

Holy Innocents, by Szilárd Rubin

2012, 280 pages ---- Published by MAGVETŐ PUBLISHING, HUNGARY

The novel describes a series of authentic and tragic events which took place in the Hungary of the 1950's.

To these days, the darkness and the inhuman brutality of all that went down still haunts the rare witnesses and those others who knew the people and places involved.

The Hungarian town of Törökszentmiklós was held in a grip of terror by a serial killer between October 1953 and August 1954. Five young girls disappeared without trace during those months until a young woman by the name of Piroska Jancsó was arrested in the autumn of 1954 who later received the death sentence for her crimes.

What *really* happened, though, might have been something quite different...

Fictional reportage? The Hungarian *In Cold Blood*? Rubin's voyage into a dark and bleak reality? Or the battle of an aging and lonely author with his source material? Perhaps the novel is a little of all these things. *Holy Innocents* is Szilárd Rubin's ultimate novel and the fruit of four decades of work now published posthumously for the first time.



Blurb: *“The cart set me down in a narrow, winding street that squeezed between squat, little houses. None of them could have had more than two rooms including the kitchen. The backs of the dwellings on the uneven side of the street ran out into grazing pasture with half a dozen dots of light in the distance that burned above a never-ending expanse of snow from the windows of scattered smallholdings. It really was a street from a fairytale and the fact that this had happened to girls who lived here seemed to be very improbable. It was as if the whole story had been scripted by the Brothers Grimm or Andersen: as if two lentils had been selected from a mass of millions and planted on a distant star.”*

“I could feel that I'd stepped on steel rather than stone. I put my foot down again and it sounded like there was hollowness underneath me.”

EXCERPT FROM THE NOVEL

Piroska Jancsó sat Mrs. Benedek down in the kitchen and offered her two sorts of pálinka. She urged her to drink but the woman was only willing to take a small sip of the vodka. It was incredibly strong and had a strange taste to it. The little that Piroska – Piri – had forced her to consume soon made her feel sleepy. But there were two very good reasons for her not wanting to lie down in that kitchen. One of them was Piri's mum whom they'd bumped into on their way from the train station: she'd been walking to the kindergarten to collect her grandchild. She had seemed annoyed that Piri had invited a guest. Mrs. Benedek didn't like the house all that much either, because it was disgustingly filthy. She asked for a blanket, spread it out under the mulberry tree in the yard and took a nap with her head resting on one elbow.

She woke to find Piri fiddling with something by her neck. Piri had come out, she said, because she was worried Mrs. Benedek might be cold. She'd brought her a pillow and suggested that she might take her arm out from under her head and place it by her side so as to enjoy the full benefit of the blanket. Piri made a concerted effort to appear caring and



concerned. Mrs. Benedek soon nodded off again but again soon sensed that Piri was kneeling by her side and was trying to get to her neck. She grabbed at her throat and managed to catch hold of the wire that Piri had already wrapped around her neck and was preparing to pull. She screamed in mortal fear, jumped to her feet and shouted for all she was worth,

“Are you trying to kill me?”

Piri simply answered, “Mother told me to strangle you.”

The visitor was so surprised that she didn't even run but simply stood where she was in a state of stunned bemusement. Piri made the most of this pause and moved slyly closer to her and remarked that, oh, she had only just noticed what pretty buttons she had on her dress. She made out as if she only wanted to touch a button but as soon as she grew close enough, she grabbed her. Their wrestling brought them tumbling down onto the grass where they rolled around and fought fiercely with each other until Mrs. Benedek somehow managed to free herself and she fled.

When she had finished giving her statement, Mrs. Benedek asked the detectives to allow the local officer to accompany her home because she was afraid to make the journey alone like that. Detective Annus let the lady go but told her that they would send a car for her the following morning to bring her in and stand her face to face with the perpetrator. Then Farkas made arrangements for the duty officer to be relieved and Kenyeres sat Mrs. Benedek on his bicycle's crossbar and pedalled her home.

Now the three of them were left alone, Farkas and Annus debated whether or not they should apprehend Piroska Jancsó with immediate effect. Annus still suspected that the complainant had coloured events and that the attempted murder was little more than a tale Mrs. Benedek had thought up out of spite after she and Piri had fallen out and decided to take a swipe each at the other. He had his own personal opinion of the background to the story: “Two whores argue over the one cock.” Farkas was also unsure because he knew that Szántó would most likely call them that night and he could be left to make the decision. The possibility that Piroska Jancsó may abscond after this unsuccessful murder attempt never even arose. The telephone call was a long time in coming and Tinka eventually announced, “Comrade Captain, I think it would be better if I just brought the bitch in...” The others took the sergeant-major's enthusiasm to impatience – which, in fact, it was – but after a short consultation, they decided he should go.

Tinka had already started the Škoda when it occurred to him that the headlights could be spotted from a distance and it would be better to arrive at the house unnoticed. So he grabbed a torch instead and set off on foot.

Piri's half-brother, the eleven-year-old József Stern, gave the following account of events to the Supreme Court:

“When Piri first came into the kitchen, my mother asked her why she had brought the woman there and they had an argument. Mother got really angry, Piri picked a knife up and tried to throw it at her but it missed and flew right past her. Mother and I didn't say a word then. Later, when we heard the screaming, I thought of the kidnapper. When Piri came back in, neither she nor my mother spoke to each other. I think we'd cooked potatoes. Piri didn't eat and went to lie down but Mother quietly ate her paprika potatoes.”

Tinka saw a young man hanging around outside the house. He asked to see his ID and then he told him to get lost because “nothing is going to happen here tonight”. He happened to know that the chap was one of the mother's clients: Borbála was in the habit of servicing young and old for a couple of pennies or she'd just as happily accept payment in the form of bacon or eggs. Piri, on the other hand, didn't sleep with the local men.

After the young man had cleared off, Tinka cut across the yard, rattled the kitchen door and shouted “Police!” Piri's mother, Borbála had a good swear at this and told him that anybody could say such a thing and he should go around to the street-side window and show proof that he was in fact a policeman. Tinka lost his temper and was about to break the door in when someone put their hand on his shoulder in the darkness.



“That really wouldn’t be the right way to go about it, Feri!” Farkas had followed him and he took a very different tone.

“He very calmly tried to convince Mrs. Jancsó to open the door and not to cause a commotion and that ‘we only want to talk to you’ and this and that, like he tends to say in these situations. But Borbála told him the same: to go around to the window on the street and she’d take the lamp there. Farkas carried on blathering but I couldn’t stand to listen anymore and I thought, what the hell, I’ll go around to the window. I was about to cut back across the yard again because they didn’t have a fence but I was afraid I might put my foot in something unpleasant in the dark so I started to walk along the paved veranda instead. I was very nearly at the little gate when I heard what sounded like the lock rattling in the kitchen door. This, and something else, unsettling, gave me an odd feeling and so I stopped.”

When Tinka spoke about those moments, he realised that he used the word “odd” because of his own memories and he made the following remarks by way of explanation:

“My father used to work for the Municipal Transport Company and I’d often sit up next to him at the front of the cart. The horses were so used to cobbled streets that the moment they stepped on softer soil – if they had to go out into the green suburbs – they’d just stop and they wouldn’t budge. It felt ‘odd’ for them that there were no cobbles. That’s exactly how I felt but it wasn’t softness that stopped me, it was hardness: I could feel that I’d stepped on steel rather than stone. I put my foot down again and it sounded like there was hollowness underneath me. But I still went back to the kitchen door. By this time Farkas was inside the house and he was trying to get Piri to get dressed and come with us. She didn’t appear willing to move and so I was the one who had to shout at her to pull herself together or otherwise I’d be left with no other choice than to drag her outside myself and give a good beating. On hearing that, she dressed herself calmly and set off as if we were taking her for a simple stroll.

We walked behind and she strode out peacefully in front of us. How shall I put it? She was so quiet that if I were to draw her in coal on a white wall, she couldn’t have been muter. I even started to feel bad for having shouted at her like that. With her short, boyish hair she had the appearance of an innocent child as she took little steps in the dark with her tiny, shapely feet. Her behaviour might even have remained this way if she hadn’t heard what I said to Farkas. Because I whispered to him as we walked that there must be some sort of potato cellar or the like under the veranda and it might be a good idea to take a closer look at it. Farkas answered by saying he would be there the next day, too, and we’d be able to see more in the light. Piri might have heard this or she might not, but the fact remains that when we got to the station and she realised we were going to keep her there, she started to pound on her cell door and shout at the top of her voice that we should let her go home, let her go back to her son. Of course, she only made things worse in our eyes. Szántó had arrived by this time, too, and when he heard Piri yelling like that, he agreed that we’d done the right thing by bringing her in. The decision was soon reached that we’d get up bright and early the next day and go and search the house.”

The sun rose at exactly four minutes past five on the morning of the 3rd of September and its light painted the windscreen of the Škoda a deep red colour as it rattled down Red Army Avenue.

“I must have been doing twenty to twenty-five kilometres an hour – Tinka said later – because it was all I could manage on that road. The car had at least one hundred and fifty thousand kilometres on the clock and it shook to pieces as we drove through Törökszentmiklós. It was as if someone were shovelling dust into the thing during the day: it only took half an hour for a bucketful to collect. The rest was swallowed by me and the passengers. But we could still breathe properly in the early hours and there was a smell of the forest at the Jancsó house. They didn’t keep animals and there was no sty in the yard or an outside loo, just undergrowth. The weeds had grown so high that little Farkas virtually disappeared. He, Szántó and Annus went in to search the house.

I found a broom on the veranda while I waited for them outside and I took it to sweep the car out. We hadn’t finished until late the night before and so I hadn’t had time. I lit up when



I'd done and it was then that I started to feel nervous. But it was a clear dawn with a beautiful sunrise. A good smell of nettles came from the yard and you couldn't really feel the dust. If I hadn't known that kids went into there to shit, I'd have had a good look through the bushes, too. But it turned out that there was no need. I'd only just flicked my cigarette away when Farkas appeared holding a big bundle of kids clothes. We all knew only too well what they'd been wearing when they disappeared and I saw straight away that they were the ones. Farkas just threw them into the back seat and nodded to go back with him because we still needed to take a look at that "potato cellar".

The metal sheet that I'd stepped on the night before was just behind the little gate. It had a thick layer of dust on it just like the bricks and so it hardly stuck out and it wasn't very big: it measured something like forty by forty centimetres and sat at a slight angle on sunken bricks. I'd taken a metal screwdriver with me and I used it to lever it up and lift it off then me and Farkas took a look inside together. We couldn't see a thing and there was no smell to speak of just a hint of drains. So Farkas went out to the car to fetch a torch while Szántó and Annus walked over to the hole. Szántó lit a match and Annus picked a stone up and threw it down. It fell for quite a while before it plopped into what sounded like mud. We guessed that it must have fallen between ten and twelve metres. We all crouched around the opening and Farkas got down on his knees, leant in and shone his torch around. We could see that the shaft was wider than the cover but the beam of light only lit a couple of meters down to about the twentieth layer of bricks. Szántó had a newspaper that he ripped into strips, lit and threw into the hole but it was no good because they went out in seconds. Szántó announced that a ladder had to be fetched and someone would have to go down there. Farkas immediately volunteered but Annus held him back. He said we should work out how deep it was first.

Of course, they hadn't had any electricity in the house for ages. It got cut off when they failed to pay the bill. So this meant we had to go over to the neighbours' place, the Évingers, and their son-in-law lent us a hand. He was a scrap dealer so he had a load of wire and he set a cable up and, if I remember, put a lamp on the end with a red shade. When we finally had it all working, the four of us lay flat on our stomachs around the hole and watched as the bulb inched down into the darkness."

During the hour that followed, a regiment of guards trundled into the town and formed a line from house to house to seal off the streets leading to the scene. Their brand-new uniforms, leather straps, boots and gleaming machine guns provided something of a festive spectacle for the locals who sat staring out from the cover of the bushes.

"It was a pleasant afternoon – someone said later – you could feel that it was September and the crippling heat had gone out of the sun that would have made it otherwise unbearable to hang around outside for that long. Everybody was waiting: what was going to happen? Nothing good came of it. No more than half an hour passed and we heard 'the parents are coming!' And the minute they appeared, even right at the far end of the street, everybody knew it was them. They ran towards us down the middle of the street like people gone mad in hysterics, and anyone could see that there was going to be trouble. And trouble there was because the guards weren't willing to let them through either and they started to shout 'where are the kids?' and they wanted to see their children. The women cursed and the men tried to break their way through with brute force. They had to be pushed back with machine gun barrels and one man even pulled a knife and only backed off when a guard fired a warning shot and he had to be pulled away from the cordon by the police."

The wall of men only opened up early in the afternoon and a convoy of Daimlers and Tatra Dynamic's set off from the east bank of the Danube and drove in silence down Red Army Avenue. The black entourage brought a delegation of top brass to Törökszentmiklós from the Ministry of the Interior led by Deputy Minister Tibor Pócze who was sent to the scene by Rákosi himself as soon as he'd read the first reports. The cordon opened again later in the day to let the fire brigade through and then a council cart with six coffins on the back. The last through were trucks from the Municipal Transport Company.

Translated by Ralph Berkin