

I'm Flying in the Airspace of a Room:
Excerpt from *Swedish* by Gábor Schein
Translated from the Hungarian by Otilie Mulzet



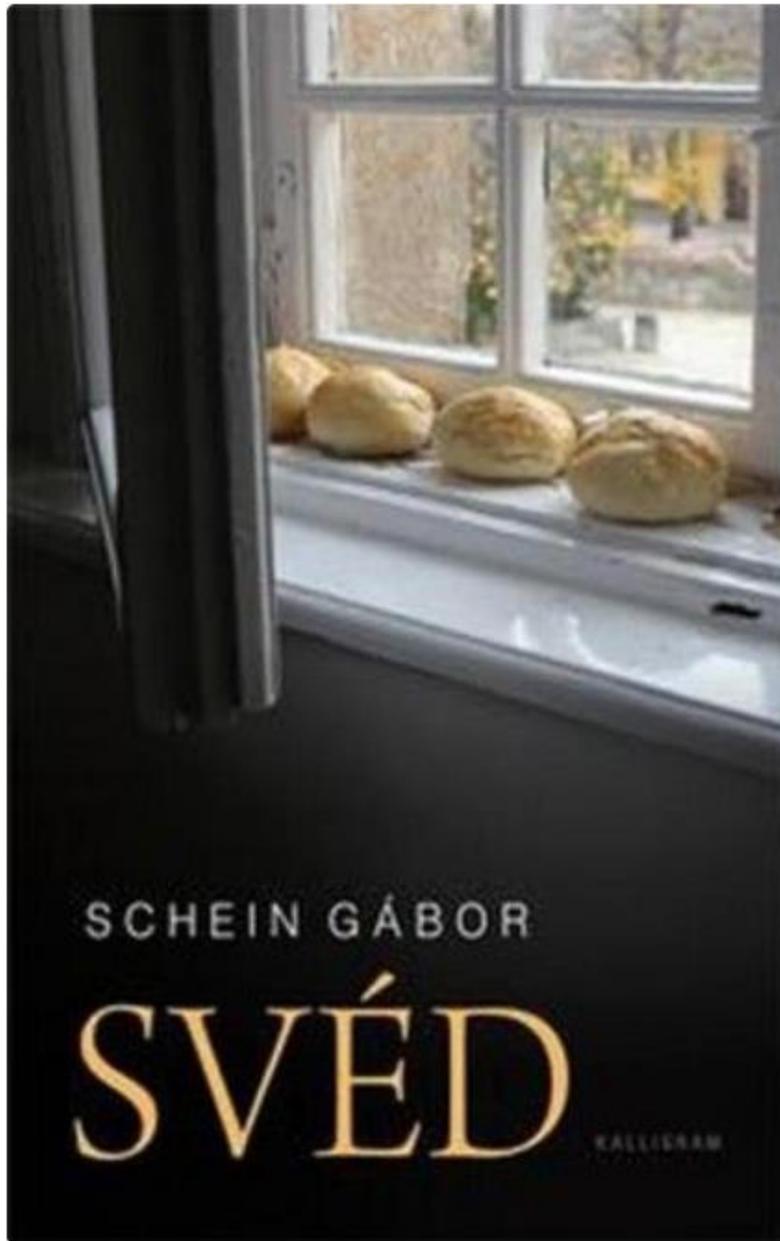
Today's exquisite translation is an excerpt from the novel [Swedish](#) by the accomplished novelist Gábor Schein, translated from the Hungarian by Otilie Mulzet. [Swedish](#) narrates the story of an orphan, Ervin, given up for adoption by his fanatically Communist mother after the defeat of the Hungarian uprising by Soviet forces in 1956, and later consigned to a psychiatric ward. In this excerpt from Chapter Two, 'I'm Flying in the Airspace of the Room', one of the wards is described, offering a rare glimpse into the psychic conditions of the final decades of communist rule.

For her translation of [Swedish](#), Otilie Mulzet received an America PEN Heim Translation Grant in 2019. We hope you'll enjoy this excerpt as much as we did. Let us know what you think, using #TranslationMonth.

Happy National Translation Month and happy reading!

—*Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman*

Translator's Note



Swedish narrates the story of an orphan, Ervin, given up for adoption by his fanatically Communist mother after the defeat of the Hungarian uprising by Soviet forces in 1956, and later consigned to a psychiatric ward. The narrative is presented from the view of Ervin's adoptive father, the Swedish physician Dr. Grönwald, who, toward the end of his life, senses a need to trace the boy's biological mother. He ends up contacting Dr. Bíró, a female psychiatrist, to assist him in this task. In this excerpt from Chapter Two, 'I'm Flying in the Airspace of the Room', one of the wards for which Dr. Bíró is responsible is described — the psychiatric hospital, a venerable institution, is being closed down, most likely to be sold into private hands for real estate speculation (based upon a genuine occurrence in the early millennium in Budapest).

The many complex threads of this novel embrace both Hungary in 1956 and Hungary in 2006 (the year of right-wing riots during the official

commemorations of the revolution's anniversary that led to the current authoritarian government in Hungary), psychiatric care in Hungary under Communism, and above all an existential probing of the state of existence without memory, as embodied by Ervin. Gábor Schein's prose is marked by a deliberate and conscious pursuit of objectivity and distance in the face of repeated traumas and horrors both historic and still very much present. Not only is this the work of a literary intelligence with very deep roots: it is equally a plea for an ethical mission and calling for literature itself.

— *Otilie Mulzet, Translator*

Excerpt from Chapter 2 of Swedish, by Gábor Schein

Translated by Otilie Mulzet

I'm Flying in the Airspace of a Room

They tried to spare the patients, but in vain, because they also heard the news, and as nobody was able to tell them what was going to happen to them, everyone's condition sharply deteriorated. For the past few days, an airplane had been flying across the room every ten minutes, roaring past the hook from which a cleaning rag was hanging, missing the soap dish by a mere hand's width. Altogether, Dr. Bíró was able get the planes to fly a little more quietly in those few moments before they landed, as they entered the airspace of the room, the landing strips now clearly visible. Although the planes clattered and rumbled somewhat less, the whole thing had become even more frightening, if that was even possible. Cutting through the air beneath the ceiling, the airplanes, droning, descended toward the heads of the patients, stained with sweat. They throttled their engines to such a degree that it was almost impossible to hear them, forcing the patients to pay even closer attention to where that soft rumbling was coming from, and yet by the time they heard it, it was already too late — the airplane was flying right next to their ears, whizzing as if a tuning fork were pressed against their temples. The dreadful rumbling came from both without and within. Then it stopped for a while, but the terror remained on their faces. As if they were being flayed alive. And then another sound started up, someone deeper than the previous one. Once again the patients grew disturbed, because they could hardly hear what it was. Dr. Bíró had to go around the room and adjust the plastic drinking cups, the handkerchiefs, putting everything back in its accustomed place, and she had to go out to the garden to show the patients what she saw there, and — as if this would cause the planes

to divert — she had to lift up all the branches one after the other, flourishing them. The patients were overjoyed. Suddenly they all began to scream. They didn't know why they were doing that. They screamed, they had to scream.

There was only one person who had not been disturbed by the invasion of the airplanes. Between the two windows there sat a man of uncertain age, but most likely older, his back straight, resting his palms on his knees. His head was bald up to the crown; the gray hair hung down long past his temples. Ever since he had turned up there — and this had been almost three months ago — he had observed, with his unbearably sharp gray eyes, everything that took place in the protected workshop. He had taken a spot in between the two windows, since from here he had a good view of every nook and cranny; not a single movement or quiver could escape his attention. He continually documented everything. Never would he have forgiven himself if he missed anything — even the slightest of details — because he realized, to his own astonishment, that to allow even seemingly meaningless things to escape our attention was to allow the recognition that we stand defenseless on the midpoint of a frail, ill-constructed bridge, a bridge leading between disintegration and the intelligible order of things. Until now, he had been mute. Now, however, while Dr. Bíró showed the patients the branches, he began, head bent down, to mumble something to himself, hardly audible and nodding at the same time. He kept murmuring the same thing over and over again, always in that same deep, ominous voice, like a prophecy, which of course no one paid any attention to: “Yesterday was one day, today makes two, tomorrow makes three, tomorrow and tomorrow makes four. Poor souls, poor souls. Yesterday was one day, today makes two, tomorrow makes three, tomorrow and tomorrow makes four. Poor souls, poor souls.”

The man who was bald at the crown of his head, with his long gray hair dangling down on both sides, was named Tamás, and only Tamás; it never occurred to anyone to call him Tomi or Tamáska. The nurses were fond of him. He, at least, was calm. With the others, the irritation

just grew and grew until ten o'clock at night, when it was time to go to sleep. The night nurse, who had already received her dismissal slip, and was finding this situation hard to comprehend, reassured the patients that the American government would not remain indifferent to what was happening here. Parachutists would be immediately dropped, trained units of Marines, they had already set off from their bases, they would soon be arriving, the aircraft carriers had anchored at Trieste, of this everyone could be certain. This had its effect for a while, and it could be hoped that they would all fall asleep while they were waiting. But nobody fell asleep and when the patients again began demanding — now in rage — that they wanted to see the parachutists, they wanted to see them falling from the sky like snowflakes, the night nurse at first said that it seemed that the maneuver had been postponed, because of the bad weather the deployment would not be taking place right now, but tomorrow everyone would certainly wake up to a wondrously beautiful snowfall, a snowfall such as they had never seen ever in their lives, and then the American Marines would fall from the sky through the pure white, with their white quilted parachutes.

But, as the general lack of tranquility had not subsided, the night nurse too soon lost her patience. She yelled at them to leave her in peace, she couldn't do anything about it, there were no airplanes, they were waiting for them in vain, maybe there wasn't even any America, and no ocean, somebody just made it all up, and as for Trieste, the Goths had demolished it long ago, and anyway in a week everyone would be able to go home, because here everything was being dismantled, the entire dump was going to be shut down. The patients understood not a word of what she had said, but they suddenly grew mute, there arose a great silence — the only thing that could be heard was Tamás's murmurings from the corner: "Yesterday was one day, today makes two, tomorrow makes three, tomorrow and tomorrow makes four. Poor souls, poor souls. Yesterday was one day, today makes two, tomorrow makes three, tomorrow and tomorrow makes four. Poor souls, poor souls."

Two or three minutes passed like this until somebody dared to cough. Then chaos broke out. Everyone began to imitate the airplanes. They held up their arms as if they were flying, and they rumbled, buzzed, screeched, whimpered, made ghastly sounds. There were those who couldn't stand it for long, and they suddenly collapsed, squatting, cocooning into themselves, or lying on the floor where their strength had given out. The ones who could bear it screeched ever more loudly, avoiding or stepping over the mute ones. And that was how the last evenings in the institute were spent.

Outside, in the meantime, the demonstrations were happening every day now. The doctors, the nurses, and the support staff took part, along with the outpatients. They were protesting the closing of the institute. From the microphone, many wise and sad words were pronounced concerning the history of the institute, which stretched back one hundred and thirty-nine years; the traditions of Hungarian psychology and psychiatry connected to this building, and chiefly the fate of the patients who would remain without care — but nobody even hoped that the decision to close the institute would be revoked, moreover they didn't even expect that there would be anyone to listen to their counter-arguments. In the evening news that night, the Minister of Health pronounced that the building was no longer suitable for housing patients, it was technically obsolete, in wintertime so much heat escaped from the building that they were almost heating the entire neighborhood, thus it was impossible, economically speaking, to keep this outsized institution in operation. From this, many concluded that somebody had picked out the location for himself; someone with an unquenchable thirst for this piece of land. The others nodded — but there was nothing anyone could do. In the meantime, articles began appearing in the newspapers explaining how psychiatry stigmatizes patients, treating them with medicines that have no scientific basis. The pharmaceuticals of today — and, as was commonly known, psychiatrists pocketed untold thousands of dollars for prescribing them — originated from the instruments of torture of the eighteenth century, as well as from ice baths, insulin coma therapy,

and lobotomies; and the vision of these psychiatrists was to raise a generation which, thanks to doctors and their diagnoses of depression, would be dependent on drugs for an entire life.

“This is insane,” said Dr. Bíró. “Do they realize what they’re destroying?”

After a lock had been placed on the main entrance gate, in the corridors of the main building of four stories and in the various divisions, there now resided only the good and the bad memories. The instruments, the x-ray machines—now languishing superfluous between the dilapidated walls—the treatment logs, the pathographic reports, all remained behind. Anyone coming into the building could take whatever he might wish to. One group of patients was scattered among other institutes; most of them, however, were permitted to go home with no further promise of care, and many ended up on the street. After they had closed the psychiatric clinic, for quite a while a few of them kept coming back, staring at the park from behind the fence: at night they shined their pocket flashlights between the clumps of grass, which made the dogs, now let loose, frantic; they jumped at the fence, baring their teeth. The patients looked at them hesitantly, not comprehending why there were wild beasts in their garden; they didn’t know if they should run away from there.

About the author



into German and Spanish. His novel *Autobiographies of an Angel* is being translated by Otilie Mulzet for Yale University Press.

Gábor Schein is a literary historian, poet, and novelist. He is the author of nine collections of poetry and four novels. His work explores the state of Jewish survival in late and post-communist Hungary, the aftermath of catastrophe, the legacy of Jewish life in both pre- and post-Holocaust Europe, and the psychic conditions of the final decades of communist rule. His two short novels *Lazarus* (trans. Otilie Mulzet) and *The Book of Mordechai* (trans. Adam Z. Levy), was published by Seagull Books in 2017. His novel *Swedish* (*Svéd*, 2015) has enjoyed great critical esteem and success in his native Hungary and has been translated

About the translator



Otilie Mulzet translates from Hungarian and Mongolian and writes literary criticism. Her latest translation is Szilárd Borbély's *Final Matters, Selected Poems: 2004-2010*, published by Princeton University Press. Forthcoming translations include *Baron Wenckheim's Homecoming*, by László Krasznahorkai (New Directions), *Dostoevsky Reads Hegel in Siberia and Bursts into Tears*, by László Földényi (Yale University Press), and *The Bone Fire*, by György Dragomán (Houghton Mifflin).