

**JÁNOS SZÉKELY**

**A NIGHT**

**That Began 700 Years Ago**

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### *In Which It Slowly Gets Dark*

He had been knocking on the door for five minutes, and still nobody seemed to hear it. He swore under his breath. What the devil is the matter with that girl? She could not have left the house -- where would she have gone? She can't let herself be seen in the streets. She can't even risk standing at the gate.

His eyes darted about nervously. If anybody happened to see him here ... today, of all days! He rapped on the door again.

"Julka!" he whispered. "Julka!"

No answer.

"By the seven sacraments!"

He remembered suddenly that the harvest hands had not reported for work all day, and that in that case, Garas was probably at home now. The blood rushes to his head. So that's why that slut doesn't open the door. She is waltzing in bed with that dirty peasant, doing the

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

bare-belly polka smirking and snickering. And he, stupid fool that he is, left a safe hiding place, hurried to this godforsaken spot two jumps beyond nowhere, just barely missed being nabbed by the gendarmes ... Why? Because he was worried for this little scatterbrained bitch, because he wanted to warn her in time that ...

He stepped away from the door angrily. Let the gendarmes take her! Let the devil take her! Let the skies come crashing down on this whole goddam village!

He walked away as though he planned to keep on going until he stood at the edge of the world, but he stopped at the well. She may be asleep, he thought, as if trying to appease himself. In the woods, too, when they had escaped from the gendarmes, she fell asleep under a bush and slept so tight that even the howling of the wolves did not wake her. She's asleep, sure, she's asleep, he assured himself, and he retraced his steps. He walked stealthily to the window of the room, but he gave another look around before he rapped on it.

The neighborhood seemed to be deserted. The

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

ramshackle cottage on the next lot, with its raggedy thatched roof, sweltered in the still murderous evening sun, its windows hidden under tightly closed shutters, like the dim eyes of a decrepit old horse behind their blinkers. Beyond the twisted, cracked picket fence, the street was emptier than a desert. The dust, this hateful, almost white Kákásd dust which felt like gravel in your mouth and like acid in your eyes, this "summer snow," as the villagers called it, was ankle-deep on the steep, winding road and lay in a thick coat over trees, shrubs, fences, roofs, everything, as if it were a real snowdrift. The very sky was the color of dust, low and hazy. Not a leaf was stirring in the midsummer calm. The sun already squinted like a bloodshot eye, partly from behind the vineyard-covered slope of the mountain, but the heat was still unbearable even here in the shade. The air quivered in the dense light, the walls poured forth the absorbed heat, the summer snow felt red hot under his feet.

He rapped on the window. At first, just softly, gently, lest the neighbors hear it, but then in his rage he

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

banged so strongly that he almost shattered the glass.

"Who's there?" yawned Julka inside.

"Me," he whispered.

"Marci?"

"No, the archbishop!" he snarled. "Come on, open up!"

"Wait a minute!"

"Why?"

"I'm stark-naked."

"So what?"

"The neighbors will see ... "

"There's nobody around."

The girl peeked out between the faded calico curtains.

"I'm coming." she waved.

The man grumbled crossly as he tiptoed back to the door. Why is she naked? Is she ...

The door opened. The girl was buttoning her dress, and as she bent forward in the doorway, her small, hard, brown breasts flashed between the buttons. The blood rushed to Marci's head. She's beautiful, he thought angrily and wished her to hell for being beautiful, for being desirable, for being so damned desirable.

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

"Are you alone?" he asked, his voice indifferent.

Julka nodded silently.

"Where's Garas?"

"In Göncöl."

"Did he leave just now?"

She shook her head. "No, at daybreak."

They spoke in a whisper, for Julka had not closed the door yet. She kept watching the neighboring house through a crack, to make sure that nobody was spying on them. Marci stood behind her, smelled her scent, that strange, heady, stifling and yet so singularly fresh Julka scent which was unlike the smell of any other woman, and he would have been unable to tell whether he wanted to kiss her or to kill her.

"He left at daybreak?" he asked sceptically.

"Yea, at daybreak," the girl repeated, then she suddenly turned around and from below her blue-black eyelashes she gave him a glance that was enough to drive a man out of his mind. "He won't be back till tonight." she whispered, with a sultry half-smile. "Till late tonight!"

## János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago

Under other circumstances, these words would have been enough to make the man, hot-headed as he was, grab her, throw her on the bed and not let her go till "late tonight." This time he neither spoke nor budged. Julka stared at him in stunned surprise. Only now did she notice how upset he was.

"Is there something wrong?" she asked, beginning to worry, and she closed the door.

"Lock it!" Marci grunted and looked around importantly, as if making doubly sure that there was no eavesdropper around. Then he said, "The gendarmes are coming."

The girl turned white to the roots of her hair.

"Gawd O-mighty!" she screamed, reverting to the **gypsy accent**<sup>1</sup>, as she always did when under emotional

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- <sup>1</sup> The characters refer to themselves as "gypsies" throughout the novel. Since there is no indication in the book which ethnic group they might belong to, the term "gypsy" is used and is to be understood in its historical context. In his novel *Kísértés (Temptation)*, János Székely also uses the Hungarian term *cigány*, which translates as "gypsy". It can

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

pressure. "Gawd O-mighty, help me!"

"Stop bawling!" he barked at her. "Do you want the neighbors to hear it?"

He did not have to watch his accent. He was a Hungarianized gypsy, a housebroken gypsy, a small-town band leader, who spoke a half-peasant, half-gentleman idiom, but in his heart of hearts he was no more a peasant than he was a gentleman, a burgher or a laborer, and as for being a gypsy, he was a gypsy as much as a potted palm in a café is a palm even though it sprouts cigarette butts instead of coconuts. But he was a handsome fellow, a good-looking six-footer, and the only thing to make him ugly was that he was too well aware of his good looks. The way he flaunted his maleness was almost womanly. He sported a heart-breaker pencil mustache, like his favorite film stars, he wore second-hand tuxedos of second-rate gentlemen, and when he wanted to impress a girl, as now, he sported their second-hand manners. With an air of

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be assumed that the same word served  
as a basis here.



## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

incredible haughtiness, he threw himself on a chair, aping an estate overseer who is aping a *huszár* officer, then he crossed his legs daintily and relished the fright of Julka, as if fright were something utterly alien to his character.

"There's no reason to faint away!" he said in a lazy, nasal voice. "Don't be scared so long as I'm around!"

Julka *was* scared. And she had every reason to be.

"When are they coming?" she asked excitedly.

"The gendarmes?" Marci already half-believed that he was really the swashbuckling daredevil with nerves of steel he pretended to be. "Tonight," he said with the imperturbability of a soldier of fortune. "The village will never forget this night."

"Are they earning because of the strike of the harvest hands?"

"That's it! The pox on those strike-happy peasants! Didn't I tell you we'll be sorry for it? Now they're bringing the gendarmes down on our necks!"

"Holy Mother of God!" Julka burst out in tears. "Where will we run to?"

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

"Where can we run to? The highways are full of German soldiers. We must hide out right here. This is the safest spot yet." "But where?"

Marci watched the terrified, sobbing girl, and he was obviously satisfied with the effect of his words.

"You," he said evasively, adjusting his brand-new rayon socks, "don't have to worry. Your darling Garas will hide you. You'll be all right, he'll hide you well. The old fox won't let his chicken dinner go."

He spoke with dispassionate sarcasm, as though he were not speaking of Julka, but of some other girl who meant nothing to him. Julka did not speak. She just kept sobbing softly, avoiding the eyes of the man. Bitch! he cursed wordlessly and stared at the small, pointed breasts of the girl which kept flexing against the thin calico gown as she sobbed on.

"When do you expect Garas?"

"He said he'd be back by ten."

"Then you have nothing to worry about. The gendarmes won't get here till after midnight."

"How do you know?"

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

"I overheard the men from the estate this afternoon."

"Where?"

"In the whorehouse."

"Don't tell me you're playing even afternoons now."

"We're playing even in our sleep these days," Marci gestured derisively. "Ever since the Germans took over the town, the whorehouse doesn't close even in the morning. The Nazis stand in line, day and night, like in front of a butcher shop. Some of them are on their way to the front, others just got back from there. There are some who don't even wash the blood off their paws, and after the third drink they're raving maniacs."

"Aren't you scared of them?"

"I'm not the scary kind," shrugged Marci.

"But you're a gypsy." There was a slight peculiar edge to her voice. "And in the eyes of the Germans a gypsy is no better than a Jew."

"Not a gypsy musician, though."

"That's what you think."

"Well, you see that they have never bothered me yet."

"Perhaps they think you're no real gypsy?"

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

"The devil knows what they think. If you ask me, that's the least of their worries. Yesterday they were in the front lines, tomorrow they'll be moving up to the front lines, some of them get a leave of just an hour or two and are dying for a little music. For Germans or not, they're still human beings. Even a German won't kill just for the fun of it, he's also under orders, and he also begins to get sick to his stomach with the stench of rotting corpses. Oh, sure, there are many among them who practically smack their lips when they brag about their murders, but the girls say that even those men moan and whimper in their sleep, and when they're awake, they just can't get their fill of the brandy. One more drink, one more girl, or two when they get tired of doing a twosome, and they smash and break things, fight, don't know what to do. The other day, a young lieutenant, no more than a kid -- just eighteen, we found out later -- wanted to strangle one of the girls.'

"Why did he want to do that?"

"He went out of his mind. He kept yelling that Lonci didn't return his love. Love he wanted yet, for eight-

## János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago

fifty, tax included. It took three men to hold him, but then he wanted to kill them, because he is a German, he yelled, and no lousy foreigner is supposed to touch him. He cracked four ribs of the bartender, then he slumped over the table and bawled like a baby."

Julka put an arm around his neck.

"You work hard for your living, too."

"I sure do," Marci shook his head, and there was nothing of the dashing *huszár* officer in his voice now.

"There are times when I'm so sleepy I could cry," he muttered. "A drunken captain made us play for three days and three nights at a stretch. He just took time out every once in a while to go upstairs with one of the girls, but by the time we dozed off, he was always back again, furious because he was unable to do anything with her. Something had happened to him in Poland, but he never said what. He had taken a trainload of Jews to a death camp, and for three days and three nights he spoke of nothing but gas chambers, ovens, and the gold teeth which the Germans knock with hammers out of the mouths of the Jews to save them

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

from getting lost in the ovens. And in the meantime, he kept yelling at us to play more lively, but of course we did anything but that."

"Why? Didn't he pay?"

"That he did."

"Well, then?"

"Well, then!" Marci snarled at her. "Well, then!"

Angrily, he yanked his tobacco case from his pocket, rolled a cigarette, lit it, drank in the smoke in deep drags. Then he spoke, but more softly now.

"There were also eighty-two gypsies on that train."

Only now did Julka understand it, but now she understood it so well that she began to weep.

"Gawd O-mighty!" she sobbed, the gypsy accent reappearing in her voice. "That's how we'll end up, too, Marci."

"Says who?" said Marci, and he put on again his air of superior aplomb the way a man will put on a raincoat.

"They can't outsmart me. And so long as you stick with me," he added with the magnanimity of a feudal lord, "nothing can happen to you either."

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

Julka was not sure whether she believed him or not, she only knew that it felt good to be comforted. She dried her tears and returned his smile. It was still early, not even seven o'clock, and Marci smiled at her, for the first time this afternoon. Her heart warmed up.

The room was getting dark. Who knows what it will be like tomorrow at this hour? She wondered. Right now, it is good. It is good like this, just the two of them in the dusk.

"Where will *you* hide?" she asked.

Marci gave her a flippant wink.

"Can't you guess?"

Julka already regretted having asked. It had been a stupid question -- she should have known the answer without asking. She tried to look indifferent.

"Is her husband still in Budapest?"

Marci fingered his film star-style excuse of a mustache.

"He sure is, bless him."

"And if he comes back?"

"He can't."

"Why not?"

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

"Because the bigwigs have their hands full these days. They must dance the way the Germans play the tune, the English and the Americans shower them with bombs, and the Russians stand on the border."

"Still, I wouldn't trust her kind. One day, she'll get fed up with you, and then ... "

She could not finish the sentence. Marci burst out in laughter.

"She'll get fed up with me?" he guffawed. "If there's any getting fed up to be done, I'll be doing it. She's so stuck on me, my girl, that there are times when I can hardly take it. If you knew what she's doing to me! Take the other day ... "

He went into a long-winded story, in the course of which he slipped into such intimate details that Julka did not trust herself to keep looking indifferent. She turned, to fix her hair before the mirror. It does hurt her, Marci thought with satisfaction.

He watched the girl in the thickening darkness, and again a wave of heat swept over his body. I want her! he thought reluctantly. I want her, want her, want her!



## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

And I don't even love her, he concluded disdainfully, the way a sick man comforts himself with the thought that his sickness is nothing serious, for didn't the doctor tell him last night that he would be rid of his fever in no time? But you cannot reason your fever away. At least Marci could not reason away the kind of fever he had. He stood up, stepped to the girl, stood behind her and put his arms around her waist. She gave her hair another couple of passes with the comb, then turned about.

"Do they know up in the castle who started the strike?"

The question sobered Marci up at once.

"Are you afraid for your Garas?" he asked testily.

Julka said nothing. She went on combing her hair.

"Why don't you answer me?"

"I asked you a question first. Do they know it or don't they?"

"They don't," Marci grunted, but as he saw what a great relief it was for the girl to hear that, he added maliciously, "They'll find it out tonight, though."

"How?"

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

"By the rifle-butt treatment. By the rubber hose massage. Why couldn't that dirty peasant stay in peace? Why did he have to stir up the village?"

"What else could he do?" The girl's voice was sharp now, almost hostile. "They slave from sunrise to sunset and don't make enough to fill their bellies."

"They'll fill their bellies for them now -- with gas!"

The comb stuck in the hair of the girl.

"You don't think they'll ... take him away like the Jews?"

"They will if they find out. Why did he plot a strike?"

Julka's face turned red with anger. She hated him now.

"You aren't on the side of the lords, or are you?"

"Lord or peasant -- what's the difference to me?

Neither of them considers the gypsy a human being."

"You can't say that about Garas. Didn't he take you into his house when you were in trouble?"

"Into his house? His stable you mean."

"Did you expect the three of us to sleep in this one room?"

"What about the kitchen?"

"Oh, sure, so you could hear everything that's going

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

on."

She made it sound nasty, trying deliberately to hurt him. He gave a short bark of a laugh.

"What could I have heard?" he snapped scornfully.

"That old fogey!"

"Old?" Now the girl was the one who laughed. Her laugh was loud and had a musical trill to it. "If you only knew! ... "

"Knew what?"

"Nothing."

"Answer when you're asked!"

"When I'll feel like it!" she pouted at him and threw herself on the bed. "It sure is hot today!"

Marci lost his temper.

"Drop dead, both of you!" he grunted and turned around.

"Where are you going?"

"That's my business."

She had not wanted him to react this way, though, and she was a little frightened.

"Come over here to me." Her voice was soft, appeasing.

## János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago

"No!"

"Why not?"

"You can't play games with me."

"Are you afraid there won't be enough left for your fancy dame?"

"Afraid? Me, afraid?"

"Then why won't you come here?"

"Because ... I don't want you."

How many times he had wanted to fling these words into her face, and now that he had done it at last, he even believed a little that he meant them, too. Once again he was the *huszár* officer, the movie star! He walked toward the door as though he planned to keep on going to the end of the world. But then his glance strayed onto the bed, and what he saw there made him lose his head so that he reached out for the girl instead of the door handle.

"What are you doing?"

"Don't you see?"

"You! ... Y-y-you!.."

"You said you didn't want me."

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

"Julka! ... You!.. No!.. Don't bite!"

"Don't you want me?"

He threw himself on her like a wild beast.

"I'm dying for you," he moaned, he rattled. "You ... you  
whore!"

## **CHAPTER TWO**

*In Which It Is Spring and the Wind Tastes Like  
Muscatel*

He still remembered that wind, although, unlike Julka, he preferred the air of a closed room, especially when it was good and heavy with smoke, way after midnight, amidst turmoil and revelry, when wallets seem to spring open by their own volition and the half-drunk customer gets a kick out of spitting on a banknote and sticking it onto the forehead of the band leader -- like *that* night.

That night, he had not even known that Julka existed. He was riding high, he was leader of his own band in the *Golden Bull*, the best hotel in town -- the hotter one of the two there were, to be exact. It was a warm March night. There had not been such a warm March even in the memory of Vendel, the viola player, and Vendel was

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

waist-deep in his sixties. In other years, the tables were never put out on the sidewalk until Easter, but this year, in the last week of March, the old gentlemen basked in the sun on the sidewalk as they sipped their coffees and browsed in the just arrived three-day-old Budapest newspapers. To be sure, the weather still had teeth at nights and the customers would take shelter inside, but that night Lieutenant Mándy marched the band outside, and half an hour later there was not one empty chair because when Mándy had the band play that was something everybody wanted to hear, even the paunchy German staff officers.

Both Mandy and the lady to whom he dedicated the music and his amorous efforts had arrived a week ago: he from the front lines, she from Budapest, and according to the hotel clerk, her husband's post cards from the front were being regularly forwarded to her from the capital. She was an impish, scatterbrained little blonde, and the gangling, otter-faced lieutenant was so crazy about her that after the third bottle of muscatel he just could not stand the curious glances

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

any longer. That was why he moved, with the band, out to the dark sidewalk *terrace*, which was sort of a war-time custom in the *Golden Bull*. In peace-time there was hardly a couple willing to display themselves in the street in this acute stage of the love fever, but now the black-out curtains let not a particle of light out to the sidewalk, and as the street lamps were not on either, Mandy could really go to town.

That was how the revelry started. To be sure, the café was supposed to close at ten, for that was the hour designated for a curfew by the German commander when the city was first taken over, but by this time the renowned German discipline was beginning to get as threadbare as the uniforms of the soldiers arriving from the front lines, not to mention the fact that Mr. Gruber, the proprietor, would not risk asking the high-ranking German officers to leave, and so the curfew was more a matter of record. The Germans did not give a tinker's dam for the clock, they listened to the gypsy music and smacked their lips over the fine Hungarian wines and their shady Hungarian ladies, the "*ersatz*



## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

dames," as the natives called them, and in the dark no one could see what else they were doing beside smacking lips. It was a cloudy night, the street was deserted, except for occasional fleeting glimpses of a soldier and his girl under the trees of Kossuth Square across the street, engaged in breaking the curfew less openly but perhaps more enjoyably.

By midnight there was hardly any sober person on the sidewalk *terrace* of the café. Even the musicians were having the time of their lives, a rare experience for them ever since the Germans had taken over the town. Mándy was an expert not only in arranging his musical program, but also in handling the band; the gypsies liked the love-smitten lieutenant. Twice he pasted ten-Pengö bills on Marci's forehead that night, and he did not treat the musicians with the cheap, acrid wine which they were accustomed to getting from the German customers, but kept their glasses filled with the fragrant muscatel which was the famous house specialty of the *Golden Bull*. The wine flooded Marci with a pleasant rosy glow, the two tens also spurred

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

him on, and yet nothing inspired him to playing better and better than did the meaningful glances which the lovely woman from Budapest would give him occasionally as he bent over her and played his violin close to her ear, for her ears alone.

Yes, a crazy night it was. The wind, that strange, unforgettable wind, caressed and ruffled the blond hair of the tipsy woman, and she threw her head back in heated languor to let the wind caress it, ruffle it, at its pleasure.

"The wind is warm," she sighed.

"It tastes like muscatel," said the lieutenant.

Marci liked the phrase enormously. He decided to repeat it after the third glass of muscatel if and when Aranka, the governess of the Baron's children, would keep her word at last and go with him to a dance in Óvár. He was busy pondering whether Bódog, the leader of the gypsy band in Óvár, would let him use his room for a night, when he heard the sound of marching steps in the street.

He glanced over his shoulder, but he turned his head

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

back again at once. There was nothing unusual to see, just a platoon of gendarmes was escorting another group of Jews to the brick factory where they were being collected from the neighboring towns and villages for shipment to the various concentration camps. A column of weary Jews being herded along by armed gendarmes had become as every-day a sight in Kiskolos as the homecoming of the herds after sundown. It never even entered Marci's mind that these nameless shadows had once been Mr. Weiss, Mr. Schwarz, or Mrs. Kovács, and he had bowed to them as deep as to any other customer when they entered the café in the old days. For a long time, they had been only *the Jews*, and everybody in the small town knew that soon they would not be *the Jews* either because sooner or later the Germans would send them up in smoke or boil them down to soap in some death camp. At first there had been some people in the town who shook their heads sadly, disapprovingly, expressed stunned sympathy, spoke of Christian love, but those days were long gone now. Now everybody kept quiet. For fear? Or

## János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago

because one gets used to everything in time? Be it as it may, the fact is that no one on the sidewalk *terrace* let the sight spoil his fun. Only the drunken captain took notice of the Jews. He pointed at them .

"And what song would you play for *this*, gypsy?"

That was not a difficult question. There were just a few songs to fit the occasion. Was it *Erger-Berger-Schossberger*? Or *Jew, Jew, dirty Jew, what do you want here?* Or ... No, he decided, *Beau-beau-beau-beau-beautiful* would go best with the nature of the amorous lieutenant. And he began to play it quickly:

*Who the hell cares for the Jew?*

*But his daughter is so beau-*

*Beau-beau-beau-beau-beautiful ...*

"You hit the nail on the head, gypsy!" roared the lieutenant. He spat on another ten-Pengö bill and pasted it on the forehead of Marci.

Three tens in one single night -- that's something!

## János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago

Marci decided not to take Aranka to Óvár<sup>2</sup> on the local train, but to hire a cab, as an army officer would on such an occasion. That's living! he told himself and almost burst with good humor. But as he stepped to the band stand to drop the tip into the communal plate, Gazsi, the piccolo player, dug an elbow into his ribs.

"Look!" he whispered.

The prisoners making up the tail end of the column were gypsies. There were about forty of them, men, women, a lot of children.

Marci said nothing. That could he have said in front of the customers?

"There was no dulcimer solo<sup>3</sup> tonight yet," Gazsi said aloud then, and Marci understood immediately what he meant.

He instructed the dulcimer player to play a solo, then went out to the men's room, and Gazsi followed him in a few minutes.

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<sup>2</sup> Today's Olováry in the South of Slovakia. At that time, however, it was part of Hungary.

<sup>3</sup> in Eastern-European folk music the four-legged dulcimer is played with drumsticks

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

"Shouldn't we slip away?" he whispered.

Marci looked at him in amazement.

"Why should we?"

"They took everybody from Gypsytown."

"So what?" Marci shrugged. "Those were just vagrant gypsies. Those were taken from Óvár, too, but nobody bothered any musician."

"True," muttered Gazsi, "still ... "

"Still what?"

"I don't know." The piccolo player stared at the floor.

"Didn't *you* feel a cold shiver run down your back?"

Marci recalled involuntarily that Gazsi's father had been a vagrant gypsy. It shows, too, he thought scornfully. Some cowardly gypsy! Afraid of his own shadow!

"There's no reason to faint away," he said in a lazy nasal voice, and he looked at his watch impatiently.

He dared not keep the lieutenant waiting. He was crotchety, hot-tempered; the headwaiter still had no idea why he had slapped his face some time ago, it would not be healthy to tangle with him.

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

"Let's get back," he said.

The marching column had vanished in the darkness, and it took Marci no more than five minutes to forget all about it. Later he found out that Julka had been in that column of prisoners. But what did he care then about the likes of Julka as yet?

"Perhaps you would have been ashamed to be seen with me," Julka told him a while ago, end of course, he just gestured impatiently as if telling her not to talk such nonsense.

But he knew that he would have been ashamed. He was ashamed of his own race. Why? Marci never gave a thought to that. Most probably, for the same reason which makes a rich Jew ashamed of a poor caftaned Polish Jew, or a rich peasant of a poor, ragged share-cropper.

"Gypsies are like money," he used to say when the subject came up. "Some are copper coins, some are thousand-Pengö bills."

Naturally, he considered himself a thousand-Pengö bill. He came from a long line of band leaders. *"Tonight:*

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

*Music by the Band of Marci Balogh VI.*" he was advertised, like a scion of some royal family, and although he would have had trouble in proving that he was the sixth man in the line of direct descent to wear the name of Marci Balogh, he did know positively about two before him: his father and grandfather who also had been band leaders, even though they had never made it to a bigger town. To be sure, his father had *almost* been hired to play in Szeged, the second-biggest city of the country, and even though he never actually made it, the old man had been proud of it to his dying day.

For *him* that would no longer be something to be proud of. Szeged ... Who wanted to make Szeged? Hadn't a wine salesman from Budapest told him a while ago that a violinist with his talent ought to be playing in Budapest?

"I sure ought to!" he had answered, modest soul as he was, and he was firmly convinced that he would have been playing in Budapest for a long time if this accursed war had not broken out.



## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

Not that he would have been satisfied with Budapest, though. There is good music also in Vienna, also in Paris, and of course also in America. All gypsies are dreamers, as the members of an oppressed race always are, and Marci was addicted to day-dreaming on a large scale, especially since he had seen the movie about the life of Jancsi Rigó. That was something nobody could label fiction. Everybody knew about the world-famous gypsy who had played his way into the heart of a real live princess and then lived in Paris as if he had been a prince himself. He lived in palaces! And if Jancsi Rigó had made it, why couldn't Marci Balogh?

This thought was milling around in his mind now, too, as he caught the eye of the woman from Budapest. He's as good a violinist as Jancsi Rigó was, and as for looks, well, even if he has to say so himself ...

He woke up from his day-dreaming. Mandy was paying his check, the Germans were getting ready to leave, and Mr. Gruber was urging the Hungarian customers to go home.

"Thank you humbly. Lieutenant, sir," he kept bowing

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

low and scurrying after Mándy and his lady love as they walked toward the door. 'Your obedient servant, gracious lady!'

The "gracious lady" glanced back once more from the door, and the thought flashed through Marci's mind that perhaps the fiery little blonde would not be leaving town the same day as the lieutenant, and ...

It was then that the gendarmes entered. There were three of them, three elderly men, not formidable-looking in the least. They shook hands with Mr. Gruber, saluted the officers smartly, and waited politely until the last customer was gone. Then the oldest one, a walrus-mustached sergeant, spoke to the musicians.

"Well, gypsies, let's go!" he said.

"Where to?" asked Marci.

The sergeant tossed down the glass of free wine which was Mr. Gruber's tribute to the forces of law and order, then he wiped his mustache with the back of his hand and said matter-of-factly, "To the brick factory."

Marci's blood froze in his veins.

"We're musicians!" he protested.

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

"Did you think I took you for a bunch of angels?"

"But then ... why do you take us to the brick factory?"

"Stop yapping!" snapped the sergeant. "Come on, get a move on!"

They got a move on. What else could they do? Mr. Gruber said nothing. The waiters said nothing. "The street was deserted, the sky dark.

"Is God asleep?" sighed the long-necked, long-legged, gangling dulcimer player, and although nobody answered him, he kept sighing every once in a while, "Is God asleep?"

The Jews stood silently in the dark court-yard of the brick factory. Machine guns were trained on them from the windows of the building, and a bayonet glinted here and there in the darkness next to a wind-blown cock's tail on a gendarme helmet.

The gypsy prisoners stood in a separate group, but the band did not join them.

"Come!" Marci said and led them to the far end of the yard, for he still hoped to get a different treatment than the vagrant gypsies.

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

The yard was heavy with silence, a thick, incomprehensible silence. There was not a single sound of the many hundreds of mouths. When Uncle Vendol, the old viola player with the Franz Liszt-style mane, wanted to sit down on a pile of bricks, an old woman gestured to him in obvious terror, warning him that it was not permitted.

"Why not?"

"Why not?" The woman shook her small, wizened, bird-like head and sighed bitterly. "I've been standing here on this same spot for the second day now," she whispered, "and the gendarmes won't even let me go to the toilet."

"Did you make them angry at you?"

"Me?" The old woman sighed again. They won't let anybody go, not even a six-year-old child. And it's forbidden to do it out here. This evening, they shot a little boy."

"Murderers!" Gazsi, the dark-skinned piccolo player spat and muttered gypsy curses under his breath.

Uncle Vendel did not curse. He was a kind, meek old

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

man, a wise, patient old man. He remained standing because it was forbidden to sit down, he merely shook his head a little.

"What a world!" he muttered. "You must stand in line even for death."

"Sh-sh-sh," somebody hissed in the darkness because, as they found out later, also talking was forbidden.

So they remained silent, standing, waiting -- for what? The eastern sky turned smoky, the clouds were brown as dried blood. The old viola player stared at the sky, then again he was the one who broke the silence.

"You know what the gypsy in the story said when they took him out to be hanged at dawn? 'Some way to start a day!' he said. That's what also we can say now, boys."

"Right you are," the long-necked dulcimer player nodded, then again he sighed heavenward, "Is God asleep?"

At least they did not have to stand in the same spot for days. The prisoners were given the order to fall in even before full daylight had come, and the gendarmes drove them out to the highway, four abreast. They had

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

to march in a straight column, in a soldierly fashion; to lag behind was forbidden, to stop even more so, to talk likewise. Everything was forbidden.

"The penalty of disobedience is death!" barked the stout, choleric captain in his stilted Hungarian before sending them on their way by the light of dawn.

They thought then that this was just an empty threat. By noon they found out that it was anything but that. A pregnant woman collapsed on the highway, and one of the gendarmes -- a moon-faced, jovial fellow who must have been recalled from pension in the later years of the war -- shot her without a word. The column did not even stop. The corpse was left on the highway.

Only now did the members of the band learn, from the Jews, that they could have brought along food for three days. The gendarmes had said nothing about that when they arrested them in the café, and complaining did them no good now; food was issued to the gendarmes only, the prisoners got none. Many of the Jews had been forced to stand in the yard of the brick factory for days, and they were dizzy with hunger by the time the march

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

started. Between noon and the evening many collapsed on the highway and were unable to go on, for most of them were elderly people; the younger Jews had been drafted into the labor battalions. Also the smaller children could not go on very long, and when a prisoner fell, the gendarmes did not look to see whether it was a child, an old man, or a woman. A prisoner fell and a gendarme shot to kill. Orders were orders.

The next day, a shot could be heard practically every hour. One Jew, one gypsy ... They no longer even bothered to look back.

The members of the band were still together. Uncle Vendel was limping, his heart rebelled against the inhuman hike on an empty stomach, he panted heavily and could hardly drag himself along, but he went on till midnight. Then he said, "Well, boys, you won't be playing music over my grave either."

The "boys" did not answer, just trudged along wordlessly in the dark of the night. It was cold, spring seemed to have turned into late autumn; it was raining

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

slowly, a rain mixed with sleet.

"Every gypsy is entitled to some music after his death at least," the old viola player muttered, "if he can't get any while he's alive."

The small, stocky Jewish lawyer who was marching abreast with them stared at the old man, obviously puzzled.

"Not while he's alive?" he asked.

"No," the viola player answered curtly.

"Why not?"

"Because he can't."

That was all he said. No gypsy will talk about such things to outsiders. How could *they* understand the unwritten law which says that no gypsy will play music for another gypsy, not even for the most famous band leader. Even at the wedding of a true *Romany*, the only music comes from a hand organ, a *drimo* as they call it in their own tongue. It is not until the bow, the piccolo or the dulcimer mallet has dropped from his lifeless hand forever that other gypsies will play for him, over his open grave, for the first and last time.



## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

That was what Uncle Vendel had in mind. That a little music over his grave was really not so much to ask for. But how could they play over his grave if he was going to have neither a grave nor a burial?

"Well, that's that," he said and could think of nothing else to say. He shook hands with the Jewish lawyer, then embraced each member of the band. "The Virgin Mary bless you!" he whispered the gypsy blessing to each of them, then he stepped out of the column, and limping, panting, he laboriously crawled across the roadside ditch and stretched out under a mulberry tree, like a man who has nothing to worry about and settles down for a well deserved rest.

Several minutes passed before the gendarme riding along on his bicycle noticed him. When the beam of his headlight flashed on the old man, the gendarme was so surprised that he just stared open-mouthed. The old gypsy did not moan, did not plead, like the other stragglers, for one more chance, for a few seconds to get on his feet again, "for the love of God officer!" The old gypsy said nothing. He lay there quietly, his head

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

rested on his clasped hands, and he stared straight into the face under the cock-plumed helmet. The gendarme was so flabbergasted that he did not shoot him at once, although, of course, that might have been because he was just plain lazy to do it, for it would have meant the necessity to unbuckle his carbine and lift it off his back where he carried it cyclist style. So he rather gave the old man a kick in the ribs.

"Get up, you dirty gypsy," he roared, "or I'll shoot you like a dog!"

The meek viola player lost his meekness, perhaps for the first time in his life.

"Shoot me, you son of a whore, you shame of the Lord God, you Satan's fairy, you!" he shouted back at the gendarme and spat in his face, right from where he lay, without even raising his head.

The iron-shod heel of the enraged gendarme stomped down into the false denture of the old viola player so violently that Uncle Vendel's mouth ripped open almost to his ears, and his tongue lolled out like a hanged man's. Then he rammed his bayonet into the

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

old gypsy's stomach, but he was too mean to put him quickly out of his misery. Swearing, he jumped on his bicycle and left the writhing, dying old man under the mulberry tree.

"That bastard won't die in his bed either," Gazsi muttered as the gendarme pedalled past them. "Germany's groggy, and when she goes down, these Hungarian butchers will croak with her."

Marci sighed bitterly.

"Where will we be when that happens?"

"Maybe in a better place than they," answered Gazsi.

"Because they bully unarmed people only. From the enemy they run so fast that maybe they'll be reaching even the cemetery faster than we. And then he added in a whisper, his voice suddenly fiery, "then comes our world. A new world, a better world!"

Marci just gestured wearily. He did not believe in the new world and had lost his faith in the old one. What would be the use of owning a palace in Paris like Jancsi Rigó in the movies? The Germans are the rulers in Paris, too, and if the famous gypsy were still alive, he

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

would also be stumbling along like this somewhere in the night, on a highway, toward some death camp.

"A better world?" he muttered. "Horse-shit! We'll die -  
- that's all."

The British planes attacked them, totally unexpectedly, on the afternoon of the third day.

It was a sleepy, grey late afternoon, rain hung in the air. German tanks, armored cars and trucks were whizzing back and forth on the narrow, steep highway cut into the mountainside, and since there was woodland, a jungle-like, impenetrable forest, on both sides, the column of prisoners had to take to a small, narrow mountain path. The members of the band dragged themselves wearily along the precipitous road, stumbling over the thick, gnarled roots which, as Gazsi put it, bulged out of the ground like varicose veins on an old gypsy's leg.

The planes were above the clouds. For a long while, they only heard the roar of the engines and thought that they had nothing to fear. The bomber squads

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

would pass above them several times a day on their way to the cities, and the prisoners were confident that the airmen would not waste bombs on them.

Marci hardly even looked up. All his attention was taken by the thick, gritty bar of *ersatz* chocolate which he had bartered from the Jewish lawyer for cigarettes. He looked around carefully before each bite, to make sure that there was no gendarme in sight, for eating was another thing that was forbidden during the march, and with his rumbling stomach he just could not force himself to wait for the rest stop.

The planes had been droning overhead for several minutes when a formation unexpectedly dove from above the clouds and seemed to fall, to plummet down at them with an ear-shattering roar, like vultures diving at their prey. The tanks and trucks tried to take shelter in the forest, many of them rolling over Jews and gypsies, but only the heavy tanks were able to knock down the centuries-old trees, the lighter ones came to a stop at the edge of the forest, and the trucks did not even get that far. Most of them bogged down in

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

the rain ditch between highway and footpath, some collided, got entangled, overturned, and the bombs were already bursting on the highway.

It all happened so unexpectedly that the gendarmes lost their heads as thoroughly as the prisoners did. They fled into the forest, disorganized and demoralized, but it did them no good, for a few minutes later the British bombs were dropping on the forest as well. Gone was all of a sudden every distinction between prisoner and gendarme, German and Jew, gypsy and Hungarian. All moaned and groaned, wailed and screamed, writhed and suffered alike, and whoever was still able to run, ran and ran and ran in headlong, terrified flight.

The skies seemed to shatter to smithereens above the forest and the earth to cave in under it. Those who escaped being torn to bits by the bombs were crushed to death by the crashing trees. Smashed bodies writhed in agony under fallen tree trunks, in the midst of gory masses of spilled innards and brains, and the blasts of the exploding bombs hurled bloody chunks of human

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

flesh toward the sky. A man's arm was caught on a branch, hung there and swayed wildly, as if still alive and pointing an accusing finger at somebody, and before Marci could run past under it, it fell to the ground right at his feet. Only then did he notice -- this was the detail that stood out most vividly in his memory later -- the wedding ring, a thick, old-fashioned wedding ring, on a finger of that hand.

He ran around, horrified, searching in vain for a way out of this living hell. And then, as though he had stumbled upon the fires of Hades, incendiary bombs began to drop about him.

The forest caught fire. It burned and blazed. The smoke was so dense that he could hardly see. He became aware, not a fraction of a second too soon, that a giant tree began to sway right in front of him, and as if plucked out of the ground by a Titan, roots and all, it fell toward him with the speed of lightning and yet -- so it seemed to him -- with agonizing slowness. He leaped aside just in time. Only the upper branches brushed him, but with such force that they knocked him to the

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

ground and buried him under their foliage.

He thought at first that every bone in his body had been broken. Only gradually did he realize -- was it hours, minutes or seconds later? -- that his limbs were still alive and moving, and somehow, he was not even conscious of how, he crawled free of the branches.

As he gasped for breath, flat on his stomach, there was a movement in the underbrush opposite him, and a pair of big black eyes flashed at him through the smoke. He watched them, petrified. He thought they belonged to some animal, and it was only as the underbrush parted that he saw that they were human eyes.

They were Julka's; that was the first time he laid eyes on her. She was crawling on all fours, ragged, her hair dishevelled, her face black with grime and soot, as though she were really an animal, and not some harmless animal at that, but a pursued beast of prey, ready to pounce.

A bomb fell close-by, the air pressure made the burning trees blaze with hissing, roaring flames. The two gypsies could hardly see in the dense, swirling smoke,



## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

yet they crawled straight toward each other, guided by that unerring instinct which makes human beings and animals alike recognize their own kind in a moment of danger.

They lay prone side by side, panting heavily, and neither of them spoke. The girl kept turning her head, looking around incessantly with quick, uneasy glances, to make sure that they were alone, then she pointed to the right, silently, urgently, and was already crawling in that direction with such incredible skill as if she had never walked upright in her life.

Marci did not see what she had pointed at. The girl, although she was barefoot, crawled faster than he, and all of a sudden she had vanished in the bushes. Then he had caught up with her and stuck his head out from the underbrush, he recoiled in terror. There was a deep gorge below him, and the girl was already clambering down the rocks.

He stared after her giddily. He had been running from the bombs only. Now it dawned on him all of a sudden that the girl was fleeing from the gendarmes.

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

Could they really escape that way? The slope and the bottom of the gorge were deserted, and no bombs had dropped there. Yet, he dared not move. He was afraid. His head swam as he looked down into the abyss.

The girl glanced back at him wonderingly, as if unable to understand his hesitation, and he started down after her, clumsily, awkwardly, his chest constricted by a deadly fear, as if he were treading on his own heart every time he took a step. But a few minutes later, he saw nothing but rocks, roots and bushes in the gorge, only the next rock which he could use for a foothold, the next bush which he could use for a handhold, and he was unable to think of anything else.

There was something unreal, something nightmarish about it all. He staggered and tottered when he had reached the bottom, the world swam in dizzy circles about him.

A narrow cart path wound its way along the bottom of the gorge, and another mountain slope rose steeply beyond that. Marci had only one wish: to stretch out on this dusty road, to rest, to sleep, to be oblivious of

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

everything. But the girl already stood on the opposite slope and waved him on impatiently.

"I can't do any more mountain climbing," Marci said crossly. "Let's stay here on the road."

"Here?" Julka stared at him as if he had taken leave of his senses. "Do you want them to see us from up there?"

With these words, she turned her back on him and began to clamber up the wooded slope. Marci hated her in that instant; he hated her as much as if she had brought all this horror down on him. But nevertheless he followed her, breathlessly, almost unconsciously, like a sleep-walker. The slope was not so steep here, but the trek seemed to be endless, and every time he took a step, he thought he just would not be able to take a next one.

It was pitchdark when they had reached the top. Julka groped on the ground, Marci had no idea why.

"It's mossy here," she said finally and stretched out on the ground.

Marci fell, or rather collapsed, next to her. He was so

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

tired that he was unable to move. But the girl jumped to her feet all of a sudden, ran a few steps, then she began to search under her skirt excitedly.

"I have it!" she whispered happily.

"Have what?"

Julka held up a thin chain. A small crucifix dangled from it.

"It's gold," she announced with childlike pride and put it around her neck. "Those rotten gendarmes took my ear-rings, but they couldn't find this."

"Where did you hide it?"

Julka giggled as if she were being tickled.

"In a safe place," was all she said.

Now she removed a thin, narrow, long package from the hem of her skirt.

"You can have half," she said. "Corn fritters."

"Why did you have to hide it?" Marci asked. "They said you could take food along."

"They said, they said!" the girl gestured derisively.

"That their kind says goes in here and out here," she whispered and pointed at her ears, and this reminded

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

her of the ear-rings again. "Whoever it is who wears them now, I hope her eyes will fall out!"

"Were they gold, too?"

"No."

"They couldn't be worth a lot then."

"How do you know?" she snapped, strangely annoyed.

"To me, they were worth more than this gold chain."

"Were they a keepsake?"

"Yes."

"From your lover?"

The girl did not answer.

"Let's eat," she said after a while.

Only then did Marci realize how incredibly starved he was. He devoured his share of the corn fritters, and then he remembered that he still had a piece of chocolate left. It was a small piece, but after some hesitation he took it from his pocket and shared it with the girl.

"Chocolate!" she sighed almost sensuously. "How long ago it was that I had some!"

She stretched out on the mossy ground and sucked

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

away on the chocolate slowly, carefully, to make it last. Marci heard her breathing become slow, rhythmical, perhaps even before the chocolate could begin to melt in her mouth. Then he, too, fell asleep.

He woke up shivering. Still half-asleep, he felt the animal heat of the girl's body and snuggled up to her instinctively. His hand touched her breast in the dark, not intentionally, yet it lingered, clung, fondled and caressed. Some bust! he thought drowsily and wanted to reach under her blouse, but he fell asleep.

About dawn, he woke again, with a start. His hand was still on the girl's breast, and now he did reach under her blouse. Nor did his other hand remain idle. Julka did not wake up until it was between her bare thighs. She did not object. She wouldn't object regardless of who lay by her side, thought Marci a little contemptuously, like a man who has been accustomed to fine food and yet is willing to try a less tasty dish when he is hungry.

Not that it was bad, though. It was good, quite good, but

## **János Székely, A Night That Began 700 Years Ago**

nothing special.

"You've warmed me up," he said, for he felt that a man had to say something in such a situation.

"It isn't cold," she replied. "The earth has a spring smell already."

"A what?"

"A spring smell."

"The earth?"

"Also the wind," she nodded and wrinkled her pert little nose slightly as she sniffed the wind. "This is a spring breeze."

"It tastes like muscatel," said Marci, and all of a sudden - he did not know why -- he felt ashamed.

Well, that was how it began.