



BALÁZS BIRKÁS

Photo: Márton Kállai

TREETOPS IN THE STORM

Balázs Birkás used to be an interpreter, for, among others, Helmut Kohl, Lech Wałęsa, and Václav Havel. Then he cut his tie in two and completely changed his lifestyle. An almond farmer of two thousand trees always has something to do, as cracking and separating the kernels of one ton of almonds takes just a bit less than two thousand hours, and this is only one of his activities. He likes it though. That is his life. He could not follow in the footsteps of his grandfather, who was a captain of a submarine.

At this time of year, it's rather cold in the morning, and the two thousand almond trees running down the hills are wrapped in persistent white mist. "Balázs Birkás got up at 4 a.m., as always. He pulled something on, sat down next to the threshold of the front door with a cup of coffee in his hand and lit a cigarette, as he always does. Mici, his alpha dog had already been eagerly waiting for the lighter to flame up in the dark and her master would quietly puff out the smoke of the smouldering tobacco. She ran up to him, placed her head on his lap, snorted then fell asleep snoring. This is how all days start on a continent of this slowly revolving planet Earth, in the village of Szentbékállá. The tympanum of the cottage built by his ancestor, a water miller, in 1762, white-washed hundreds of times ever since, is even depicted on

one of the postage stamps in use. This part of the country has been dear to him since his childhood. After his parents divorced, Balázs Birkás, born in 1939, would spend both his three-month summer and six-week coal breaks (school breaks due to a lack of heating coal) on his father's property. His time in Szentbékálla would be characterised either by scorching heat or bitter cold. If I wanted to write tales, it would be enough to pen some lines about my forebears: his maternal grandfather was a high-ranking Austrian officer and a commander of a submarine, whose life was saved by a pustule. While he was back on the shore to have his pimple cleaned, his submarine was sunk. As the Habsburg Monarchy came to an end and so did the Austro-Hungarian navy, Balázs Birkás' forefather was appointed director of a Dutch steamship company running on the Danube. According to the family custom on his father's side, men took foreign wives, so his father's brother married a young lady from Sweden, and his own father married a girl from the German-speaking minority from the Italian region of Veneto.

The native German-speaker Balázs Birkás did a series of different things after his secondary school final exams: worked as a car mechanic and as an assistant photographer, attended the University of Technology, but didn't complete any of the relevant trainings, earned no degree or diploma. He was offered the possibility to work in foreign trade for twenty-eight years while being in a project office of Csepel Works (metal works producing a variety of vehicles and other metal products). As he spoke good German and English, he could conduct business negotiations all over the world. The two European countries he did not visit at the time were Luxemburg and Portugal, but to make up for it, he visited many distant spots, for instance in India, Bangladesh, and Nigeria.

In the second half of the 1980s he had an increasingly intense feeling that due to the inefficiency of the socialist economy, "this ship was going to sink", and he decided to undertake a radical change. Thanks to his language skills, he specialised in commercial law as a translator and interpreter.

On the wall of one of the rooms of his house in Szentbékálla, four necktie blades are framed and put underneath a glass pane. He, who used to wear neckties as part of the strict dress code of interpreters, has cut his four most frequently worn neckties in two, and put them as a reminiscence on the walls to remind himself never to end up in such a suffocating situation again. Back then, he began doing translation and interpretation jobs for attorneys' offices that had a German clientele. As state-sponsored companies could not settle privateers' invoices in those days, Balázs Birkás would search for alternatives, so in 1988 and 1989, he was working for the Hungarian Parliament. In retrospect, he must admit that he had to put on a necktie only a few times, when he was interpreting for Károly Grósz, Helmut Kohl, Lech Wałęsa, Václav Havel or while he was chaperoning German ministers. He preferred simultaneous interpretation in a booth in the Parliament because there he was not obliged to dress up. What he did have to do, though, was to translate quite unexpected things with only a 1 second delay: for example, parliamentary speeches on the dog tax, the raised traffic fees, or the changes in the way of issuing baptismal certificates.

Following the political changes in 1989, he could get hold of this family property in Szentbékálla, which was in shambles. The unkempt grapevines had vigorously grown on the ground, and not even tractors could handle the unruly growth of briar and spindle bushes. For an entire year, he was fighting against the overgrowth of plants, and he knew that

he would not want to work with a vineyard, because growing grapevines was just part of the big picture: winemaking was another issue. While he was considering his options, he came up with the idea of growing an almond plantation. The land was fit for the cultivation of almond trees. Loam limestone soil with a pH of 6.8, 550-600 millimetres of rain a year, and a partly protected area is on a sunny, south-facing hillside.”

As almond production has a long-established tradition in Andalusia, on the Iberian Peninsula in general, in the south of Italy, Sicily, California and Louisiana, in the years 1991 and 1992, he visited all these places. Following his study trips, he planted two thousand almond tree saplings. He still had five years left until the trees would produce fruit, so he had time to plan how he would sell the yield. This is exactly what he did. In better years, he can harvest even one ton of almonds, but he does not do business with retailers. When tourists come, they sometimes buy ten to twenty pounds of cracked almonds. He also has a permanent stall at the producers’ market in Káptalantóti.

‘By car, I can get to the markets of Vienna or Zurich in just a half a day or a day. If I get up at 2 a.m., I can easily take my almonds in labelled jars to the organic market in Vienna or the Freyung organic farmers’ market. They did, of course, check what I meant to sell and for how much. They wouldn’t have let me sell my products below the prices of the local Austrian farmers.’

‘I guess you needed thousands of different permits and licenses?’

‘At a farmers’ market, international commercial law is not an issue. What matters is whether I have paid the fee for the stall, I must make sure that I don’t push other stallholders into the background. They heard I spoke German just like

them, even though my accent wasn’t local, they guessed Munich or Regensburg. If they asked me where I was from, I replied that I was Hungarian from Szentbékállá...’

‘Did you keep going there for a long time?’

‘No. It is like the neighbour’s wife telling you that she makes potato gratin differently from your wife. Will you taste it? I’ll go over and eat from the differently-prepared potato gratin, but it won’t become a habit...’

There are some potential clients, perhaps Germans. They are already here in the village, but they haven’t been to the farm yet, so they can’t find the way; some help on the mobile phone could be of use. Sitting next to the porch underneath a walnut tree with its already golden leaves, he tells me that he will collect them at the church. My view glides right to the Black Hill and then down the Káli Basin as he fastens his helmet and jumps on his quad. Mici, the dog, follows him, and if she does, all the others, Répa (Carrots), Retek (Radish) and Mogyoró (Hazelnut) (these three words form a Hungarian tongue-twister) will follow too. On meandering paths even beyond the stone cross, It is an established habit with them that they accompany him to the village shop howling, but if they see that he does not stop there, they will turn back sooner or later...

Balázs Birkás regularly gives presentations in the region on almond cultivation. Why does he do that? He believes that if the regions can boast significant almond production, the regional economy could also benefit from it. If you have 250 pounds of almonds, you sell it for what you get for it, several farmers together, however, could insist on a higher price. Today, there are nearly ten thousand almond trees in the region north of Lake Balaton, and it is absolutely clear that this is the area that is most suited for almond farming.

On the hillside in Szentbékállá, where the sun of the Indian summer shows off with its somewhat weakened heat, almond trees cover about 1.8 hectares, while 1.4 hectares are allotted to organic spelt wheat. In order to have sufficient yield stability and to reduce work accumulation, he did not plant just one species with the highest yield but several. In this manner, the times of flowering do not coincide, and the rather frequent spring frost does not destroy the entire yield but only the species that is in flowering. The case of harvesting is similar. It begins in early September and lasts until early October. This way, they never have so much to harvest that they could not make due without day labourers.

The other day, before the seeding of the organic spelt crop, he ploughed the entire 1.4 hectares of land. He sells the controlled organic products to a mill in Kalocsa, where he transports the crop by a truck. This time of year, in the autumn, he and his partner Zsuzsi continuously crack the almonds, and then with gradually increasing heat, they roast the almonds at 150 degrees Celsius, and finally they sprinkle olive oil and fine grained sea salt on them. What a meticulous task! Almost one (.9) kilo consists of 950-980 clean almonds. It takes about eighty minutes to crack this amount, and the thorough selection takes another thirty minutes...

On rainy days, they also clean the rye. In November, he starts working in his workshop, repairs his machines, the cultivator, the shredder, the plough and its discs, his Italian tractor and thousands of other things. Behind the lathe, the anvil, the welding accessories, his precision drill bits are in apple-pie order. If he wants to wind down a bit, he chops logs into firewood using a hydraulic press. He starts the new year again with work. I learn that almond trees must be pruned twice a year, first in January or February, while the

plant is still dormant, and then in the second half of August one must thin out the shoots. If there is a wind direction that brings tempestuous winds several times a year, then during pruning care must be taken that the treetops will not be exposed to the storm. When Birkás has a bit of free time, he shreds the wood chips, which are composted for months, and the compost is then used as a mulch for the trees.

With the almond shells stored in the shed, the heating of the two hundred and fifty-year old manor is also solved. Inside the building, we see tokens of a rich life: underneath the antlers, a certificate issued for the most skilled of the tractor driving contest. In the year 2000, Birkás' property was given the title "Organic Farm of the Year". He also has a medal from the vigilantes, as well as trophies acknowledging his line fishing competencies, but he has little time to muse over them. And of course there are the curtailed neckties...

The ashlar walls of the house are 76 centimeters thick. Once the fireplace has been started, maintaining the temperature is a piece of cake. The fire is beautifully crackling.

'And did you really get away without tying a necktie?'

'I would much rather put on a turtleneck shirt. No one found fault with it.'