



Pál Zavada

Milota tells of the Kuhajda family and of the poppies

Pál Závada tells a story of poppy seeds, beauty and lost love.

My dearest ones, and all the rest of you! As I talk to you on this Friday, the sixteenth day of May, I believe, my sweets, that we can start the acacia–honey harvest in three or four days.

My parable today – I will tell you about the Kuhajda family – concerns the truth that opium can cure everything – as indeed the ancient Arab medics held – other than itself. The story is set at the turn of the century – unfortunately its telling is hampered by a number of inconsistencies.

Rumour has it that late one evening, at a time when Kuhajda's poppies had dropped their petals and their poison–green heads had reached the size of dove–eggs, the entire crop was invaded by razor–wielding pariahs, who had, no doubt, taken oaths never to utter a word about the swift incision, the blunt pressure of the knife–edge, or any other sordid aspect of their moonlight harvest, that is if their tongues had not been cut out previously to ensure that the name of their illicit act and of the syrup earned by it, not to mention the identities of their master and his client, would remain forever secret.

Others disagreed. *Zranyik*, they said, that story was put about by the half–wit, Uncle Kukuchka, who came home quite deranged from his time as a prisoner somewhere in Manchuria where perhaps they do that sort of thing. Or maybe he only saw or heard of it – even if half the old man's face is missing and he has only one ear, his tongue is still intact. The whole thing, in short, is preposterous, no manner of poppy–head–slitters ever slinked about these parts.

But for years, Márton Kuhajda did indeed have the best part of his poppy–field cut down while still green! What's that? True enough though, and if anyone inquired further he'd just smile. Or he'd simply reply with a gleam in his eye, that the weevils had been at them.

–But what do you do, Marci, with all that green weed?

–Feed it to the donkeys. It stiffens their blood. And the ass that eats those poppy–stems, I tell you, her milk is so good, so syrupy, that a man who drinks it fresh in the evening gets a boost to his natural.... Didn't you know that?

–What are you saying, Marci, what nonsense! You haven't got a donkey!

–Ah, but I might, answered Márton Kuhajda. Or perhaps: O but I do! Such a donkey as tried to feed his chopped green poppies to his goat!

This – so they say – finally got a laugh out of Márton's interlocutor, who said:

–And was the goatmilk up to scratch?

–Well – responded Marci Kuhajda – that's just what I asked the next day, it was Jani Kustyik you know, and I said, well, Janika, was the lady happy last night?

–That damned goat, he said, wouldn't so much as sniff at it.

–But you did sprinkle it with honey?

–Honey? – Janika's eyes opened wide.

–And nothing else, my friend, poppies and honey! Well, cow–honey will do for a goat. Beet–molasses.

–Molasses? Whoever can get a–hold of that?

–You just go down the sugar factory, tell them the lady says...

–Get off, its not worth it! – Jani Kustyik gestured disappointedly, and it very much seemed he was thinking of his wife. Allegedly Márton Kuhajda told this story, but I think I heard it from Feuer, the lawyer, a founding member of the "smart cardtable "

–Come now, Ernoe my brother, I say to Feuer sometime in '61 at the bar in the local sala, you must know why Kuhajda's poppies were cut down before their time?

–I know, or perhaps I just think I do, answered the old man, because I never saw it exactly, as far as seeing goes, as it happened at night. The question is, had I seen it, would I really have known I had? But here's what I heard: the poppyfields had to be reaped in their most virulent prime. Imagine! Like sending out a division of tender virgin–infantry, veiled brides into the battlefield, just to have them put to sword! Petals sprinkling the spring moonlight in gigantic flakes, like dream–snow, until all the poppy–girls are mown down and bundled into sheafs... And their blood, brother, is white as snow...!

–Ernoe, did you ever want to be a poet?

–Me? Why would I want that when it's what I am!?

–Fine. But what was all this reaping for, tell us?

–The bundles are straightaway taken to a depot in carts and freight–trains, and once there, before fermentation sets in, they're immediately thrown into a machine–colossus called an "extractor ". Or some manner of chopping and pulping gadget, with a maw full of "extracting " fluid, where this green poppy pulp soaks until it is transferred into a non–stop churning press. When the crushing is done, the extract and the juice are put in barrels and brought to a chemical factory where the whole lot is boiled down to a thick marmalade. Well, there's no rush after that, because the next steps in morphine extraction, which are beyond my description, can be nicely paced until the next poppy harvest.

–You mean to say Márton Kuhajda, or Mákony, as you know they all called him, was just a deliveryman for the druggists? Uncle Ernoe! You mean he didn't have a poppy pusher, he didn't have a client?

–There was someone, certainly.

–Named Ignác Dunkeldorfer?

–How should I know? Old Feuer shrugged his shoulders.

But later Dr Antaloczi said – though sadly only after the death of his old card–buddy Feuer the lawyer, "Hell no ". That Ernoe talks nonsense. Kuhajda's fields were good and ripe, the poppies were harvested and thrashed in proper order and the dry poppy heads transported to the pharmacists for further use. Just like they do today.

Well and good, but less than two weeks later, the third member of the late card party, Mr. Mihalko, a retired mathematics professor, revived the first version, now known as the "home grown poppy cake ". He is entirely sure of it. To mention just one thing: he well remembers the ill–fated but beautiful Ilona Kuhajda, a lawyer's wife, and her husband, who Ernoe Feuer knew even better,

being a colleague. Did he never mention them?

–Oh he mentioned him alright, I laughed. Which, I said, does not necessarily bring me any closer to the truth. But then, I was some years learning that sitting by your cardtable, if you'll forgive me my dear professor.

So I didn't discover the secret of the Kuhajda poppyfields from him. But I learned a good deal about the family itself. I told you the other day – it can be heard on the last cassette – that after their two boys, Márton Kuhajda and Anna Král had a third child, a daughter, around 1895 I reckon. Through the yearly blooming of the poppies, this Ilonka matured, solitary and silent, into an exceptionally beautiful young lady.

Gergely, the younger of her two brothers, was married by then. Before the war broke out, he took a sudden shine to – and married – a less than serene daughter of the local gentry, Klara. It was a stormy union. This was known from the furious dustclouds which followed Gergely Kuhajda like a fleeting tornado, in a jealous rage when his wife didn't show up at all of a night, flogging his horses and careering his chaise down the road to the new town, where he himself would drag her from the bed – on a good day, in her childhood room in her parents' home – and remind her, shaking the soul from her body, of her duties to her spouse – with which office, according to some evil tongues, Klarika usually complied then and there, laughing, among the ravaged duvets, so that her husband instantly forgave her misdemeanour, and the horses ambled back with no need for the crop, the couple in the back seat kissing all the way home, and the peasants working in the fields lifted their caps to the first and last acts of the piece, winking at each other and thinking all the while, of course, of what went on in between.

But let me return to Ilona Kuhajda.

This perceptibly slender, educated and delicate creature soon took to travelling into town with her flirtatious sister-in-law, Klara. Although she needed some encouragement in company at first, with a little cajoling Ilonka quickly got involved with a medical apprentice and fell madly in love. And her feelings were returned – indeed the two soon formed the closest liaison, although whether this was due to an explicit promise of marriage or a surge of ardour is not known.

More detail would be good, but all we know for sure is that nineteen year old Ilonka was made pregnant by the medic. He, on the other hand, was clearly alarmed at the pool of starshine in her eyes and the determination in her voice – that death itself could not end her love. "What am I to do with such a confession? ", the young man must have asked himself, but probably he already knew. All he could do in such a situation, even without the incentive of her newly blessed state, was back out. And let me tell you, as he peered again into Ilona's ever-dilating pupils, something else alarmed him. It seemed he had thoroughly infected the girl with a taste for the morphine they had taken together –intended only as an occasional stimulant to their mood. So, inventing some urgent business, he quickly withdrew – and from then on he excused himself through his maid. The end came with the news that the young man had decided to continue his studies abroad, and even Klarika could only shrug her shoulders and say no more.

At this point the mother stepped in – according to her own story, her suspicions were aroused just in time. Or perhaps, Christ only knows, a bewildered Klarika poured her heart out to her mother in law. Anyway, Anna

Král ordered her daughter to talk and, although she heard what she sought, her daughter not only overcame her shame, but she defiantly admitted her condition and even dared set herself against her mother's wishes. So, in the face of Ilona's furious protestations, Anna Král had an abortion carried out on her under sedation. That doctor too used morphine on her.

Ilonka was unable to recover either from the loss of her lover or of her unwanted baby. "Unwanted child?!" she sobbed, and insisted in vain she had wanted it. She was inconsolably disappointed in Klara too, who did not stand by her in those terrible days.

Only her loving father felt for Ilona. In fact, Anna Král did not share her plan with Márton Kuhajda, in order that the matter would remain a strict secret, but the news found its way through the grapevine, indeed, in a matter of moments. When the daughter told Kuhajda what had been done to her, weeping all the while, the father fell out terribly with his wife, so they say.

—O my dear Ilonka, forgive your mother! She's done a terrible thing, but her intentions were good! Thus he tried to soothe his daughter, without success. It was years before Ilonka Kuhajda, the pain stark in her sad eyes, could step foot outside the house again.

Long after the war she finally married a friend of her father's, a lawyer from Szeged more than twenty years her senior. No doubt she simply resigned herself to the marriage.

This melancholic beauty, wilting early on from her despondent disposition and, of course, her dangerous secret passion, nevertheless fired up the ugly little potbellied jurist. A year later their son was born – I knew him by sight – he must have been about seven or eight years older than me.

But even this child could not draw his mother from her spiritual agony – and its catastrophic "medication" – nor from the dizzying opiate legends that always clung to Ilonka in her family. So I can hardly believe the claim made later by her relatives, that they noticed the young woman's morphine addiction only too late.

But nor do I believe that Márton Kuhajda, who was famed far and wide for his poppy production, is entirely blameless in this matter. Indeed, I can well imagine that her addiction was not principally the fault of the young medic, but rather her father's, who cultivated unfathomable demons within himself, and whose demented adoration of poppies led him to believe that some extract of this magic plant could salve even the spiritual health of his beloved daughter. The story goes that when the local doctors sent a note around to all the chemists in the neighbourhood forbidding Ilonka and her accomplice husband from buying morphine, Márton Kuhajda, or Mákony as we called him, pulled strings on her behalf.

That this is not entirely fantastic is borne out by the remarkable end to her story: the very hour Ilonka passed away, her father, Márton Kuhajda hanged himself. But the rest, I believe, is legend only – that beforehand he laid her out with a wagonload of poppy flowers and then decorated his own neck in the noose with a wreath of the same. As far as I know, all this took place in August, when their petals are long fallen. But even I remember that they were buried together. The village hasn't seen a funeral like it since. That was 1937. I was seven years old.

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