

BEHIND THE BRICK WALL

by

Tibor Dery

Tibor Dery, now 62, is one of the great Hungarian prose writers of his generation. A veteran Communist, he spent many years in exile, was persecuted by the Horthy regime on his return to Hungary. The author of two novels published after the war, "The Unfinished Sentence" and "Answer," he was the object of extremely violent attacks from orthodox, "Zhdanovist" quarters. Dery later took part in the Petofi Circle discussions, and his forthright attacks on Stalinist perversions of socialism led to his expulsion from the party, on the direct instructions of Rakosi. There were many protests—from the Communist group of the Writers' Association, journalists and others—and the storm contributed to Rakosi's downfall.

Dery played an important part in the Writers' Association during the Hungarian uprising. After the Soviet intervention, he was elected a member of the Revolutionary Council of Intellectuals, along with the composer Z. Kodaly and the physicist Lajos Ganosy. He was imprisoned by the Kardar regime in January, released, and arrested again in April, when the Writers' Association was dissolved.

The following story (which is translated from the French) takes as its theme thefts committed in the factories by workers who could not live on their wages alone, and reveals the human background—the profound resentment against excessive norms, and bureaucratic administration—which sparked the revolt of the workers in large industrial areas such as Czepel. Written in 1955, censorship prevented its publication until 25th August, 1956, in "Trodalmi Ujsag."

COMRADE BODI left Karoly Brock Street, which leads to the main gate of the factory, turned into the first side-street, and a few minutes later came out onto the bank of the Danube. He still had half-an-hour before him until the relief of the night shift by the morning shift. He had time to take a stroll and enjoy the early spring sunshine. He had a head-ache.

Across the Danube, in Pest, there was outlined the long row of dust-coloured warehouses, and, further off, the bridge above which seagulls slowly wheeled. The wind was blowing strongly from the west, ruffling the river and chasing the filth and dust along the water's edge. When the gusts became more violent, yellow dust-clouds suddenly arose, darkening the sun. The river's edge, left derelict, was littered with rubbish. Some way off, beside the water, a stray dog, shaggy and emaciated, sniffed at some dried-up filth and watched uneasily as the man approached.

At this spot the high red brick wall which surrounds the factory broke the force of the wind a little. Rubbish strewed the ground beneath the wall, but at least one's eyes and mouth were not filled with sand when the wind blew too hard. Comrade Bodi stopped a moment, his back to the wind. He leaned against the wall, turning to the sun his thin face with its day's growth of beard. Just as he was about to set off again he noticed, right by his foot and partly covered by the sand brought by the last gust of wind, a brand new piece of leather belting. It was twelve or fifteen inches long. Comrade Bodi picked it up, examined it, then went on his way with the thick piece of leather in his hand.

He had hardly gone a few steps when another piece of strap fell in front of him, almost brushing his cap, and coming from the other side of the brick wall. A third and fourth followed, curving in a great arc over the wall. Comrade Bodi examined them for a few moments, and then continued on his way. On the other side of the wall was a low storeroom attached to the workshops.

Bodi made his way straight to the cloakroom. Every morning he slipped on a pair of oil-stained overalls to save his clothes.

"What's this?" asked a metal-worker, sitting on a bench where Bodi was changing.

"What?"

The worker, with a jerk of his leg had just shaken off his shoe. His yellow big toe was poking through his sock. He took the sock off carefully, and held it UD between two fingers

"What's this?"

Comrade Bodi averted his head slightly. "Are you talking to me?" he asked.

"Yes, what's this?" the worker repeated, waving the sock in front of Bodi's face.

Bodi turned away his head even more. "Take it away," he said quietly.

"Don't you know what it is?" asked the worker. "It's the Sock of the New Man."

The night shift was already leaving the workshop. Some workers greeted Bodi, others did not. Some had known Bodi all the twenty years he had been working at this factory, yet they passed without a word. Bodi went across the yard, where again the wind lashed his face. Here it seemed denser, more solid, because of the litter suspended in it. In another part of the works, employees were arriving one by one at the central office. Comrade Bodi reached the office in his turn.

Behind the desk was a corpulent man, whose face was marked by illness, yellow and puffy beneath the eyes and with flabby wrinkled jowls. Bodi greeted him. The man nodded curtly, then asked: "What's wrong this time?"

"They're stealing the belting now," said Bodi.

The fat man said nothing.

"I saw it with my own eyes."

"Where?"

"Shop No. 4," said Bodi. "They're throwing them over the wall. I was strolling at the back of the factory."

The two men stared at each other without speaking.

"Makes leather to mend their shoes," said the fat man, the corners of his mouth twisting in a slight sarcastic grimace.

An old man with eye-glasses, tall and stooping, came into the office. He gave a humble greeting, and then, as if expecting a kick in the rear, fled precipitately into the next room. Two workers followed him; one, a slight girl with dimples, had a face as fresh as a peony—as if she had been picking peonies that very morning in her garden at Pestszentlorinc, before setting off for the factory. Comrade Bodi waited until the door was once more shut, then put on the desk a hand worn to a blueish-white, the nails cut right down to the finger.

"It can't go on like this," he continued. "No, it can't go on like this. It's obvious that it's impossible. Good God! It can't go on like this any longer."

"I'll see to it," said the fat man, with a tired air, gazing at the door through which the peony-girl had disappeared.

As he retraced his steps, Bodi had the wind behind him. An empty oil drum started to roll and struck against the wall of the petrol stores. The wind was fresh, a fine Spring wind. The workshop windows set up such a rattling that one could scarcely make out the din of the mechanical hammers.

In the workshop someone was waiting for Bodi. He worked in a corner of the assembly shop, in a glassed-in cubicle through the door of which so much soot and dust came in that at night they had coal-black faces and their hair was gritty with metal dust. The place was full of people waiting or jostling each other. The foreman was standing by the window, immersed in reading some document, his glasses pushed up on to his forehead. The man who was waiting for Bodi was standing with his head bent; he was slouched against the wall and did not look up until Bodi took his place behind the desk.

"Hello, Ferenc," said Bodi.

The man took a pace forward.

"What's up?"

"Do you know what's going on?"

Comrade Bodi looked at the work-sheet the man was holding out to him, and which was shaking beneath his eyes.

"Of course you know," the man went on, "since you are responsible for it. What the hell does this mean?"

Comrade Bodi examined the sheet more closely. "Don't get excited, Ferenc," he said.

The paper continued to shake.

"But how can you think this stuff up?" the man continued in a low voice, so low that one could hardly hear it for the rattling of the windows. "With this norm I shan't even earn enough to live on cold water. A minute and a half per piece! How can you think up such things?"

"Don't get excited, Ferenc," said Comrade Bodi.

The man put the paper down on the desk. "How did you arrive at this figure?" he went on, his voice still low. "Just give me some idea how it's possible. If you can show me, I won't say another word and I'll go back to my bench. But show me how you arrived at it."

"In the mornings from now on"—said Bodi—"you won't have to wait until materials arrive. You ought to gain half an hour from that alone."

"You think! so?" said the man, ironically. "What next?"

Bodi avoided his eyes. "You know it's necessary, Ferenc," he said. "Our production costs are too high, we are eating into our reserves. Our expenses are so heavy that . . ."

"Is that so?"

Bodi looked at him out of the corner of his eye, to see if he was being sarcastic. "That is so," he replied. "I'm speaking in earnest. Don't be funny."

"Funny?" said the man.

There was silence. Comrade Bodi watched the door which had just opened; no doubt it was a visitor for him. He folded the paper that was on the desk.

"Just work out how much I take home," the man went on. "Don't give me that paper back. Just work it out. See what I get deducted and see what I'll take home to Boske and the three kids. Work it out!"

"Put your back into it, Ferenc," said Bodi. "You'll have made it up inside a month." As he got no reply, he raised his head and looked at the other's face. Ferenc was looking him in the eyes for the first time since the beginning of the interview. Comrade Bodi turned away his head. The man turned on his heel and, without a word, left the cubicle.

"There goes a man who has no love for you," remarked the typist near Bodi.

When a few minutes later Bodi walked through the workshop again—the manager had just sent for him on the 'phone—he noticed that the bench of the man with whom he had just been talking was empty. The wind snatched the workshop door violently from his grasp, and carried off his cap towards a puddle of oily water that had remained in a hollow of the clayey soil

since the rain of the previous week. Two apprentices sniggered as they saw the cap bowling along towards the puddle. A third, who was coming towards Bodi, could have put out his hand or foot to stop it, but seeing Bodi running he looked another way. The two apprentices burst into guffaws. The cap fell in the greasy water. Bodi shook it and went on with slow steps. He had a feeling that the others were staring after him.

On his way back from the manager's, he came round the central office, and, behind the metal shop, in a narrow alley between the red brick wall and the workshop — a spot where people rarely went — he let himself slowly to the ground, his back against the wall. His head was splitting. The world seemed dark around him, his eyes throbbled, misted over with tears from the pain, his forehead ran with sweat.

Usually his attacks came on in the evening, between eight and ten o'clock. Occasionally he suffered during the day as well, but the worst pains did not usually come on until the evening, at supper or after, when he was at home or elsewhere. For two years now he had not gone out, neither after work nor after his meal, except on the days when he had a Party meeting. On Sundays he stayed in bed, for on that day the pain never left him. Then he tried all kinds of analgesics: aspirin, various brands of pills and sedatives—in short, the whole range of special cures. What gave him most relief was to lie down with his head hanging off the bed.

Here, behind the workshop where no-one came, he told himself he could rest for just a quarter of an hour. He stretched himself at full length. He was at the foot of the wall, well sheltered from the wind which crept into the alley, sometimes raising dense clouds of dust. He rested his neck on a brick and tilted his head backwards. Above him long boat-shaped clouds sped so quickly across the blue sky that they made him dizzy. "I'll shut my eyes," he said to himself. As he shut his eyes the wind whistled in his ears. Go back again to the doctor? What for? For two years he had trailed from one hospital to another. At first the doctors suspected a tumour on the brain: examinations of the back of his eyes, X-rays of his skull, his brain. Then he had been sent to the nerve specialist. Then to the general section. Six months before they took a cisternal puncture. "Undress and don't worry. I am going to insert a needle in the nape of your neck. It won't hurt you. Don't move or the prick could cause a fatal lesion. It will only hurt for a moment, don't be afraid. And now, be calm." He had not felt much pain, but when the thick needle had been plunged into his neck he had experienced a sensation which he would never forget. It was worse than anything he had endured until then.

"What did the old man want with you?" asked the foreman, pushing his glasses onto his forehead when Comrade Bodi was back in the cubicle.

Bodi shrugged.

"Production costs?"

"Yes, he talked about that."

"What else?"

"The thefts."

"Those are our fault, I suppose?"

"Of course," said Bodi. "I am a member of the council for discipline."

"That's a big leg up."

"He's right," Bodi continued. "I am not active enough, I just gape about, I lack vigilance, enthusiasm. He's right."

"You think so?"

"Yes," replied Bodi. "I think he's right."

"What are you shutting your eyes for?" asked the foreman. "Are you in pain? What's up with you?"

"Nothing's wrong with me. Nothing at all."

The foreman stepped towards Bodi. "Your dial's all blue, you look like a corpse."

Comrade Bodi began to laugh. "No, really I'm fine. By the way, yesterday was Karcsi Olajos' trial."

"The fool! What did he get?"

"Six months."

The foreman looked at Bodi without a word. His round Magyar face, with its little stiff moustache, had gone white with rage.

"There's a fine bloody story to take around," he said after a pause. "Six months! What an article for the wall newspaper! Bloody hell! Six months for a few yards of copper wire! How many yards was it?"

"Four or five," said Comrade Bodi.

"Bloody fool!" exclaimed the foreman. "What a mug! He gets himself in jug for six months over five yards of copper wire. No appeal?"

"No appeal."

The foreman looked out of the window, in front of which two labourers were noisily dragging a wheelbarrow full of scrap. "Nothing will stop them," he muttered. "What a fool, that chap, all the same. What did he want the copper wire for?"

"To hang out his washing," Bodi said. "Copper doesn't leave rust marks on the washing."

The next day they arrested one of those who had stolen the belting, a turner of about forty, together with his accomplice. The latter was an old labourer who worked in the workshop store. He

had been cutting the straps and hiding them under his overcoat. The Party organisation called a meeting at once in the main workshop. The manager and the Party secretary were there. Three or four hundred men were assembled in the middle of the vast workshop, around a big drawing table.

The two culprits were made to stand on the table. The turner, motionless, his face chalk-white, arms dangling, looked down at the table-top, covered by a sheet of rusty tin-plate, at his feet. Beside him the old labourer looked uneasily around the silent crowd. Now and again he smiled: he obviously did not grasp what had happened to him. On his bald head he wore a canary-coloured beret which he kept shifting backwards and forwards. He seemed tired from working all night, and he rested his weight on each foot in turn, moving his old lined face to right and left, as if to beg for help. Above his head the factory loud-speaker was pouring out jolly marching-tunes.

Comrade Bodi's speech lasted only a few minutes. The workers listened, without moving, sullen-faced. When between his slowly-spoken sentences there was a brief pause, the scraping of the old labourer's iron heel on the metal plate on the table could be heard throughout the workshop. As Bodi was speaking other workmen arrived from near-by shops and the crowd around the table grew more and more tightly packed. Above the table the arm of a crane had stopped and five or six men stood in the idle bucket, just above the two thieves. The turner was motionless, sweat ran down his forehead, while the old man continued to rock from one foot to the other and smile vacantly.

Just before the end of the meeting the canary-yellow beret slipped off the old man's head and fell on the floor. An old workman bent down to pick it up and put it on the table. In his confusion, the labourer rolled it up and pushed it deep into his trouser pocket. He forgot to take his hand out, and as the meeting came to an end one might have thought that he was listening to Comrade Bodi's speech unconcernedly, smiling, a hand in his pocket. Only those standing near the table were able to see that fear had made him wet his trousers.

Before the morning shift had finished work those in the workshop learned that the turner had committed suicide. He had hanged himself in the lavatories. He had made a noose with brass wire, climbed on the seat, then with his head in the noose had stepped off into space. When they found him his body was already cold.

"Well, what did you say at the meeting?" Mrs. Bodi asked her husband when he got home.

Comrade Bodi was stretched on the couch, his head hanging over the edge. He had his everyday migraine, but seemed calm,

The large room was lit only by a little lamp with a pink shade on the bedside table.

"But what could I have said?"

The pale, frail little woman was pacing up and down the room, wringing her hands. "My God! My God! The Lord will punish us," she wailed incessantly. "They will say it is your fault. What did you say?"

"I made the speech," said Bodi.

"Saying what?"

"What had to be said."

The little pale-faced woman went on wringing her hands, weeping continuously.

"Don't get so upset." said Bodi.

"What's that?"

"Don't get so upset. Sit down, you make me dizzy."

She sat down near him and placed a cold, bony hand on his forehead:

"What did you say?" she repeated.

"What had to be said."

"The Lord will punish us," said his wife. "Why did it have to be your job to speak?"

"The manager selected me."

"But why did it have to be you?"

Bodi did not reply.

"The good Lord will punish us," the woman went on. "Why did it have to be you?"

The man tilted his head still further back, just above the floor which glowed under the red light of the lamp. "I am a member of the council for discipline," he said, looking at the pallid face of his wife. "It was up to me to speak. I couldn't get out of it."

"What did you say?"

"Don't keep moving around like that," said Bodi. "You make me dizzy. Come and sit down again on the couch or take a chair."

The woman re-seated herself on the couch, at her husband's feet. "The good Lord will punish us," she said. "It was no job for you. You are too good, you'll make yourself ill. How did you speak?"

"With great care," said Bodi, looking up at his wife's face. "I mentioned all the things I knew in his favour."

"What?"

"That he was a first-class skilled man."

"The Lord will punish us," the woman repeated. "What else did you say?"

"I said that he had worked at the factory for fourteen years, I said that he had never missed a single day since he had been in our workshop, that he was a good time-keeper, that he

carried out all his commitments so far as his work was concerned."

"The Lord will punish us just the same," she said. "What else did you say?"

The man held his head between his hands. "I said that he had been a Party member since 1945, that he fulfilled honourably all the tasks that the Party entrusted to him, but that for some time he had done his political work with a bad grace. I said that Communists must set an example . . . That they must always be the first . . .

"Oh, I'm sure," said the woman. "You would say that."

". . . that they must set an example in production and also in discipline."

"Naturally," said the woman. "I can be sure you said that."

Comrade Bodi again gazed upon his wife's face. It was reddened by the lamp-light. "That's what I said," he muttered. "And I also said that when a Communist harms the State and does not respect socialist property, he is doubly criminal and has no place among honest workers."

"The good Lord will punish us," said the woman. "He stole because he wasn't earning enough."

Slowly the man lifted his head onto the couch. "They all say the same."

"Poor man! Just look at your own shoes!" said his wife.

"When will you have the money to buy yourself another pair?"

Comrade Bodi, instead of looking at his shoes, stared at his wife's face which had aged so much these last years. Their god-child, who was married in Miskolcz, had scarcely recognised her when she came to Budapest last winter.

"Go to bed," he said. "I'll sleep on the couch. Put off the light."

"Did anyone else speak?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"Two."

"What did they say?"

"They didn't say anything," muttered Bodi. "Go to bed. Put off the light. It had been agreed in advance. From among the workers no-one spoke."

"Because they all steal," said the woman. "Poor wretches. We are poor wretches too. When will the poor world have peace?"

Three days after the turner's suicide, at lunch-time, Comrade Bodi went to the narrow alley between the metal workshop and the red brick wall. He stretched himself out beneath the wall, his head resting on a piece of brick. He had a headache. A strong wind was blowing. From time to time a cloud of dust and rubbish arose, and when the lull came, fell back on the ground like a veil,

The sun went in and out behind the swift-moving clouds. Comrade Bodi remained stretched out for a moment, then got up, dusted his trousers and went towards the workshop. At the end of the alley a workman had his back towards him. He was carrying a big parcel under his arm. When he caught sight of Bodi he began to run. Bodi continued slowly on his way.

The man came back. "Denounce me, Bodi!" he said. "You bloody nark, denounce me!"

Bodi continued without faltering.

"You've seen me, you bastard," the man shouted. "Denounce me, then. Do you think it would matter to me? That I'm afraid to die? Denounce me!"

"I shan't denounce you," said Bodi.

"You're lying, you swine. I know your sort. I'd never forgive myself for running away from you. Come on, quick, to the police-station. Look, here's the proof. You're all a lot of bastards."

"Get to hell out of here," shouted Bodi.

The next day, Comrade Bodi did not go to the factory. He reported sick. He spent the whole day at home. He repaired the kitchen tap that was always dripping; he replaced the washer and packed it round with tow, then he went to see to some plumbing in a neighbouring workshop whose owner he knew. He worked until late in the afternoon. He had mended the foot of the kitchen table and polished the stove, which shone now like a mirror. The next day he bought two tins of white paint and painted all the kitchen furniture. He even put two coats on the dustbin, because the first coat was uneven. He remained at home a week, until the end of the month, and did not return until the first day of the next.

Arriving early, he left Karoly Brock Street, which leads to the main gate of the factory, turned into the first side-street, and a few minutes later came out onto the bank of the Danube. He still had half-an-hour before him until the relief of the morning-shift.

The Spring sunshine was warm and clear. The air, as if made of light and vibrant crystal, hung over the wide river. On the far bank—that of Pest—the long row of dust-coloured warehouses was framed, shimmering, in the crystal air. Further off, factory smoke-stacks rose black as far as the horizon in a sky empty of birds. The Danube flowed silently and no ripple disturbed its surface. If it had not been for the penetrating odour of ammonia coming from the works and the piles of rubbish on the sand, one would gladly have lain on the ground at the water's edge.

The red brick wall glowed in the sun. In an angle well beyond the store Bodi saw a piece of belting. He walked past and continued his 'way. A pleasant breeze was coming from the river, which every now and then drove away the stench of ammonia which came across the brick wall.

"Hello," said the foreman. "Are you better?"

"All right."

"Flu?"

"That's it."

The foreman rummaged among his papers. Me too—every year at this time I get 'flu. I'll have to take some 'Germicide.."

"That's what I took," said Bodi.

The foreman stood up, brought his steel-rimmed glasses down onto his nose, and went towards the door. As he passed Bodi gave him an affectionate pat on the back.

"Don't worry, old chap," he said. "We'll see the end of it. That right?"

"Of course," said Bodi.

"And the wife, is she still bearing up?"

"Not too bad."

"That's good!" said the foreman. He left the cubicle.

At the same moment a young girl came into the ill-lit place with a little dance-step, laughing aloud. She had a face as fresh as a peony—as if she had been picking peonies that very morning in her garden at Budafolk, before setting off for the factory.

Comrade Bodi gazed absently at her for a moment, then, without knowing it, gave a silent sigh, and sat down again behind his desk.

In the evening his wife had drawn the table up in front of the open window. This window looked out onto the island where the river's ship-building yards are.

"Do you like it?" she asked.

Comrade Bodi was very fond of pasta with cabbage. "Very good."

The woman poured out a glass of water for him and cut him a piece of bread.

"You haven't got a headache?"

"No."

"You haven't had any pain during the day either?"

Bodi thought for a moment. "No, I've had none."

"It make me laugh," said the woman a little later, "to think that you always have to have a piece of bread cut for you to eat with pasta and cabbage. For nearly eighteen years, isn't it? Because you eat bread with everything—soup, vegetables, all kinds of pasta, even with cakes."

The man looked at his wife's face, waiting to see what she would say next.

"You told me eighteen years ago, when I served your first meal: 'You know, love, I'm an eater of bread, I even eat it with pasta; I'd like bread always on the table, always a piece beside my plate'."

Comrade Bodi continued to gaze at his wife.

"For eighteen years now I've been cutting bread for you," she went on.

Bodi nodded his head: "That's true."

"Of course it's true," said the woman, laughing. "Eighteen years now. But you no longer eat what I cut."

Comrade Bodi looked at the piece of bread, untouched beside his plate. At his side his wife was laughing so much that her thin, faded face was suddenly filled with a youthfulness that effaced its lines.

"For years now you haven't eaten it. You sit down to the table, you look to see if there's bread by your plate, then you set about your pasta with a spoon. As for the bread, that stays where it is."

"It's true," said the man.

The woman laughed again. "You're getting old, Bodi."

"I must be," admitted the man.

"You're no longer an eater of bread."

The woman looked out of the window at the Danube, which shone with a dark brilliance.

"I believe you didn't have a headache yesterday, either. At least, I suspect so. You didn't lie on the couch and you didn't ask me for any medicine."

"Didn't I?"

"No. It must be at least four or five days since you asked for any. I've noticed it. Unless you've bought some yourself at the chemist's."

The man reflected. Staring in front of him, he shook his head. "No, I haven't bought any," he said. "You say that it's four or five days?"

"Thank God!" said the woman with a sigh. "Thank God! May the Lord be praised! Perhaps you won't need any tomorrow either."

"Perhaps," said Bodi.

He grew suddenly gloomy, stood up and went to the window.

"Perhaps," he repeated, morosely, as if to himself.