

68/11

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**the man who sold
smelly cheeses**

I DO NOT know exactly when it was that I first learnt that there is cheese — and smelly cheese. As for the term itself, I'll let it stand. Why it is that the layman usually says smelly cheese, while the initiated say sharp or pungent, is beyond my understanding. I am referring to the quite ordinary fact that one day I realised that while some cheeses have got taste, others are completely flavourless, like rubber. Several more years passed before I learnt that the number of smelly cheeses corresponds proportionately to the number of people who like smelly cheeses. I mean to say that they are few. Only it puzzled me that while smelly cheeses, although in a minority, have their own nickname, and not just one at that: smelly, sharp, pungent, — all the others, in spite of being in the majority, lack a common designation. No one ever says: fragrant cheeses. Like all majorities, they are anonymous. So when a majority of non-sympathisers gives a nickname to a minority of cheeses, it is not surprising that it is pejorative. Consequently all the better cheeses are popularly called smelly. This is obvious to the average cheese-lover, and anyone else doesn't concern me.

Well, there we are: I said *better* cheeses, thus giving away my view. As far as I'm concerned, then, smelly cheeses are superior to others. It remains a mystery to me how I came to like smelly cheese, for in our household cheese was practically never eaten: particularly not after lunch, and particularly not any cheeses which could be smelt. I am secretly convinced that my family valued a cheese for the number and size of its holes, and not its pungency. My life experience in the realm of cheeses depended entirely on my own initiative and ambition. As a result I discovered the world of cheeses only gradually, indeed, I still haven't fully explored it. However, believe it or not, I knew a great deal about them, even before I read »The Stomach of Paris«, and visited, for example, Rue d'Amsterdam. My knowledge was theoretical, of course, for I had no occasion to acquire practical experience.

All the same, I was worried that my cheesophilia was growing somewhat excessive. The circle of my acquaintances became increasingly restricted, for I tolerated only those who liked smelly cheese. We would regularly meet, and furtively, like stowaways, deep into the night chew cheese-rinds which we had left in the sun to grow stale. We discovered that it was possible to eat the rind of the most insipid cheese, together with its mauve stamp, once it had been left to go stale and smelly. I quarrelled with my best friend from pre-cheese days after seeing him on an excursion eating with his wife a piece of that processed sponge which they fatuously call »Zdenka Cheese« (his wife was also called Zdenka and greatly resembled than spongy matter). I became rather worried, for after all I lived amongst men and it was hardly fair to judge human beings by the laws which govern coagulation, fermentation, and casein. I eventually began to consider myself an eccentric, and took up weight-lifting, and did my best not to think about Rue d'Amsterdam and imitation Banja Luka Trappist cheese.

Until one day I met him, the man who sold smelly cheeses. It was a fatal encounter for me, indeed, for both of us.

I was strolling about the market with my hands in my pockets. Although I was trying to forget about cheeses, hardly a Saturday went by that I did not make the rounds of the stalls selling dairy products. I would contemplate that amorphous, anonymous mass of casein and

occasionally be carried away by fantasies, as a man sometimes has obscene dreams in colour. I would have the illusion that coloured labels were sticking themselves onto the cheeses and I would breathlessly read off: Excelsior, Livarot, Fourme d'Ambert, Marolles, Fribourg, Gammelost, Camembert... Until someone would get angry with me for treading on his corn and give me a shove. And so, still in colour, I stopped in front of a new stall and with two fingers fastidiously picked up a little piece of Sombor cheese which seemed to me creamier than imitation Sombor cheese usually is. I picked off a crumb and munched it: it actually almost tasted of cheese. With mutual amazement the seller and I looked at each other.

— What are you so surprised about? — he said. That's not Cheddar! I gaped at the man standing there behind the bench. It was his voice, actually, that first startled me, drawling and slightly sing-song, as my acquaintances who are better connoisseurs of men than cheeses would say. A small, undistinguished face, bluish grey eyes, and an irreproachably clean white apron.

— Excuse me — I muttered almost inaudibly. — Did you say Cheddar? Do you mean C-h-e-d-d-a-r?

— Of course — he drawled sarcastically. — There is only one Cheddar!

And from that moment on I had my own seller of smelly cheeses, although I was not immediately aware of what had happened. I quietly asked him (you might as well know so that I won't have to repeat it again: I always ask quietly) if he could perhaps recommend me one of his cheeses.

— By all means — he readily replied — Schwarzenberg. Of course, it isn't anything special, but it has a flavour of its own, it's sharp. At present there's nothing better to be had.

The Schwarzenberg was a firm, almost full-cream cheese; it wasn't exactly sharp, but it did tingle on one's tongue. At that point, having exhausted my stocks of Camembert which I had purchased from France, the Schwarzenberg was a true balm to my cheese hungry wound, and an incentive to me to persevere in the exploration of this smelly universe (some acquaintances had written on my front-door, »Beware, cheese is eaten here«, and drawn a skull and crossbones!). Unfortunately the Schwarzenberg soon ran out and my man informed me that due to lack of demand it had ceased to be made. I felt as though I had lost a much-beloved member of the family and for ten whole days I could not bring myself to touch another cheese.

— There you are — said the seller of smelly cheese with a mournful sigh. — They've deprived us of Schwarzenberg, too. It's a crying shame... And you've no idea of the materials we have for cheese-making... We could be exporting cheese to France, and instead we make this kind of rubbish. It always seems to me that our agricultural collectives must be run by men who have never yet eaten a slice of cheese after supper. Even Kocevje Trappist is no longer what it used to be...

And then we would embark on an interminable discussion about Kocevje Trappist, Bohinj Emmentaler, Pag, Lovcen and Tolmin cheeses, until I turned the conversation to my favourite subject, to the elect

amongst the elect, to my beloved *soft* cheeses. Then it was the turn of Travnik, Vlasic, Cacak, Sombor and Uzice cheeses, of endless comparisons with Camembert, Romadour, Limburger (the French ones, and our varieties which never ripen and ooze at the centre, except when I bought them from my cheese-monger).

— It's no good without goat's milk — my man would declare.

— Really? — I would say — I thought sheep's milk, too...

— Pah! Sheep's milk! My dear Sir, the whole secret lies in *la chèvre* — he would declare enthusiastically, not paying any attention to the other customers who had come to buy their hundred grammes of trappist for sandwiches.

The first time that I discovered how few customers he had — although the market was otherwise full and busy — I realised that matters might come to a bad end (I not only ask quietly, I also, as you see, don't express myself clearly). On Saturday afternoons, in the middle of the general bustle, we would remain almost completely alone behind his stall. Ah, I shall never forget those Saturdays! I would come to the market elated and joyful, impatiently anticipating the surprise he would have in store for me: would it be a last stray round of Schwarzenberg or some delicious sheep's cheese from Lika? I could never predict what the surprise would be, for however poor the selection of cheeses in our town, he would always bring out some speciality from under his bench. Who knows, I used to think quietly to myself (I also think quietly), perhaps it'll be a Sijenica cheese which has lain maturing for half a century in some ogre's magic castle.

As I was saying, I realised that matters might come to a bad end, when I noticed how alone we were. Housewives would occasionally appear, stop before the stall. If they already knew my man, they would merely nod their noses, while if they didn't yet know him, they would ask for their hundred grams of trappist and be kept waiting for him to finish his conversation with me. Sometimes one of these housewives would appear just as he was bringing out from under the bench some »old« gorgonzola from Slovenia, all marbled with green veins like soap in a cabbage leaf. Like every housewife who scent that something special, something for someone, is furtively being brought out from under a bench, — and consequently something tastier (thus including her and her household in the small circle of the elect at that moment, the only people in the whole town to eat, say, fresh eggs or ripe water-melon), the wretched woman would dart towards us, snatch from me a morsel of gorgonzola, taste it and screw up her face in disgust, »Ugh, what don't they try and sell nowadays, they'll poison the lot of us... You should be ashamed of yourselves!« But there were fewer and fewer of these rash housewives, and finally they began to make a wide detour to avoid the stall. One day I warned him that this could end badly and suggested that, perhaps, he should be more attentive to his other customers. He gave a disdainful smile.

— Look, there are dozens of people selling on this market who haven't the vaguest notion about cheese and serve any old rubbish. Why should I be bothered with ordinary customers? Doesn't someone have to attend to the few connoisseurs like you, who can tell the difference between cheese and rubber, if you please.

I quietly agreed with him. And smiled.

Only I was surprised that I never saw at his stall any other amateur of smelly cheese apart from myself (I couldn't see myself either, of course, that's just my way of expressing it.) This began to make me feel uneasy. I felt like a member of some secret, underground society, whose rules, for conspiratorial reasons permitted me to know only one member, the man selling smelly cheeses. And so I would come and stand before the mysterious stall, exclaim, »Open, Edam«, exchange with my cheese-monger the password: »Belje special« — and the gates to the underworld would open up, and there, awaiting me would be Roque the Mighty and his forty smelly mates.

The exciting conspiratorial game continued. People made wider and wider detours to avoid us. Gradually the circle of my friends narrowed, my knowledge of cheeses deepened, and my experiences fermented and coagulated into casein. In relation to cheese I was a new man.

Until one day I became aware that it wasn't just cheese.

I was not a particularly busy man and it was not the demands of work which obliged me to choose Saturdays for my meetings with the cheese-monger. As, unlike other people, I did not have working hours, so also, unlike other people, I did not have free time. I envied school-children, housemaids, and consultant physicians for whom Saturdays and Sundays are special days. Every day was the same to me, and so I made Saturday into a holiday. Although on ordinary days I would also pass by for regular provisions of cheese, I kept Saturdays for the smelliest conversations and cheeses. And naturally it was precisely on Saturday that the coup occurred.

I was discussing with my man whether Edam was the only right name for this cheese, or whether it was also possible to use the variant *Ajdamer*, which I considered to be a German alternative. In the middle of this discussion I suddenly noticed that my seller of smelly cheeses used in his speech a linguistic terminology of a complexity such as one would not expect even from a proficient linguist. And just at that instant, seized by an inexplicable impulse (I believe this is the phrase for it when one doesn't quite know what's up), I caught sight of a book with a mauve cover on a shelf in between greaseproof paper and cheeses. I couldn't believe my own, and wouldn't have believed another man's eyes. A shudder ran through me. There could be no doubt: my man has hidden amongst his smelliest ware the same book that I had hidden in the third shelf of my library. Even my friends mocked, scorned and derided me on account of his book, declaring that nothing could justify my affection for it and its author, whose place in the history of literature, philosophy and mankind was extremely problematical. I had always thought that it would be impossible to find two men liking that same strange book. And then this, out of the blue. I didn't dare to ask any questions; hurriedly I took my leave. I decided there and then never to come back to that man's stall. I wasn't going to let myself to be drawn into the game; I realised that more than cheese was at stake. Feverishly I turned over in my mind who that cheese-monger could be, and who could have sent him to torment me with talk of Kocevje Trappist and the differences between French and our Romadour, between Czech and our »kvargl« cheese. After that book with the mauve cover I knew that he knew all about me. I decided to

flee from him. Furthermore in the first moments of panic I resolved to join the category of people with a hundred grams of sham trappist. That enchanting, simple world of half a dozen labels, instead of three hundred of them.

If it hadn't been for gorgonzola and Gorgonzola I might never have stepped into the market again. But that too was inevitable.

It was probably some stupid (or inexplicable) instinct that took me to Milan, and from there my flair led me to Gorgonzola, a small Italian town of which my cheese-monger had spoken one thrilling Saturday afternoon. There it was that I ate for the first time real Gorgonzola, gorgonzola from Gorgonzola. I then realised the immense difference not just between our imitation gorgonzolas and those imported from Italy, but also between gorgonzolas I had eaten in Venice, Rome and even Milan and the unique, authentic cheese from Gorgonzola. Although gorgonzola officially belongs to the category of firm cheeses, the soft centre of the true Gorgonzola was a real revelation to me, showing me that naked theory stands helpless before the secrets of the cheese underworld which only a lifelong experience can discover. But to whom could I confide this great revelation, with whom could I completely... and so on, and so on. I won't bore you with it all. I flew home as if on wings. Once again I completely surrendered myself to cheese, we know what kind, and I had the presentiment that henceforward nothing could part me from it.

It was a cloudy, dark Saturday when once again, after so many days and cheeses, I walked chirpy as a cricket into the unfriendly market. From afar I could see the crowd around the stall of my cheese-monger. I thought I must be dreaming, in black and white. People, in the form of housewives, were jostling around the stall like at a burial. They were buying colourless, tasteless cow's cheese, watery cream, battery eggs and their hundred grams of sham trappist. The finest anti-cheese in the world. What I had feared, had happened: behind that bench there no longer stood my cheese-monger.

I approached the stall as if in a dream. Behind the bench stood a fat, yellowish, nondescript man with vacant eyes. Like a big hole in a small cheese. In front of him, on that same bench, were a few nondescript hunks of cheese. Quaveringly I asked:

— Is that all you've got?

— What do you mean, all? I've five different kinds of cheese! Five different kinds! FIVE! What more do you want?... — his voice was harsh, powerful and monotonous, as my acquaintances who are better connoisseurs of men than cheese would say.

I turned, and pushed my way through the grave-diggers out into Saturday, which was once again just an ordinary day. I don't know which housewife it was who informed me in a tone of satisfaction of the fate of my cheese-monger: the just protests of citizens, those buying their hundred grams of sham trappist, had become increasingly vociferous; rumor had reached the ears of authority that a maniac was selling in the market stale, mouldy, smelly cheeses »which will poison the lot of us«; market inspectors had come and declared that the complaints of the purchasers of a hundred grams of excellent, fresh, Banja Luka trappist were absolutely justified; they confiscated a large quantity of stale, smelly cheese, and as for my cheese-monger, they temporarily...

(well, there are some things I don't know how to precisely define, formulate or whatever the word is)... a less dangerous duty; he was lucky, said the housewives, not to be punished as an example to others.

I went home, took the book with the mauve cover out of the third shelf of my library, threw it away, and ate with relish a triangular piece of processed »Zdenka cheese«. I telephoned several acquaintances and informed them that they could once again call me, my smelly-cheese days were over. At present when I maturely reflect on all this (*mature* not in the sense of Gorgonzola or Romadour) I wonder what came over me. As if in this short life of ours cheeses were of an importance. Pah, close Edam.

Translated by Ivo Curćin

Auteur de neuf recueils de poèmes, lauréat de trois prix de poésie, SLAVKO MIHALIĆ (1928) est l'un des plus éminents représentants de la poésie croate contemporaine, ainsi qu'en témoignent les critiques suivantes:

«Voici enfin un poète dont on peut dire que, nanti d'une personnalité parfaite et achevée, il a évité les excursions dans les traditions techniques et dans les conceptions poétiques et philosophiques qui lui sont étrangères. Ce qu'il y a d'essentiel dans sa poésie, c'est qu'elle est le fruit d'un équilibre heureux de toutes les structures de la langue.» (DALIBOR CVITAN)

«Mihalić est l'un de ces poètes qui donnent une nouvelle langue à la poésie dès leurs premières oeuvres. Sans doute son oeuvre à lui est-elle construite sur certaines bases communes à tous les poètes de sa génération; mais le langage qu'il utilise s'est révélé dès le début personnel, robuste, riche en nouveaux rythmes, en nouveaux assemblages.» (BRANIMIR DONAT)

«On lui sait gré non seulement d'avoir écrit des poésies qui comptent parmi les plus belles de notre langue, mais aussi d'avoir su, à une époque où le public manifestait peu d'intérêt pour la poésie, attirer comme par magie un grand nombre de lecteurs et transformer jusqu'à ceux qui ne croyaient plus que la poésie, à l'ère de la bombe atomique, et de tous les miracles de la technique et de la civilisation, fût encore capable d'immobiliser l'homme et de le conduire sur les chemins lumineux de l'humanisme et de la paix.» (TOMISLAV SABLJAK)