

# PILVAX

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## **from The Scarcity Shop**

by Mátyás Dunajcsik

(Translated from the Hungarian by Sam Poole)

Jenő Bander started the trade while the war was still going on. Of course everything was easy then. For a while his was the largest enterprise of its kind in the city—like a version of Father Courage, anything that was needed, he could get. Afterwards came the changes and Bander had to tighten his belt, of course not so much, because while the Iron Curtain still stood, there were no real problems. Even after the regime change, the problems didn't really begin until our inclusion in the European Union. After that you could forget about merchandise like caviar and Japanese silk; the new rules didn't really make it possible for someone to run a store with such a variable stock. That's when Bander decided to try his hand at the black market. The company officially went out of business, and he took down the painted red sign that had been above the cellar entrance on Ó street:

Jenő Bander's Scarcity Shop  
Founded 1942

and rehung it behind the counter. Fortunately, by that time there was already a group of regular customers that would whisper the address of the store to anyone who couldn't find something they desired.

Those whom Bander held in his employ were a notorious group. Namely, he only retained professionals. His best people were deserters still in hiding from the war or the revolution, all frightfully experienced, madly cunning characters who, despite their graying temples and aching limbs, could cut across the continent in just days if one of Bander's customers had a craving for a forgotten Portuguese vintner's wine, or could somehow find the only trash collection point in the city where, at that moment, a macramé toilet paper holder fashioned in the national colors was being tossed out. His web of connections was vast, containing networks of second-hand booksellers, flea

market vendors, knick-knack hunters, estate administrators, food specialists, bicycle couriers, hotel waiters, and street kids, not to mention the occasional thief, all awaiting his phone call.

Bander took orders, it's true, but this activity was of minor importance and he treated it with a degree of professional contempt; anyone could order things, even from halfway around the world. What he was really proud of was when a customer found what he was looking for immediately and on the premises, even if it was just some godforsaken trinket. On display at any moment one might find a Persian carpet decorated with both the lamb and falcon; olives stuffed with paprika-tuna in a cylindrical tin; Breton cider; a private edition of Attila Jozsef's psychiatric records (with a dedication by Flóra Kozmuca); a corkscrew with a handle in the shape of the Statue of Liberty. For a while there was a separate shelf for the emblems of past regimes, once totally unobtainable relics, though that branch of the business was worn away by the unstoppable, breaking retro wave of nostalgia at the turn of the millennium. By now there wasn't a hipster on the right bank of the Danube who didn't have a Trabant matchbox car or a dog-shaped piggybank. If something began to be manufactured anew, it didn't interest Bander anymore.

Bander didn't differentiate between his customers, working equally for the highest and lowest among them. If someone found the cellar entrance through a friend or business connection and rang the buzzer (which had been modeled after Stalin's mausoleum) three times, he could enter. If they didn't find what they were looking for, Bander at first smiled despairingly and, practically offended, retreated to the warehouse from which the only sounds that filtered out were those of his unintelligible yelling and the angry clatter of the telephone being banged around. Bander would return a few minutes later, his face serenely transformed. Then he would quote a price and the time required. In the course of the negotiations that followed, the customer could reduce the delivery time, but the price would grow exponentially and, in parallel, so would Bander's pique and zeal. Most of them did this, and Bander had been living on tranquilizers for years. He took them when there was no business or when things seemed to be running too smoothly.

I came into the picture when Zoli Winkler announced that he was moving to Basel for three years on a scholarship. I had known for months that he worked for Bander and I had even helped him on occasion, as I had acquired a near unrivalled knowledge of the city's second-hand book trade during my university years. Zoli Winkler was of course one of those rivals; with his leaving, I was not only losing one of my best friends but one of my biggest competitors. Therefore I knew I had to seize this opportunity. On his last day of work he accompanied me to see Bander.

We chained our bicycles to the barriers in front of a nearby school and Zoli rang the 'Stalin buzzer,' as he called it, four times. "Four buzzes. Remember it. For suppliers, it's the code to get in." He looked at me significantly and, after the lock clicked, pushed the door inward. From the shadows of the store Bander's figure slowly took shape before me, at that moment looking for something in the pockets of the vest he always wore. For no reason at all, I flushed with annoyance. A strange nervousness came over me, the

source of which I couldn't locate, made worse by the towering figure of Bander in front of me.

He didn't even look at us when he barked at Zoli, "Have you got it?" Zoli took a brown envelope out of his bag and slid it respectfully across the table. "My last delivery. If I'm not mistaken, with this one I've broken the record."

Bander clicked the stopwatch that was dangling from his neck and wrote something in the registry book and then, with lightning speed, freed the contents of the envelope and began to scrutinize a book. "Excellent, excellent," he said, then suddenly fixed on Zoli over the rims of his glasses, while the books that Zoli had brought disappeared with such speed that I couldn't decipher the titles on their covers. "I really don't understand you, son. You could have had a great future and I don't know who I'll get to replace you. Customers are always pestering me with orders, yet nowadays there's hardly anyone who reads and really understands the book market."

"I know. That's why I brought a friend of mine. One of the best in the city," Zoli started to say and then stepped out of the way so that I could look the old man in the eye. I tried to appear sure of myself and extended my hand towards him.

"Tamás Daedalus. Aesthete, editor, and bookworm. At your service."

My hand remained in the air. Bander merely eyed me suspiciously, as though I were a shipment of counterfeit goods. "Outside of the work that you'll be doing for me, I don't really care what you waste your time with. Tell me what you can do."

Zoli glanced towards me, his eyes saying Now! Now!, but I could barely utter a word. My head still seemed filled with a thousand swarming ants. I could scarcely hear my own voice when I finally did make my case: "Last year, in a single week, I was able to get Hegel's three-volume *Aesthetics* on three separate occasions. Twice I repeated the same stunt a month later with his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. I acquired the single-volume, first edition of Péter Nádas's *Book of Memories* the week it was released. At a quarter of the price. Later I did the same with Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. A month and half ago, I found Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil* in French for a friend in less than four hours without even, I needn't add, leaving the city. In under three days I put a copy of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* in the hands of a classmate who was preparing for a university entrance exam, and a week before the new edition came out. That's my specialty: obtaining new works before they come out. Since my work makes me a frequent visitor to publishing houses, I also deal in the secret copying of manuscripts."

In a slow, measured voice Bander broke in and put the question to me: "Have you ever stolen anything from a library?"

Here, I think I turned a little red.

"Not yet sir, but I'm familiar with the techniques required for that kind of operation. Other than that, I'm somewhat familiar with estate matters in the area of rare books, and with the book trade in the subway underpasses."

In the meantime Bander had lit up and was now distractedly fanning smoke in our direction with a giant, outstretched hand, like someone demanding the end of a horribly boring performance. "And I guess you're also familiar with the history of Renaissance poetry, the reception of conceptual art in France, Maurice Blanchot's literary criticism, classical German idealism, the love life of Goethe, and from the look of it," (here he again looked me up and down contemptuously, as if I were some cat carcass he had

stumbled upon in the street) “you probably have an exhaustive knowledge of homosexual and lesbian literature from antiquity until the present.”

“You’re not mistaken at all, sir,” I answered with scant pride in my voice, fidgeting a little. At the sound of my words Bander snorted, as if he had just been told some amusingly bad joke. With this, he disappeared behind the old posters covering the entrance of the warehouse. It was then that I realized what it was, other than Bander’s undeniable rudeness, that had been annoying me to no end. From speakers hidden somewhere, I could hear Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* transcribed for balalaika. When I expressed this Zoli just laughed.

“The Moscow Feel-Harmonics. Unobtainable.”

We stood in nervous silence for a while in the stuffy cellar. I looked at Zoli, but he just hummed uncertainly.

“Well, I don’t know . . .” I finally began.

“I thought you liked being humiliated?”

“Shut up.”

*The rest of Matyas Dunajcsik’s story can be found in the NOVEMBER 2005 issue of PILVAX. Locally available in Budapest.*