to Israel where he taught at Bar-Ilan University. Jewish and especially Holocaust topics played an important role in his works.

Further Important Publications: *Nevěsta* (1969, translated to English, *The Bride*, 1970, short stories); *Hlavou proti zdi* (1976, Head against the Wall, short stories); *Z pekla štěstí* (The Devil's Own Luck, 1994); *Povídky* (2018, Short Stories, summary edition).

Content and Interpretation

The geographical setting of the story is an unspecified provincial city in Eastern Slovakia. The author took this image from his hometown of Humenné. The temporal setting seems to be the summer of 1942 when the first wave of Jewish transports from Slovakia was organised, but the novel doesn't have any precise historical date. The main figure is a small man that is not overly interested in politics or in public events – who is a naïve Tono Brtko, a carpenter. He instinctively resents the Slovak Fascists and the war and keeps himself away from this ruling group. But he is not active and brave enough to fight against the regime. He wants “to survive and stay out of trouble” (Hames, 2005, p. 38). He likes walking his dog and chatting with neighbors. Brtko's brother-in-law, Markus Kolkocký, is the leader of the local Hlinka Guard (the Slovak Fascist organization) and Brtko's simple wife Evelína is very greedy and pushy. Therefore, Brtko involuntarily becomes the so-called Aryaniser. He acquires a small, worthless and insolvent haberdashery store on the main street belonging to the old Jewish widow Rozálie Lautmanová. Brtko is a good person at heart and does not like conflict, therefore he helps the old Jewess serve customers. He pretends to be her shop assistant, while at home he makes out to be a strict and ruthless Aryaniser.

Mrs. Lautmanová seems completely unaware of anything around her. The almost 80 year old and near-deaf Jewish woman doesn't perceive the outside world any more. She doesn't know that Jews are being persecuted. The novel presents for a long time an idyllic life of a small town: the colourful local market, the fire-brigade and its concerts on the main square, walking people on Sundays on the promenade. The Jewish Mutual Aid Society supports Tono Brtko financially, because Mrs. Lautman's shop doesn't bring anything in. Tono befriends a little neighbour boy, Danko (Daniel) Eliáš, and teaches him carpentry. The name has a symbolic meaning (Jewish prophet Daniel protected by an angel in the lions' den). Danko is also saved at the end of story.

But this lovely idyllic and relaxed mood comes to an end in the last chapter of the novel. The Jews from the city and neighbouring regions are lined up for a transport. Brtko's friend Kucharský, who is involved in the resistance, is labelled as a "White Jew" (someone who helps and protects Jews). He is brutally beaten, arrested and deported. Moreover, Brtko's wife Evelína isn't satisfied with the money that Tono Brtko brings in. She knows the Jews should be transported and she wants more Jew jewelry and gold.

From now on, Brtko's dual existence can't continue. He decides to save Mrs. Lautmanová and shelter her. However, Čarný, the Fascist, starts shadowing Brtko, who finds himself under increasing pressure. The next morning Kolkotský manages the gathering of the Jews on the square close Brtko's shop. The idyllic square becomes an *appelplatz* (Šmatlák, 2008, 89). Rozálie Lautmanová is forgotten due to a bureaucratic error. Nevertheless, Brtko assumes that this is really just a clever move on the part of his hated brother-in-law who will then designate him also as a Jew lover and exponent and thus permanently get rid of him. Thus he convinces the old lady to go out to the square and join the deportees in transport. He argues, that is the law: "Mrs. Lautman! The world is run this way now... there are special laws for Jews" (Grosman, 1970, p. 117).

Later he regrets this and tries to save her. At first, Rozálie Lautmanová does not understand anything. But then she realises what is happening and is scared. Tono Brtko tries to hide her in a backroom by force and accidentally kills her while shoving her into her hiding place. Then he goes completely insane and commits suicide by hanging himself.

Main Topics and Film Adaptation

The novel depicts the drama of a person (Brtko) who is roped into a dilemma, an oppressive, irresolvable position through no fault of his own. Brtko is a by-stander who is forced to reveal his attitude and has to act. He is not a hero, but a little desperate man. Consequently, he reacts in a chaotic way. At first, he wants to get rid of Mrs. Lautman. At second, he tries to rescue her.

The other protagonist, the old widow Lautmanová, lives in isolation and is turned to her past. Annette Insdorf expresses her opinion, that Lautmanová's "deafness is symbolic of the Jewish victims who are either unable to or refuse to comprehend what is happening to them" (Insdorf, 2003, p. 165). A part of the text depicts not only dramatic and grotesque but also imaginative scenes with hints of image of paradise. The last night before their death, Tono Brtko dreams Rozálie and he are walking on the main street promenade. Both of them are youthful, happy and carefree.

In this dream sequence, the idyllic mood returns, at least in Tono Brtko's mind. In the novel, this scene precedes the final situation in the shop, the death of Lautmanová and the suicide of Brtko. At the end, it is noted, "so it's quite possible they are both up there now, promenading along the Main Street of Heaven" (Grosman, 1970, p. 122).

The novel *The Shop on Main Street* was made world-famous by the film adaptation directed by Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos, which apart from other things won the American Academy Award for the best foreign film in 1965 (in the U.S. it was released as *The Shop on the High Street*). Unlike Grosman's novel, the film presents important new motifs (storks over the town, the city prison and military trains) that symbolise the atmosphere and tension of the time. Prisoners walking in the dark prison yard become people promenading in the sunshine on Main Street. In the film, Brtko's vision at the end repeats twice. The second time is a long scene at the very end of the film. After Brtko takes his own life, the door of the shop opens. Rozálie and Tono appear, both gracefully dressed in white. They smile at each other. They slowly walk Main Street, they almost float and dance across the square.

Both leading actors, Jozef Kroner (Brtko) and Ida Kamińska (Lautmanová), won international awards (for instance in Cannes). Kroner underlined the farcical aspects of the story. Sixty five

year old Ida Kamińska was the manager, producer and leading actress at the State Jewish Theatre in Warsaw. It was her first important film role. *The Shop on Main Street* where she was speaking both Polish and Yiddish and praying in Hebrew, made her famous. After Grosman emigrated to Israel and Kadár to the U.S. at the end of the Sixties, the novel as well as the film were accused of “Zionism” and his works were banned in Czechoslovakia.

Despite its tragic end, the important parts of the novel are the comic and grotesque scenes. Tono Brtko is a clownish figure resembling Charlie Chaplin. Dialogues between Brtko and the half-deaf Lautmanová cause comic misunderstandings. So the novel is a mixture of dramatic and comic situations. Similar to Jiří Weil’s →*Life with a Star*, Josef Škvorecký’s →*The Menorah* or Arnošt Goldflam’s → *Sweet Theresienstadt* where grotesquerie and black humor are present. Such literary devices are a part of the Czech(oslovak) as well as the Central European cultural tradition of the subversive comic and Jewish jokes that were presented in the fictional world create a vision of non-reality, which liberates the reader. So through the integration of comic modes, a more complicated and effective fictional world is able to be created, distant from the traditional representation of this topic.

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