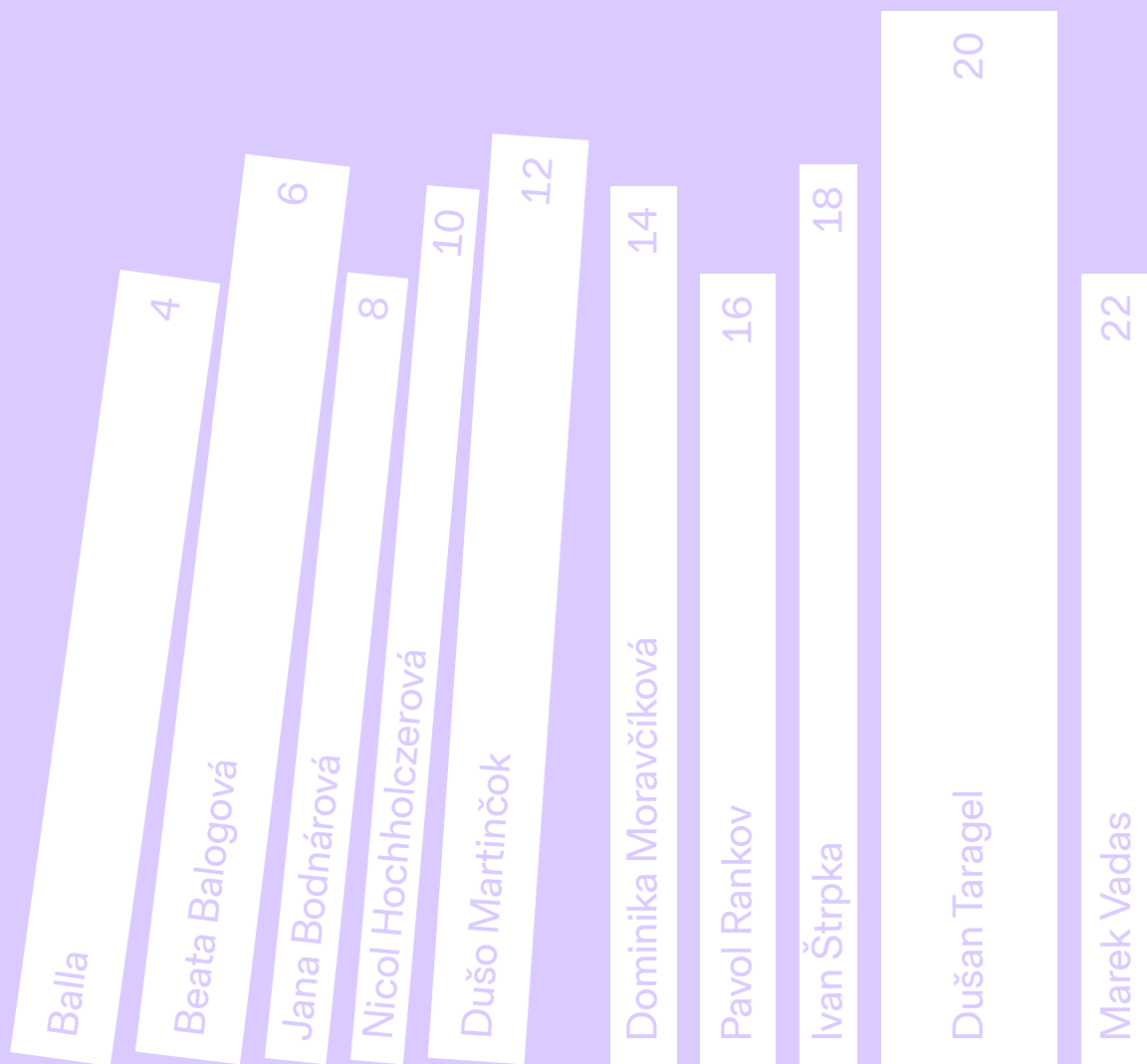


Books From Slovakia 2023



Slovak
Literary
Centre

The Slovak Literary Centre is a public organisation aimed at providing organisational and financial support for literature written in Slovakia, its authors and translators.

Slovak
Literary
Centre

One of the Centre's primary objectives is promoting Slovak literature abroad through literary translation, events, international conferences and festivals of literature, and international book fairs. We seek cooperation with foreign publishers interested in Slovak literature, and strive to provide financial support for the publication of translated works of Slovak authors abroad. The Centre also supports and promotes Slovak authors within Slovakia and educates readers about their work and about Slovak literature in general.

SLOLIA Grant Programme

The Slovak Literary Centre runs a grant system called the Slovak Literature Abroad Grant System (SLOLIA). The main goal of the grant is to support the publication of Slovak literature in translation. Foreign publishers may apply for financial support for the publication of books by Slovak authors.

Deadlines for sending applications are:

31st January

30th April

31st July

31st October

You can find more information at
www.litcentrum.sk/en/institution/slolia
slolia@litcentrum.sk

Balla

Among the Ruins

A woman with mental illness fondly remembers her father and Socialism, loathes the present day and is given to writing letters of complaint to a psychiatrist who needs help himself as he spends more time drinking than treating patients. While her letters capture the spirit of a crazy age, when truth is less attractive than falsehood, he, in this tragicomedy, doles out pseudo-advice in pubs and cafés as darkness rapidly descends and in the distance great storms are already brewing — but society is in a worse peril than any havoc wrought by nature.



PHOTO: NICOL HOCHHOLCZEROVÁ

Balla (b. 1967) lives in Nové Zámky, Slovakia, where he has worked for over thirty years at the Office for Employment, Social Services and the Family. He has published twelve books, including *Leptokaria* (1996), *Outsideria* (1997), *De la Cruz* (2005), *Cudzí* (Odd folk, 2008), *V mene otca* (In the Name of the Father, 2011, which won the Anasoft Litera Award), *Oko* (Eye, 2012, nominated

for the Anasoft Litera Award), *Veľká láska* (Big Love, 2015, nominated for the Anasoft Litera Award), *Je mŕtvý* (Dead, 2018), *Medzi ruinami* (Among the Ruins, 2021, nominated for the Anasoft Litera Award). He has been accused by some of writing the same book over and over again, and he believes that that's right, but that it only gets better and better. His works have been translated into 17 languages.



“I collect everyday uneventful events in ordinary people’s lives, ones that are striking for their very banality, I string these trifling matters together with sentences stolen out of context and so create caricatures of individuals and society, drawn against a dark background, just before things keel over, perhaps into civil war.”

Balla
Medzi ruinami
KK Bagala, Levice, 2021, 261 p.
ISBN 978-80-89973-58-3
booksfromslovakia@litcentrum.sk



From his consulting room he had a good view of the car park. Between the lines of cars, patients or their relatives would make their way to come and see him. Sooner or later, he'd have seen every inhabitant of the town there, they'd all have come except the ones who'd fitted themselves up with a psychiatrist in Bratislava or somewhere abroad. But then, unless they moved to Bratislava or abroad, they'd show up in the car park sooner or later anyway. He was staring down and only by a fluke registered that his patient was telling him something interesting: hunched down on his chair, he was claiming that life was like a never-ending execution.

"Just watch closely what's happening to us, keep your eyes peeled," he urged. "What you see sometimes speeds up, sometimes slows down, now it's further away, now closer at hand, but all the time it wounds you so deeply that you just long to be able to shy away from it once and for all."

Felešlegi nodded. The patient likewise. Spartakiad choreography.

"Try concentrating on the state of your hair," the patient went on. The psychiatrist instinctively touched his. "How thick it is, the dandruff, the itchiness." They both started scratching. "The apparently virtual insect that you can sense the whole time is real! Completely real! An entire insect civilisation is living in your hair. Set up a system of mirrors and look at the top of your head. At the point where you can feel the insect's legs you can see nothing that's alive, nothing in particular. And that's exactly how the execution is proceeding unobserved."

In line with the Spartakiad of the consulting room they both nodded again. Down below, cars were arriving and departing.

"Some people are different from us, they live in a world that they won't let people like us into. They're a superior race. Though what's superior about it? There have always been different people existing alongside us. They've sometimes even slept with us in the same bed. That was when, at the very latest, we should have spotted the difference. It's a matter of success and failure, of aptitude and ineptitude, maybe even of mortality and immortality. Do we know where the difference lies? But we should probably avoid talking about races, let's try looking for another label, though we won't find one, we won't hit on anything. Guess who always will hit on something. Just so, precisely those of a superior race."

2.

Doctor, sir,

Why have all the good people died out? I'd like to be on my way out too. My father's been long gone. He was a kind man, though he often flew into a rage. Ever since I was little I've known that men can fly into a rage; of all men, he was the most manlike. Nobody dared contradict him. Once, on May Day, he aimed his People's Militia automatic at a Gypsy, because a Gypsy isn't a Slovak, and this one had also been poking fun at the red flag and the labour movement. In the end Father didn't shoot him, he just whacked him with his gunstock. Everybody else stood there in shock, then three came to their senses and dragged Father off behind the rostrum. Only one or two couldn't have wrestled down a bull like him. He'd strike at any moment, never hesitated. But hitting out, he meant well. Sometimes he hit out a lot. Meaning very well. Those were the days, not like today. Today you can't even smack a naughty child. My mum once said I used to be a wicked child and now I'm a wicked woman. That made me want to cry, but I pretended I didn't, I made a lot of clatter with the washing-up, then chucked everything into the sink and went upstairs to my room, which I could lock, because my brother had fitted a lock for me, though he did charge me thirty euros. Dad would have fitted a lock for me for nothing.

Regards,
Vargová

Beata Balogová

Cornelias

The whole world is crammed into a small village in south Slovakia. Reminiscences of ancestors and mavericks, some of whom came from surrounding villages, because they knew that they would be remembered in Jablonia Panica. Yet, for a book to be written about love and death, generations of strong women, Hungarians in Slovakia, about a family in which men die young, the author must half grow up and half remain a child. It took Beata Balogová a while for this to happen. Her book will help you to discover the story that may be growing in your own family. Because without a story, a family will be scattered by the wind like the ash from the cigarettes of Cornelia, her mother.



PHOTO: MARKO ERD

Beata Balogová is a journalist who writes in Slovak, Hungarian and English. She was born in Lučenec and lives in Bratislava. A graduate of Columbia University in New York, where she studied journalism in 2006–2007, she has been the editor-in-chief of *Sme*, one of the biggest daily newspapers in Slovakia since 2014. She comments on politics and social affairs. In 2020, Beata was awarded the

European Press Prize in the Opinion category. Her essay collection, *Kniha plná ľudí* (A Book Full of People, 2019), was published in 2019. Three years later, her first novel, *Kornélie* (Cornelias, 2022), became available to readers. She is an active advocate for press freedom and the protection of journalists both at home and abroad. Polish, Serbian and Hungarian translations are underway.



“I’ve always written. Since I was little, I’ve been preparing myself for the day when I was as mature as an autumn rosehip, when I would write a book into which my entire world would be crammed. Only nobody’s world will fit into just one book. So I’m going to write more. I want to write stories that will first unsettle you, then rock you to sleep. Like your mum wiping a burn with sour milk when you were little.”

Beata Balogová
Kornélie
Ikar, Bratislava, 2022, 256 p.
ISBN 978-80-55185-24-8
booksfromslovakia@litcentrum.sk



The last summer before she died, Mari-Mama told strange stories, as if she wanted to leave them to me, because she didn't own anything material. They were completely different from the tales she had told me before that summer. They were the stories of people she had never met, but they all had something in common with our family.

She told me about beautiful, freckled Amalia, whose hair reached to her ankles, and when she turned twenty-five, she sold her auburn waterfall to the hairdresser and moved with her short hair to Argentina, where she opened a milliner's shop. Her hats resembled fruit, large ripe pears, walnuts half broken open, and marrows. The business thrived. She sent yellowing postcards that sometimes travelled for as long as a year before they reached the village. Later, she made hats for rich Argentinian women. Those hats resembled exotic birds, creatures of the past. Her fame only lasted a short while, because her assistant left a needle in one of the hats, which injured her best customer, who wrote letters to her friends in her first flush of anger, asking them to boycott Amalia. However, she did not stop making hats, although they no longer sold as well. She sent a few of them home on a big boat, but the women in the village didn't know what to do with them, so they hung them on the blossoming cherry tree on May Day. Then they would walk under the branches and waited until a hat fell on their head. Nobody knows what was then meant to happen to the woman on whose head Amalia's hat landed.

She also told me the story of Bertalan Bolondos, who was said to have left for the Soviet Union. Nobody knew why, or for how long. He only sent gifts for the villagers; never news about himself. Every year, someone different received a different gift from a faraway land. Russian dolls, small artificial rockets, a bust of Lenin, embroidered blankets, a little wooden Kremlin, pencils surmounted with the hammer and sickle. He also wrote postcards, but they brought no answers, only more questions. They were like pages torn at random from the notepad of a secret agent: the neighbour is number three; bread is cheaper than it was last year.

The strange thing was that the gifts and postcards kept on coming even after Bertalan had died, as if the activity had been inherited in exactly the same way as the name Cornelia. Nobody knows who read those postcards, but everyone knew their stories, that sentences from them were repeated at various celebrations. If any fake Soviet goods appeared in the village, people didn't have to think, but always said: Oh, that's from Bertalan.

The small room was overcrowded with ghosts that summer. Everything came to life through Mari-Mama's stories. She commanded the characters — everyone who had ever left our little village — to come from the far ends of the earth. She summoned them back, so they could catch up with their roots, now that the stories had given them wings. I still remember their names today. Back then, I thought they sounded like the myths of the Greek gods and heroes.

Bertalan Bolondos (Batty Bartolomej) was Odysseus. He travelled around small Soviet villages and collected objects that nobody knew how to use. His journey apparently started with a group from the village, but those men all later married strong Russian women, as if red-cheeked wooden Russian dolls wearing dresses adorned with huge pink peonies had come to life. Mari-Mama never saw those photos, but she described the Russian women as if she met them daily at the iron gate to the house. She saw Russian soldiers during the Second World War and her memories of them were not the best.

Jana Bodnárová

Patchwork in White

A brief yet powerful novel depicting the dramas of childhood as experienced by Ota and Andrej, a couple who adopt a pair of albino twins exposed to abuse and exclusion because of their otherness. Stitched together from fragments spanning the decades from the mid-1950s to the present day, the book is a meditation on motherhood, femininity, marriage, and the imminence of death. The author's poetic, and at times brutally honest, voice is complemented by Eva Moflárová's sensitive illustrations.



“The 1950s were a decade lacking in charm, magic or lightheartedness, when people no longer cruised around town in limousines. Apathetic and hunched up, they hurried down the streets, scared of men in leather coats who could turn up in the middle of the night and herd them into police vans.”



PHOTO: PETER LÁZAR

Jana Bodnárová (b. 1950) is a multiple award-winning writer, poet, playwright and art historian, and one of the most unique voices in Slovak literature. She received the Ivan Krasko Award for her debut, *Aféra rozumu* (An Affair of the Mind, 1990), the Bibliotéka Prize for her children's book *Dita* (2014) while her play *Kurz orientálneho tanca* (A Course in Oriental Dancing, 2004) won the

first prize in the DRAMA 2005 competition. Her books have been published across the globe in 17 languages, in countries from Poland and Ukraine through Brazil to Taiwan. Her novel *Náhrdelník/Obojok* (Necklace/Choker, 2016), the recipient of the Literature Academy Award, was published by Seagull Books in 2021 in Jonathan Gresty's English translation.

Jana Bodnárová
Patchwork v bielej
Aspekt, Bratislava, 2022, 120 p.
ISBN 978-80-81510-99-1
booksfromslovakia@litcentrum.sk



In Ota's family, the subject of her father's imprisonment was bypassed in a strangely frosty silence, as if one was avoiding touching a leper. Ota had to slowly put together the puzzle of the erased fragment of her father's life. She began by picturing the cold and damp prison cell where he had been locked up, with a narrow, barred window right under the ceiling. She imagined him having to crane his neck to catch a glimpse of the sky. It was his receptionist, who had joined the party following the communist takeover in February 1948 and climbed the greasy pole and proudly taken a front-row seat on the platform, who had landed her father, the self-confident hotel owner, in prison. Surely no police interrogator would doubt the words of a highly-placed official when he bared his teeth and claimed that her father had stolen silver and precious china from his own hotel after nationalisation, that he had routinely siphoned brandy out of their bottles, filling them with tapwater, and that in wartime he and his wife gorged themselves on dark chocolate with almonds and drunk genuine Arabica coffee while everyone else had to make do with ersatz. In prison her father was tortured to extract a confession, and his pregnant wife was forced to share their house with two families of tenants. At the sound of their six children's stomping about one floor above, Ota's mother, nine months pregnant at the time, would grab a broom and bang the handle on the ceiling. Although she had to move to the ground floor, she could count herself lucky not to have been driven out of her family home.

Her husband, formerly a chatty and articulate man known for complimenting his hotel guests and engaging them in civilised conversations, returned from prison taciturn and morose, a mental wreck with fingernails permanently fungal from being injected with some new toxic fluid. He seemed stripped of his skin, like a diffident young boy, a transcendental stranger to himself.

A few years later at school Ota was told that everyone was now living in a brave new world of truth and modern welfare, where there was no room for anything but beauty. That is why the sight of a dead feral cat, with its skin showing through the patches of its moulted fur, didn't make her feel any pity.

Back at home her father told her about an Egyptian mummy he had once seen in a museum in Berlin, wrapped in crumbling fabric, with empty eye sockets and incredibly ancient teeth.

When we die, we will be embalmed, swaddled in cotton cloth and displayed in a museum, you know.

He told her with a wild, wicked laugh, as he sat in his shabby brocade robe reading the cards while her mother toiled in a chemical fibre factory.

It grew colder outside and wet snow started to fall, dimming the light of the streetlamps. Andrej was looking down from his eighth-floor window at the last pedestrians as they hurried home from work, disappearing in the long row of doors of the huge prefab block of flats across the street. They resembled straggler ants running towards the safety of their anthill. His mind jumped back to the image of his ex-wife, and reflected, with surprising tenderness, indeed joy, that even in this foul weather her gait would be graceful because every cell in her body was radiant, and an X-ray of her chest, too, would resemble the shadows of flowers cast by a floral display. He pulled down the window blinds and retreated into the depths of his flat.

Nicol Hochholczerová

This Room Is Impossible To Eat

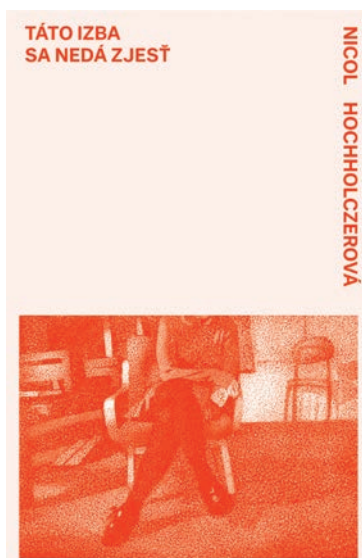
Based on the young author's own painful experiences, the book is not meant as an easy read for the beach. Told in a richly poetic prose that is surreal and starkly realistic by turns, Hochholczerová's debut novella is composed of small fragments gradually evolving into the story of the relationship between an adolescent girl and an older man. The book caused a considerable stir in Slovakia not just because of its controversial topic, but also because it is written from the perspective of both protagonists, leaving it up to the reader to pass judgement.



PHOTO: JAKUB GULYÁS

Nicol Hochholczerová (b. 1999) grew up in Rimavská Sobota and is currently studying graphic design at the Academy of Art in Banská Bystrica. Her debut *Táto izba sa nedá zjesť* (This Room Is Impossible To Eat, 2021) was nominated for Slovakia's most prestigious literary prize, the Anasoft Litera Award, in 2022 and received Tatra Banka's Young

Artist Award in the same year. It has been translated into Hungarian, Serbian and Polish, with Czech, Bulgarian, Macedonian, English and French translations underway. In 2023 a theatre adaptation directed by Eduard Kudláč opened in the City Theatre in Žilina. A Czech stage version as well as a film adaptation are planned.



“For me, anger in literature is not something negative but rather a productive emotion. Grief is a different matter: grief is negative and induces apathy and prevents you from doing anything other than to accept it gradually and try to get rid of it as far as possible. Anger, on the other hand, spurs to action: to be angry makes you seek to effect change, find solutions, be creative.”

Nicol Hochholczerová
Táto izba sa nedá zjesť
KK Bagala, Levice, 2021, 152 p.
ISBN 978-80-89973-48-4
booksfromslovakia@litcentrum.sk



My room is impossible to eat. So are my fingernails, all I can do is bite them, and I cry because they called me an ugly lesbo for no reason, surely all girls practise kissing with girls, but it's worse when you're the only one who's ugly. They also call me a swot, but I never have to study, I just remember everything. My grandpa says I have too many brain cells for a girl and actually pretends that I'm a boy, he makes me guns and has taught me to eat boiled blood. Boiled blood is easier to eat than my room, it's also easier than eating myself, all of myself, from the cuticles to the ears, which at school they say are as big as plates. I could write about this sort of stuff but I don't because I entered a writing competition and we were told that it's not very original to write about being bullied and that everybody writes about that, so I'm not writing about it, and one of the judges also told me, I once read a book that began with the sentence, I got up in the morning and cut off my hands, that's what your story sounded like to me. But I remember everything because I have too many brain cells for a girl, but one day I will go quiet and keep everything to myself!

My parents enrolled me in a drawing class. I sit here chewing a pencil like I'm in my room, with heavy metal pulsing in my earbuds. I asked Silvia to take the class with me but she said no. So I sit here, don't know anyone and when I take my earbuds out, all I can hear is the scratching of pencils and the jangling of keys and someone's steps, that's you, my teacher. You're pacing up and down among us, jangling your keys and saying what's that supposed to be, a horse, looks more like a rat, and is this meant to be a house, this lopsided box? I haven't drawn anything, in front of me there's a blank piece of paper and a pencil that's impossible to eat, you walk past and ask, so what's this here, you lean on my desk, your keys jangling, a wall, I say.

Then I start telling you: I was baptized when I was a month old, I hadn't even grown any hair or teeth yet, and when the priest said, let's pray, my grandma cried because I folded my hands together like everyone else, what, how do I know that, I just remember; I also remember tumbling down the stairs, look, here's the scar; and I remember every fairytale I've ever watched and I remember bawling when we couldn't go sledding because there wasn't enough snow, just like today, and I remember my mum leaving me out in the courtyard in my pram that winter to make me go to sleep, but by the time it finally started snowing she'd totally forgotten about me until my nose was the only thing sticking out from under the snow, that's when she stopped gazing at the snow and swooning, look at all that lovely snow, and dashed out to get me. And no, it wasn't my mum who told me this, it's just that I have an amazing memory, I never forget anything, and anyone who hurts me will be in trouble because I remember everything, I don't like that Hungarian saying: it's not your fault, someone has just cracked a whip over you, I hate it because I remember everything and if I cracked a whip over someone, I would fucking hit them, and you laugh, you don't tell me off for saying fuck, you don't say watch your language, young lady.

The next time I sit here tossing a clump of clay from one hand to the other, it's going to be an ashtray, and I keep rattling on at the top of my voice to make everyone laugh but especially you, sir...

At home, I scrape the plaster off the wall with an earring and stuff myself with it like children who lack minerals, but maybe they just want to know what it tastes like and what's on the other side of the wall.

Dušo Martinčok

Someone Will Be Found

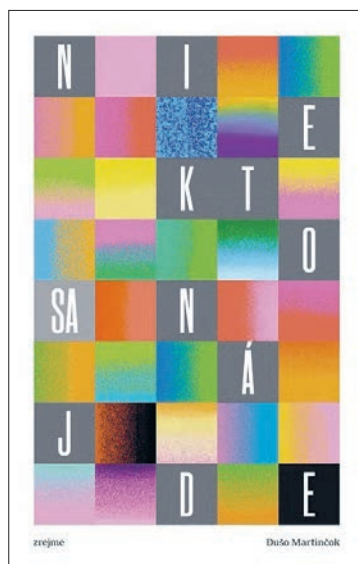
A little boy called Oliver moves into an old house with a modern extension, where he lives in a luxury flat. He could use a private lift if he wished, but he prefers to go up and down the dingy stairs, where he loves to read and where he meets his new neighbours. He is a year older in each successive story. In some, he just flashes past; in others he is the central character. Everybody knows him, although they often don't know each other. The tenement's inhabitants would prefer to be islands, but this isn't possible. They have too much in common. Stairs, steps, and holes in the ceiling.



PHOTO: MICHAL HUŠTATY

Dušo Martinčok (b. 1975) has homes in Košice, Luxembourg and Bratislava. He grew up in the first and often returns to see his parents there. He works in the second as a lawyer-linguist for the EU Court of Justice. In the third, he created the community project Neighbours in the Courtyard, which led to friendships

with older people. He and his friends founded the civic association Apparently Aimed at Intergenerational Dialogue and organised the festival Old's Cool Bratislava. He is the co-author of the book *Záhrebská* (2018). His prose debut, *Nie kto sa nájde* (Someone Will Be Found, 2022), was longlisted for the 2023 Anasoft Litera Award. He is married to Michal.



“I am interested in our mutual connections, such as those evident in communal buildings. We think that we can get along without others, but that is an illusion.”

Dušo Martinčok
Nie kto sa nájde
Zrejme, Bratislava, 2022, 248 p.
ISBN 978-80-97319-84-7
booksfromslovakia@litcentrum.sk



“If you aren’t going to be able to cope or, God forbid, you feel ill, just tell me and we’ll take a break, okay?” The girl sitting at the kitchen table was making an effort to speak in a firm voice, but she was obviously tense, her hands trembling. She was wearing a knitted green jumper that smelled slightly of sweat. From her rucksack she took two folders and a pencil case.

“Let’s do it, uncle.” He regretted having let her in the instant he heard those words.

* * *

Samuel Bodnár felt refreshed and full of energy that morning. The tentative April sun was shining into the hall. Samuel caught sight of his reflection in the glass of a large, framed photograph. He looked as if he were still fifty. The light and shadows emphasised the high cheekbones and chiselled nose on his freshly shaven face, leaving only a narrow gap between the tip of his nose and his lips. No wrinkles were visible in the reflection, only the deepest around his mouth and on his forehead.

He looked at the extraordinarily well-lit version of himself with satisfaction. Then he refocused on the photo of the actress behind the glass. He’d hesitated before hanging that photo in the hall; he’d felt a bit like a teenager plastering the walls with his idols. However, the photo of Greta Garbo, on a cream-coloured mount in an elegant black frame, in no way disturbed the economically arranged space of the hall. On the contrary, it nostalgically hinted at the good old times.

* * *

“I’m surprised you still find me interesting.” The girl with the forced smile and terrified eyes had nestled down on the uncomfortable chair. She had one hand on top of the other on the table in front of her, like a model pupil who was about to raise a hand with the right answer.

“If I’m right, my table states you are among the least creditworthy clients, because you’re over 70. But then again, you’re my first customer, so at least I can learn from you.” She opened the file and spread papers covered in charts and graphs over the tabletop.

“It has its advantages. When there isn’t much money, there’s also nothing to mess up.” Conspiratorially, she giggled, and her joke seemed to relax her a little.

“Let’s start with the simple stuff. What is your pension?” Samuel stated the modest amount.

“Really?” she goggled at him, as if he’d disclosed some shocking gossip. “And you can live on that?”

“As you see.”

* * *

He suffered a little from heartburn in the morning. He’d run out of his tried-and-tested mineral water but at least found the remnants of some bicarbonate of soda. The square box and pale blue lid reminded him of his mum. She’d collected them and used them to store the seeds of withered flowers.

He picked up the desk calendar. There were three items under Wednesday. Market, LP, financial advisor. He would definitely forget one of them. He didn’t want to write everything down. Someone had advised him that you need to be able to visualise your schedule. Generally it worked for him. Every morning he thought up some bizarre diagram containing everything he needed to do that day. Today, a giant vinyl record was rotating, beneath a stand with a stripy canvas canopy, a heap of vegetables on the counter, on which sat a young woman, her hands clutching a child’s abacus with coloured beads.

Dominika Moravčíková

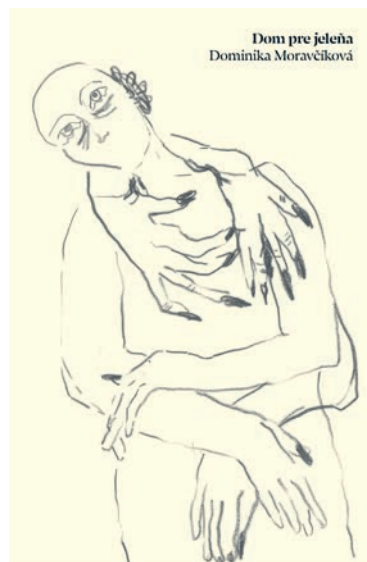
The Deer House

Dominika Moravčíková's short stories explore the boundaries between humans and animals, between nature and human habitation. Families living in settlements of different types find themselves ensnared by curses, secrets and property disputes, against the backdrop of wider social events. Each story is set in a different village with a specific history and geology, but the leitmotif running through them is women's search for freedom in the midst of repeating traditions and how these traditions are ruptured by war and religious conflicts.



Dominika Moravčíková is a fiction writer and poet based in Košice, Slovakia. One of the most exciting young voices in contemporary Slovak literature, she debuted in 2020 with the poetry collection *Deti Hamelnu* (The Children of Hamelin). The book received widespread critical acclaim across Slovakia and Czechia. In 2022 she published her second book, a collection of short stories entitled *Dom pre Jeleňa* (The Deer House).

The stories, characterised by Moravčíková's imaginative use of language and world-building through the development of fictional rural mythologies, has also received much attention since they were published. In 2019 she became the first writer to win both the country's short story prize Povedka and the poetry prize Básne SK-CZ in the same year. Her works have been translated into 5 languages.



*"You too will die like this:
in the pain of work and
uncertainty of education.
We know that life survives
only in warm spots: death
has a home everywhere.
What's left of life is hatched
by a crow who does not
know what an honour it
was to be able to feast,
then fly off un reproached.
You said it, Ramon: there
is no sanctity in taste or
in scent, but only in work."*

PHOTO: SAMUEL VELEBNÝ

Dominika Moravčíková
Dom pre jeleňa
KK Bagala, Levice, 2022, 180 p.
ISBN 978-80-89973-68-2
booksfromslovakia@litcentrum.sk



Every Saturday, Mother cooked for the household gods, but usually not choice food of the sort, that we could afford only once a year. What's more, Mother loved to cheat. She never missed an opportunity for some culinary deception when she gave an offering of food. When we had lavish meals, she put at the statues' feet fake meat soup in which she'd boiled the bones and hide, while we ate all the real soup. Her favourite deception was a dessert which should have contained strawberries, but instead she threw in anything black from the forest, inedible rowan berries or poisonous February daphne, whole clusters with glistening berries, ten of which could kill an adult. And as for wine and beer, into our best, jewel-studded glasses specially intended for the gods she happily poured any old piss she found that foamed a little if it was to replace beer, or was the right colour for wine. This could be soapy water in which she'd soaked rags used to wash the wood of the outhouse, or waste from fabric-dyeing which she collected in the dyeing vats using a funnel system and which, when red or purple, resembled wine.

This did not mean that Mother was an unbeliever. She simply liked making life easy for herself, and felt that the gods did not understand human tastes, so anything could be offered to them. They were evidently never angered by our family's false offerings, because the harvest was always the same, and life, too, went on in the same way. Only sometimes winter was more severe, sometimes there were frosts in May and rainy summers; sometimes illness struck the family, or a marriage failed, but nothing that could be considered extraordinary for life as it had always been and probably always would be in Lysky or even elsewhere in the world.

This is good, Mother muttered to herself as she cooked, and she emphasised to us that the household gods would only cause people as much suffering as they could bear. Only once did Mother cook two meals, one for the family and the other for our set of statues, and mix them up. The gods got our soup with meat and dumplings, and our porridge with honey and late sour cherries from the best cherry-tree in Lysky, where it enjoyed ideal soil and sunlight in our garden, and we got dishwash with hide which was disgusting, but not poisonous, fortunately.

Father lost his temper and threw his plate of slop at the wall. Mother stated that the offerings had already been ritually dedicated to the gods and we couldn't just take them back or consume them. According to the rules of our faith, we could not eat the sacrificial food ourselves; it had to be thrown out into the forest for the wild animals. At the time, Father was determined that the family should become disciplined, that this was a useful lesson and a warning from the gods that we should cook better food for them and not give them anything we wouldn't eat ourselves. Mother responded that she needed more help with cooking from her daughters, just as she did with gathering ingredients, because spending money on better food for the gods would exceed the family's budget. For a while, we paid closer attention to the cooking, but soon enough we returned to our previous habits.

There were also other deceptions which I myself had to answer for. Sometimes, when my older brother and I went into the forest to throw away the offerings that the gods had had enough of, but hadn't yet gone bad, we would sit under the fir trees and gobble down the cakes, pastries or pies that the gods had already eaten, but time and mould had not. We even allowed ourselves pieces of meat, or swigs of wine, before watering wild mushrooms with what was left, so that nature could benefit from our offering.

Pavol Rankov

The Clinic

First of all, it is the story of a man wandering around the absurd labyrinth of a clinic in his need to be examined by a professor. As he wanders, he meets with a range of curious characters: a stoker, a receptionist, a nurse and an assistant professor. He talks about his difficulties and tells them some of the failures and disappointments life has brought him — the closer he gets to the professor, the clearer it becomes that his problems are not really physical in character. And thus, from behind an irrational and grotesque mask, an authentic and intimate portrait of a contemporary person is revealed to us. *The Clinic* won the 2023 Panta Rhei Award.



PHOTO: JÁN BELÁK

Pavol Rankov (b. 1964) lectures in the fields of information society, media communication and literary culture at Comenius University in Bratislava, and at the Silesian University in Opava (Czech Republic). He is the author of four collections of short stories, six novels and a large compendium of tales for children. His work covers a wide range of genres and includes socio-historical fiction set in Central Europe in the 20th century,

fantastical and dystopian motifs as well as parody, whilst his latest novel, *Klinika* (*The Clinic*, 2022), touches on various autobiographical themes. Translations of his novels have been published in fifteen countries, and he has won international awards such as the European Union Prize for Literature (2009), Nagroda Angelus (2010) and the Prix du livre Européen (2020). His works have been translated into 19 languages.



“The Clinic came about as a kind of protest against the kind of autobiography that seems to dominate in our literature: urban, intellectual, rather cynical and ironic existential musings on the pseudo problems of the author, who is at one time both the narrator and also the main character. I was so vexed by it, I got the urge to write an autobiographical book of my own which would go completely against this grain.”

Pavol Rankov
Klinika
KK Bagala, Levice, 2022, 142 p.
ISBN 978-80-89973-71-2
slolia@litcentrum.sk
maria.vargova@litcentrum.sk



On the floor below, every door was numbered and the logic behind the numbering system was clear to me, but on this floor, many doors are completely unmarked. Perhaps this narrow corridor is home to storerooms with equipment in them, or places for ancillary staff which no patient is supposed to enter.

At seven o'clock it might happen that the receptionist will send me to room no. 240, for instance, but I will have a problem finding it. On the corridor I'm now walking along, the first door I passed was no. 237, the next door was unnumbered — and so one might assume the next door would be either no. 241 or 233 depending on which way the numbers go. But instead the little sign on the door says 250/b.

At which point another door opens and a young cleaning lady comes out pushing a trolley with a bucket and mop. Although I don't really expect her to help me, I ask about the professor's practice.

"Oh, the dear professor. My saviour!" And the woman puts her hands to her chest. "Of course I know where he is — I'm an old patient of his. I used to be a computer programmer but had a relationship crisis, burnout, problems with digestions and hearing. It was the dear professor who got me back on my feet — I can now hear you perfectly and my stomach no longer aches. Oh, the professor is a lovely gentleman and an expert in his field. You know I could now go back to my old job but I don't want to. I'd rather stay here, near to him. Not long ago, I again had a few health concerns, you see, and somehow bumped into the professor near to the lifts. By the time we'd reached the groundfloor, he'd healed me. Oh, he is such an expert is my beloved professor..."

"But where is his practice?" I ask, cutting her off.

The cleaner looks somehow offended; her tone is now blunt and matter-of-fact: "Go round the corner over there and go up to the padded door of the professor. There's an unpleasant woman already sitting there. You'll be second in line."

As I round the corner, I enter a nicely painted corridor with attractive benches and armchairs. If the professor is the renowned specialist everyone says he is, then it's only right that his practice should be so tastefully appointed. A woman of around forty is sitting in a leather armchair next to the upholstered door. It has no. 257 on it but there is no sign indicating whether it is his office or not. I have to ask the woman if she is waiting to see the professor. She nods and I am so surprised by the success of my search that I ask again, this time more emphatically.

The woman gives a raucous laugh: "Yes, I too am waiting for the professor. You don't have to say his name twice — I'm not here to have my ears looked at."

"Excuse me...I was repeating it to myself, really. I've been looking for the professor's door for so long, I can hardly believe I was successful."

"You'll be successful when you get inside," she says ominously. "And even more so if you can get another appointment with him."

For a fleeting moment I enjoy some kind of idyllic peace. Sitting outside the professor's surgery, I feel the endorphins inside me together with the testosterone this attractive woman has activated — even my sweaty shirt no longer bothers me. But I cannot sustain such small delights for very long and they are soon replaced by the feeling of dread the woman's last words have aroused.

"Does the professor often refuse patients?" I ask.

"He may take you but then pass you on to somebody else."

Ivan Štrpka

The Hermes Walk

The Hermes Walk is an obvious movement performed in a non-obvious manner. It is a single coherent, extensive, long and open poem — or an original, vital experiment. It is, perhaps, a different type of poem for the early 21st century. The poem as the contemporary human situation. Both in content and form. The Hermes Walk consists of 395 verbal sequences and an equal number of pauses between them. These pauses are essential in the growing, evolving network of meaning-formation, as a live process right before our eyes. They articulate, while advancing, the process. The footstep endures in them, as silent speech.

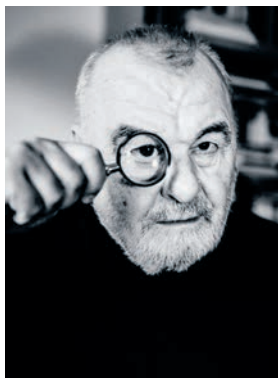


PHOTO: SOŇA MALETZ

Ivan Štrpka was born in Hlohovec in 1944. He spent his youth in southwestern Slovakia. From 1963 to 1969 he studied Spanish and Slovak at the Faculty of Philosophy of Comenius University. After briefly working in the editorial offices of literary journals such as *Kultúrny život* and *Mladá tvorba*, and publishing houses Slovenský spisovateľ and Tatran, he worked as a dramaturge for children and youth for Slovak Television

in Bratislava. During the 1970s he was not allowed to publish, on account of his political opinions and attitudes. During the second half of the 1980s he became editor of *Mladé rozlety*, then deputy editor-in-chief of the newly-founded *Literárny týždenník*, and from 1990 to 1993 editor-in-chief of *Kultúrny život*. From 1999 to 2010 he was editor-in-chief of *Romboid*. He lives in Bratislava. His works have been translated into 10 languages.



“The feeling we have constantly is The Loneliness Of The Runner, who performs his movement on an unfamiliar road; distant from the start and from the goal (which is unknown to him), he runs, therefore he is...”

Extract from the Lonely Runners' manifesto: Return of the Angels, 1963

Ivan Štrpka
Hermovská chôdza
Modrý Peter, Levoča, 2022, 160 p.
ISBN 978-80-82450-00-5
booksfromslovakia@litcentrum.sk



THE HERMES WALK

(This poem consists of three hundred and ninety sequences and an equal number of pauses)

We are the ones who hear the grass grow.
Tongue hides in the mouth's darkness. The walk
is its own work of writing. The Hermes
walk is lightly borne by each step,
through the air, along earth, over water
at just the same time. No other dimension here,
only mutable depth. And it echoes
on the surface of movements and things, and quite
naturally abandons in them each
established form.

×

Time is only in waves. (I) rise and (I) fall at just the same time.
The step lasts: (I) abandon earth and (I) echo
in abandoning. (I) plunge into air and (I)
emerge above water.

×

Every second (I) submerges and every few seconds
(I) emerges and again (I) sinks onwards.

×

I am thinking of someone else's mouth.

×

And vision is a crevice through which we see
what we see and live directly (without thought) as
what itself appears (before us). And seeks a face.
Passage from the seeming to the invisible. And to the real.
A little-understood chemical trial that fuses fleeing mercury
with the all-devouring dark. Sense goes beyond
the abstraction of non-joining differences. To overcome the end
in each beginning and end of the step. So close to life.

×

Silence under the trees amid the night, broken only by the pale
swaying of street lamps and the slippery flashes
of wandering headlights, is a perfect embodiment
of the idea of an easy walk through air
to the length of the little sole of an almost childish foot
close above the earth and above the grass.
Established language does not know this mode.

Dušan Taragel

Mobster Ballads

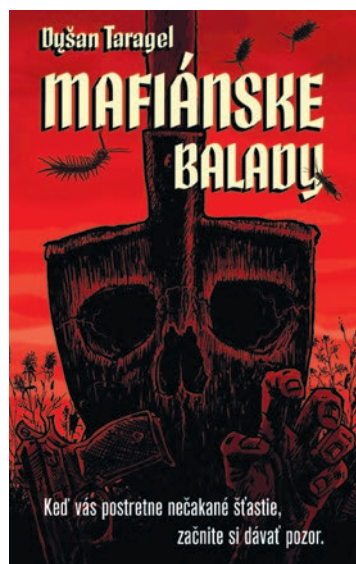
What kind of family life do mobster killers have? Why did a former beauty queen flee from London to Slovakia? Is everyone photographed by a young man named Tommy doomed to die? What kind of equipment does a disposer of corpses use? Is it a good idea to lust after a woman whose intimate photos you've found on someone else's mobile? Seven intriguingly linked contemporary stories, a riveting plot, suspense, and murders, generously leavened with humour. *Mobster Ballads* is among the ten books nominated for Slovakia's most prestigious literary prize, the Anasoft Litera Award, in 2023.



PHOTO: TÁĽA HOJČOVÁ

Dušan Taragel (b. 1961) is a writer, journalist and scriptwriter. He is the author of the children's book *Kniha pre neposlušné deti a ich starostlivých rodičov* (Fairytale for Naughty Children and their Caring Parents, 1997) which has acquired cult status. He is the co-author, with Peter Pišťanek, of the short story collection *Sekerou a nožom* (By Axe and By Knife, 1999) and a contributor to the collection *Roger Krowiak* (2002). He has published a handbook on the etiquette of murder, *Vražda ako*

spoločenská udalosť (Murder as a Social Event, 2006), as well as a collection of short stories, *Polrok bez sexu* (Six Months Without Sex, 2013). His first novel, *Mafiánske balady* (*Mobster Ballads*, 2022) is based on extensive research in court archives, driven by the author's desire to learn more about the family life of individuals involved in organised crime, and to discover what someone who has just committed a murder does. His works have been translated into 5 languages.



"In planning this book, what interested me was not so much the mechanics of crime but rather the private life of those who commit crimes. The police do not make an appearance, since what I have written is not a detective story, but rather an action thriller, featuring characters who steal and commit murder while living apparently ordinary lives, seven lives that become fatally intertwined."

Dušan Taragel
Mafiánske balady
Slovart, Bratislava, 2022, 448 p.
ISBN 978-80-55657-72-1
booksfromslovakia@litcentrum.sk



How long did it last? Five minutes? An hour? Baláž had lost all track of time and couldn't find his bearings in the almost total darkness and silence. All he could hear was the sound of his own irregular breathing. His arm was still draped over the body of Sandra, who lay next to him moist with sweat, her chest rising and falling. He let blissful exhaustion sweep over his body and wished he could remain in this impassive state, lying next to her and feeling her, until he gathered fresh energy. Sandra stirred, slipped out of his arms and planted a kiss on his neck.

"I'll just go and freshen up a bit. I'll be right back," she said and nimbly leapt out of bed. He heard the shower turning on the bathroom.

He rolled onto his back and felt her cooling sweat. He closed his eyes, savouring the smell of her body and the odours of sex coming off his own. He will persuade her to come with him to Bratislava. They'll leave today, as soon as he's sorted out everything here in Banská Bystrica. He'll set her up in his old flat, that should do her for a start. Tomorrow he'll go to Košice, sort things out there and when he returns, he'll find her waiting for him.

His mobile started to vibrate in the pocket of the jacket he had tossed on the floor. He ought to pick it up, pull himself together, get dressed and start looking for Ruža's money. His mobile continued to vibrate for a while, then stopped. The only thing he could hear now was the sound of water, as the bathroom door had been left ajar, its light illuminating the hallway and a section of entrance to the flat.

Baláž closed his eyes. How big can a packet containing one hundred thousand euros be? Two hundred 500 hundred euro notes are not too bulky, and even if there were a few smaller notes among them it should all comfortably fit into a plastic bag, he wouldn't need anything bigger than that. He'll look for something the size and shape of a carrier bag. Ruža was a moron, he was bound to have stashed the money at home. Where else would he have taken it? Baláž will keep it all, he won't share it with anyone even though half of it was supposed to go to Kalman and Miki, that's how it worked, everyone gave them a cut and he, Baláž, was no exception. But neither of them knows that he's here, that he's driven up in secret, so they're not getting anything. Maybe he could share it with Sandra. Let her have some money to make her more compliant. That might work.

She seemed to be taking a very long time in the shower. The sound of water was lulling him to sleep, his mouth was dry. He'll wait for her to come back, then get up, have a drink of water, relieve himself, and start looking for the money. That's the most important thing. Once he's found it, they'll make out again, more slowly this time, paying more attention to detail. Baláž felt a wave of warmth surging over him. Something must have told him to hang on to the keys to Ruža's flat, and also prompted him to take them when he set out for Bystrica. Maybe it was just intuition, but perhaps there was more to it, was it some kind of sign? Things have been going well for him lately, in business and in the family, he was on the way up. In a word, he was lucky, and after tomorrow's meeting with Miki he'll climb another rung on the ladder and Sandra may well be part of this lucky streak, a reward for his courage and risk-taking, the best kind of reward he could imagine, a beauty queen...

Suddenly he felt a violent stab in the left side of his chest. He gave a start. A fierce pain made his heart constrict... Sandra was kneeling by the bed, naked, with her belly taut and arms raised high above her pert breasts, holding something pointed and sharp. What the fuck?!

Marek Vadas

Six Foreigners

These loosely connected stories create a slim polyphonic novel exploring the roots of evil. Although not documentary in character, the book creates a convincing mosaic of a historical event which the author looks at through the eyes of its direct and indirect victims, its witnesses and its perpetrators. His primary aim, however, is not to describe the violence of a night in which hitherto law-abiding people brutally murder six innocent compatriots. Instead he writes about the silence which follows, about the unspoken guilt which permeates the lives of the killers and about the responsibility they are unable to accept, leading to further personal tragedy.



PHOTO: PETER ANDEROVSKY

Marek Vadas (b. 1971) is a fiction writer and author of children's books, a journalist, traveller and member of the council of elders in a small Cameroonian kingdom. Much of his work is set in Africa, with stories told by adults and children living on the edge of society where the line between reality and fantasy is often blurred. This narrative approach enables him to look at apparently straightforward problems and questions from a different point of view

and to create in the reader a feeling of uncertainty together with dreams full of beauty and magic. His style is influenced both by African folk narratives and by European modernism. He is the winner of Slovakia's most prestigious literary prize, the Anasoft Litera Award, for his book *Liečiteľ* (The Healer, 2007) while other books of his, including *Šesť cudzincov* (Six Foreigners, 2021), have also been shortlisted for the same award. Literary works of Marek Vadas have been translated into 17 languages.



“I open a book and after just a few lines start to feel the same unease as that felt by the people described. I suffer with them, sometimes much more than they do themselves, because they are unconscious of their inclusion in the story and have no idea what is awaiting them, whereas it’s clear to me their fate will not be an ordinary one. Why otherwise would the author have chosen to write about them?”

Marek Vadas
Šesť cudzincov
KK Bagala, Levice, 2021, 128 p.
ISBN 978-80-89973-57-6
booksfromslovakia@litcentrum.sk



Our people are not cut out for violence. I'm not sure if I say that to defend or attack them, but we've never taken up arms in protest. We've always been ruled or watched over by someone else — a Hungarian, an Austrian, a Czech a Russian. So we learnt to keep our mouths shut and watch our step. We'd peer through the net curtains at what was happening in the streets, happy that someone was ruling us and that we didn't have to decide things and sort them out for ourselves. It's hard to become a murderer when you're a prisoner.

Given our limitations, we'd only ever dare take on Jews and gypsies. We are a small nation surrounded by large groups on all sides. Some people may talk of cowardice on our part but we had to think carefully before choosing who we could hate without running the risk of reprisals.

There's always been someone we could blame our failures on, ideally some outsider, someone different, some small group that can't defend itself with either an army or very much influence. Recently homosexuals and immigrants have joined the ranks of such groups but any conflicts are merely verbal. The first group are well hidden and one can never be sure about them anyway while immigrants avoid our country like the plague — there simply aren't any, and so opportunities for the angry mob to manifest their feelings are very limited these days.

At first there were a few efforts made by some free, romantic souls, poets who came up with ways of dealing with the Jews. But they soon got their fingers rapped by the emperor. In their enthusiasm they mistook crimes for revolution. So they channelled their grumpy antisemitism into their tracts and novels, but our people, fortunately, were not really into books. And if there ever was a pogrom, well it was a pogrom in name only and nothing much to speak of.

Later on, during the Second World War, even when we had self-rule under our Nazi overlords, there was no great outbreak of amateur slaughtering. The bloody lands were to the north-east of us, where the armies of Stalin and Hitler clashed, civilians died in their millions, commandos cleared the country of Jews, liquidated the Polish, Ukrainian and Belarusian intelligentsia and razed whole villages and towns to the ground. It was hell up there and ordinary people also took part in the purges. There were hundreds, even thousands of pogroms and it was impossible to keep count of all the victims. In our country, though, it was quite different.

Our president, a Catholic priest, organised the deportation of Jews to the concentration camps. It was the right thing to do and kind to our country; it was what God wanted. We paid the Germans a fixed amount for each person so that they would do it for us. We accepted it in silence, without protest — such were the times: the Jews were going. We were innocent and had our excuses: the Holocaust was the work of German Nazis; we didn't know then what was happening; Hitler had tricked our regime... those were our answers. We just wanted peace so that we could grow and throw off the chains of a thousand years of oppression. We are a nation of doves — or so we like to call ourselves, and such a description suits us. Think Picasso and his peace symbol: that's us, as mild as doves, merely dancing around our rivals.

Pogroms before and after the war were rare in our country. We were happy to think that nothing much worth mentioning actually happened. Very occasionally there might be some incident but without corpses, just a mass looting or two and some public humiliation — just a bit of sport, really.

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Texts by

Balla, Beáta Balogová, Jana Bodnárová,
Nicol Hochholczerová, Dušo Martinčok,
Dominika Moravčíková, Pavol Rankov,
Ivan Štrpka, Dušan Taragel, Marek Vadas

Editor

Miroslava Bilačičová, Mária Vargová

Translation

© Julia Sherwood, Jonathan Gresty,
David Short, Isabel Stainsby, John Minahane

English language supervision by

Jayde Thomas Will

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Contact

Slovenské literárne centrum /

Slovak Literary Centre

Nám. SNP 12

812 24 Bratislava

Slovak Republic

booksfromslovakia@litcentrum.sk