Géza Ottlik

School at the Frontier

Iskola a határon

Presented by: Richárd Vincze

In *Iskola a határon*, Ottlik attempts to present a world in which power does not need to declare itself as political in order to function politically. To show this, he chooses and places a (secretly, or covertly operating) military school at the center of his novel, which functions as a so-called laboratory of authority, where discipline, surveillance, hierarchy, and sometimes terror produce subjects (actually kids between the age of 11-14), who eventually learn to obey, adapt to, and internalize domination as such. The novel thus offers a subtle yet incisive exploration of how authoritarian structures and patterns become embedded in everyday life and how they can function through institutions.

The novel is set in a Hungarian military boarding school near the western border during the interwar period (precisely: 1923-1927, but there are scenes from 1957 as well). This peripheral location also functions as a symbol. The school depicts a closed, self-contained system governed by rigid rules and hierarchical relations. Within this environment, everyday life is strictly regulated, and even minor, everyday actions are subject to control and evaluation. The text also emphasizes that the cadets inhabit a transitional state between childhood and adulthood. They are no longer children, yet not fully formed adults. Instead, they live in a “liminal condition” in which identity, moral judgment, and social roles are still in formation. The “frontier” of the title thus acquires multiple meanings: it refers not only to the geographical border near which the school is located, but also to psychological, ethical, and existential boundaries. The boys stand at the threshold between innocence and experience, obedience and autonomy, dependence and responsibility. At the same time, the novel situates them between two pedagogical models. One is a rigid, Prussian-style system based on discipline and coercion, and the other, which is a more humane, child-centred approach that remains largely unrealized here.

The narrative centers on three boys – Medve, Bébé, and Szeredy – whose experiences at the school shape their understanding of authority, friendship and identity as well. It is not really unfolding as a linear story; the novel is structured through how memory and retrospectionworks. Bébé, as a narrator, reconstructs past events from a temporal distance, reflecting on the formative experiences that defined his youth years. This retrospective perspective (and also the work on Medve’s text, which was given to Bébé after his death) introduces a layer of interpretation, reinterpretation: what is narrated is not only what happened, but how it is remembered and understood later…

According to the novel, daily life in the institution is marked by discipline, humiliation, terror and the constant negotiation of power. The cadets are subjected, first forcefully, and then habitually, to a system that enforces conformity, while undermining trust and solidarity among others. Official

authority, exercised by officers (Bogdán and Schulze), is mirrored by informal hierarchies among the students themselves (Merényi's group is the equivalent of Schulze e.g.). Older or stronger boys dominate younger ones, reproducing the very structures imposed upon them. Power thus circulates through the system rather than remaining confined to a single level — and somehow it becomes visible that it was quite naïve to believe that if they get rid of Merényi's group, then everything is going to be solved…

One of the novel's key insights is that domination becomes effective when it is internalized and becomes a habit. The boys learn not only to obey commands but to anticipate expectations, regulate and censor their own behavior, and accept injustice, or totally question it as part of the normal order of things. Authority is no longer experienced as a purely external feature, but eventually it becomes embedded in their perception and habit. In this sense, the school operates as a training ground not just for later soldiers, but for subjects who can function well within hierarchical systems.

At the same time, *Iskola a határon* does present this process as not a totality or as an irreversible fact. There are, e.g. moments of friendship and solidarity, which can create spaces of resistance within the institution (but of course this is also quite fluctuated…). The relationship between the boys, especially the figure of Medve, introduces an alternative ethical dimension based on loyalty and mutual recognition rather than sheer domination. Medve's stance is really important from this perspective: it is not formed as one of open rebellion but more of inner autonomy. All in all, he refuses to fully internalize the system, maintaining a degree of moral independence.

In the context of the form of the novel, it is crucial to note that it reflects these tensions through its complex narrative structure. As mentioned earlier, time is non-linear, and the movement between past and present highlights the instability and createdness of memory. Of how memory and remembering works. The act of narration then becomes an attempt to make sense of those experiences that resist clear interpretation and clear forms… This dimension reinforces the novel's political implications as well, by understanding that authority requires not only describing it, but reinterpreting it from a critical distance (as it was too close, a too lively experience — just as in the case of an abusive relationship e.g.).

Language also plays a crucial role in Iskola a határon, because it can be seen as a kind of narrative field in which authority and experience are negotiated — in a visibly mediated way. In particular, it anticipates key features of postmodern writing, such as the instability and the complexity of narrative voice and the self-reflexive treatment of storytelling. The impact of Ottlik's language can be traced, e.g. in the work of Esterházy Péter, also, whose prose similarly foregrounds the constructedness of narrative and the problem of representing experience. In this sense, Iskola a határon occupies a foundational position in the transformation of modern Hungarian prose.

The historical context of the novel is also crucial. Although set in the interwar period, it was published in 1959, in Hungary, which was shaped by state socialism(/capitalism). Without explicitly referring to contemporary politics, the novel can also be read as an indirect reflection on authoritarian systems more broadly. The military school then becomes an allegorical space in which different forms of power – whether associated with earlier regimes or later political structures – can be recognized in their shared mechanisms or functional patterns.

But importantly, Ottlik rigorously avoids presenting clear moral oppositions. As authority is not always visibly oppressive, and resistance is not always heroic and nice in a cliche way. The boundaries than between complicity and survival remain ambiguous. This ambiguity is central to the

novel's political dimension, as it reflects the complexity of living within systems that cannot be easily opposed or escaped, only adaptation is possible — in many subtle, nuanced and everchanging ways.

In this sense, *Iskola a határon* raises a question that extends beyond its historical setting. It invites readers to consider how institutions shape individuals and how systems of domination become normalized through everyday practice. Its political relevance lies precisely in this indirect approach, by focusing on the formation of subjectivity, the novel attempts to reveal how power operates beneath the surface of explicit and visible ideology.

Ultimately, Ottlik's novel offers a powerful diagnosis of this institutional authority. It tries to show that the most effective forms of power are those that become internal, operating through habit, discipline, adaptation — invisibly. By tracing how young individuals learn to navigate, reproduce, and occasionally resist such structures, *Iskola a határon* stands as a key work of twentieth-century Central European literature and a profound reflection on the politics of everyday life and of institutions.

LANGUAGE: Hungarian/Magyar nyelv

CENSORSHIP STATUS: