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Mikuláš Galanda:
Woman with Bellflowers, 1926

This year's festival of poetry Cap à l'Est, or Capalest, in Banská Štiavnica is aptly accompanied by a new book of Albert Marenčin, a poet, translator from French and member of the Czech and Slovak Surrealist Group. Appearing in the PT publishing house in bilingual Slovak –French edition and entitled LATERNA MAGIKA / LA LANTERNE MAGIQUE, it was presented, predictably, in Banská Štiavnica's Old Castle, on August, 23 at 10.00 p.m. Visitors of this year's event had the opportunity to witness a uniquely real and surreal experience of the author reading from this magical book.
(From the left: Albert Marenčin, Miroslava Vallová. Alexander Halvoník, Michel de Maulne)

An important and praiseworthy novelty of this year's Capalest is the publication of a volume of poetry including nine French-speaking poets, who participated at previous vintages of this unique festival. The trilingual edition (native tongue, French and Slovak) was published by the Centre for Information on Literature (LIC) within its Polyphonic Series (Viachlasne). Slovak poetry is represented by Ján Švantner (*Tree and Other Memories*) and Jozef Mihalkovič (*From New Verse*). The selection, which can also serve as small anthologies of their authors, was prepared by Miroslava Vallová.
(From the left: Albert Marenčin, Jozef Mihalkovič, Rút Lichnerová)

The Centre for Information on Literature (LIC) jointly with the Slovak Embassy in Paris and Slovak Institute in Paris was involved in preparing and realizing this event in Paris, dedicated to contemporary Slovak literature. On September 27, 2006, French readers could enjoy the presentation of Daniela Kapitáňová, whose novel *Samko Tále: Le livre du cimeti're* had appeared shortly in French translation (by Barthelémy Müller) supported by the LIC in the L'Éngouletemps publishing house. Publisher Koloman Kertész Bagala presented several interesting works by other Slovak writers appearing recently in his L.C.A. Publishers Group.

Poet and translator Marián HATALA has recently had several readings in Salzburg, Regensburg, Berlin and Leipzig. On September 27, in Vienna's Slovak Institute, Hatala presented *Na dosah ďaleko (Zum Greifen weit)* – a selection of his poetry, just appearing in Austrian metropolis, in addition to his book of aphorisms *Why Dwarfs Grow So Quickly (*Prečo trpaslíci tak rýchlo rastú), released in Bratislava. The evening with M. Hatala was a success, as witnessed by attendance of his literary colleagues. Participants included several Austrian writers such as G. Jaschke, H. A. Niederle, M. Chobot and P. Matejka.

The portraits of Slovak writers were written and translated by Renata SakoHoess, Saskia Hudecová, Daniela Humajová, Inka Martinová, Eva Melichárková, Viera Prokešová, Anna Šikulová, Luben Urbánek, the book reviews on p. 37 – 40 were translated by Saskia Hudecová.

SLOVAK LITERARY REVIEW
REVUE DER SLOWAKISCHEN LITERATUR

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Am 13. Oktober 2006 stellte sich die slowakische Autorin Uršuľa Kovalyk mit einer Leseprobe aus ihrem Schaffen in Potsdam vor. Sie schreibt für diejenigen, die das Wort „Feminismus" nicht fürchten, die an ständig lächelnde opferwillige Frauen und harte Typen nicht glauben, die nie weinen, sowie schwarzen Humor und Ironie mögen. Ihre Texte sind frisch und frech. In Potsdam las sie aus ihrem neuen Buch „Frau aus dem Secondhand".

On October 5, 2006 our stand at the International Book Fair in Frankfurt am Main was visited by the Slovak EU Commissioner Ján Figeľ. During his half-hour visit Mr. Figeľ met representatives of the LIC, Slovak publishing houses and the diplomatic corps. This informal gathering provided the opportunity to discuss the most topical issues concerning Slovak publishers and booksellers, and the specific problems of individual branches of book production.
(From the left: Alexander Halvoník, Ján Figeľ, Daniela Humajová)

At the Frankfurt International Book Fair the LIC prepared several accompanying events.
On October 5, the works of poet, translator and publicist Marián Hatala and the successful writer Daniela Kapitáňová were presented in individual readings at the Literary Forum.
The same day the authorial readings by Etela Farkašová, Márius Kopcsay and Jozef Puškáš took place at the DIALOGUE Forum. After readings, the authors together with the translator Mirko Kraetsch discussed the different kinds of restlessness in Slovak literature – as inspiration for writers.
(From the left: Etela Farkašová, Jozef Puškáš)

«
An exceptionally well-received event was the presentation of the work *Puss on Skates* (Kocúr na kolieskových korčuliach) by Ján Uličiansky, held on October 7, within the Children Literature Forum. The author discussed on the initial phases of his books, the translator Mirko Kraetsch read one of the book's stories, and the illustrator Miloš Kopták finally prompted the attending children to take part in the painting workshop. The children painted puss masks in their own imagination, and the three most successful masks were rewarded by beautiful books and dictionaries.
(From the left: Children at the Puss Mask Parade, Ján Uličiansky with children)

On December 7, the Centre for Information on Literature together with the Slovak Institute in Berlin prepared an event of contemporary Slovak literature. The premises of the Slovak Institute hosted the presentation of Viera Prokešová and her selection of poetry; Svetlana Žuchová and Peter Krištúfek read samples of their fiction. In the follow-up discussion, the authors engaged themselves in a debate with their readers on the issues of their books and the current situation in Slovak literature in general.
(From the left: Peter Ilčík, director of the Slovak Institute in Berlin, Mirko Kraetsch, translator, Svetlana Žuchová and Peter Krištúfek.)

MIKULÁŠ GALANDA (1895—1938) is a renowned painter, illustrator, and one of the most important pioneers and promoters of Slovak modern art. He began studying at the School of Applied Arts in Prague with Professor Hugo Vratislav Brunner. There he met Ľudovít Fulla and their friendship, artistic and personal, lasted until his death. Galanda transferred to the Academy of Fine Arts under professor August Brömse, later with professor František Thiele, and graduated in 1927. In all his work, he strove to formulate the Slovakian artistic modernism on the basis of achievements in European painting. He inclined towards Expressionism and Cubism, and created his own form of painting on this basis. At the very beginning of his career he was oriented more into graphics but later he switched to paintwork, in which he turned to domestic content, associated with the Slovak landscape and people. He participated in many exibitions and won numerous awards for paintings and illustrations. Galanda was considered to be a lyric painter of female beauty and charm. His paintings are distinguished by subtle melancholy. Galanda is the leading Slovak artist of the first half of the 20th century. The significance of his pictures is enclosed in themselves, in their extremely high artistic qualities.

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Slovak Literary Review

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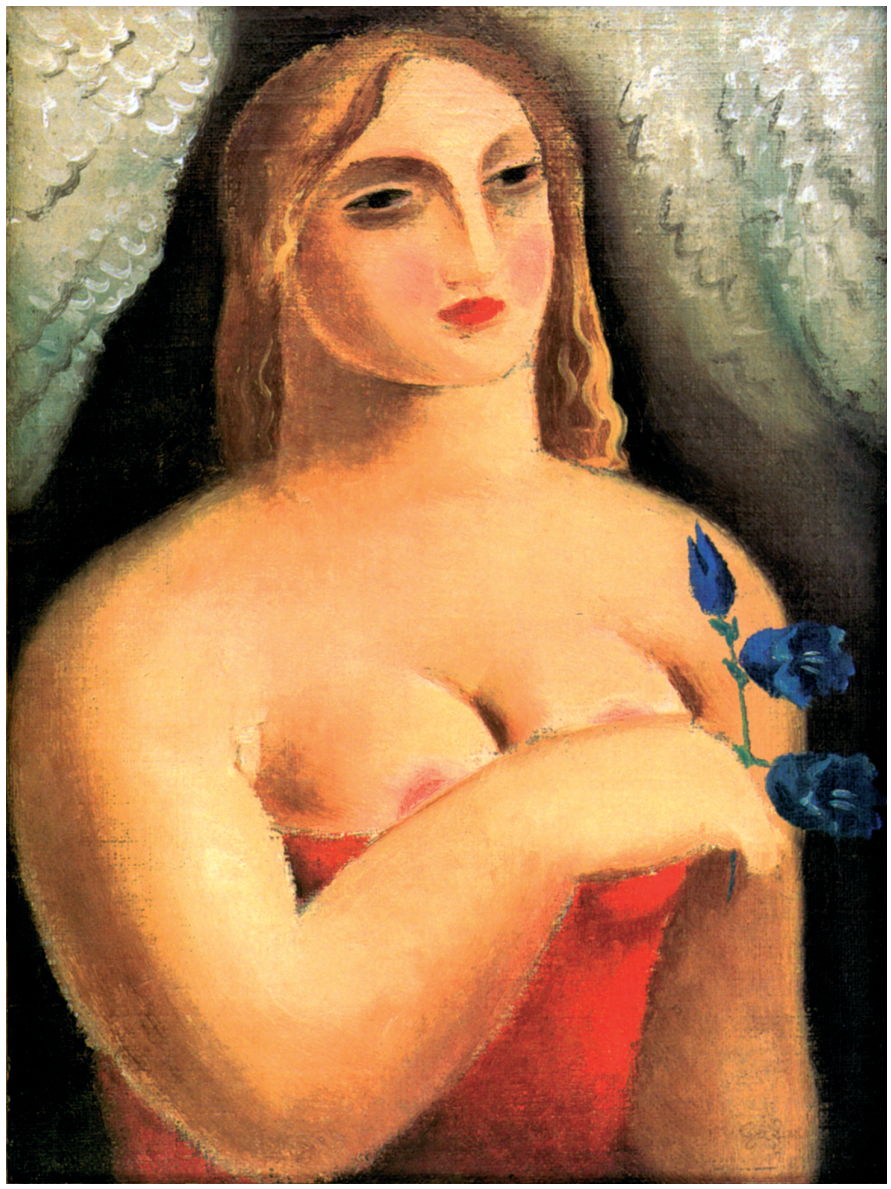


SLOVAK LITERATURE IN THE ERA OF REALISM

Vladimír Petrík

MODERN Slovak literature was born in the second half of the nineteenth century when the Slovak language was standardized and Slovak society, influenced by the revolutionary spirit prevailing in Europe at the time, became active in its fight for national and civil rights. There was a virtual outburst of poetry, flying on the wings of revolution, intoxicated by romantic visions of future Slovakia. Because poetry was deeply rooted in folklore traditions, it continued to live long after the revolution was defeated. All enthusiasm evaporated and Bach's absolutist régime certainly did nothing to encourage free thinking, and so poetry survived in a rather simplistic form, refusing to take a new, more sober look at social reality. That is why the era of realism began as late as the 1880s.

A new generation was formed, not only in poetry but mainly in prose, and later in drama and it was this generation that brought Slovak literature to a qualitatively higher level. Of course, even this generation lived in oppresive conditions and still felt the need to defend national interests. However, there was a lot of disagreement among writers concerning the best form of expressing this need and reacting to literary development with regard to the reader, who also went through new experiences. Svetozár Hurban Vajanský (1847–1916), the Corypheus of social, political and cultural life, an outstanding journalist, poet and prose writer, who actually founded Slovak realism (collection of poems *The Tatras and the Sea,* 1880, Tatry a more), acknowledged only works with strong nationalistic undertones and criticised all those who favoured other literary models. In his series of novels and novellas (*Dry Sprig*, Suchá ratolesť, 1884; *Wasteflower,* Pustokvet, 1893; *Root and Shoots,* Koreň a výhonky, 1896; *Cauldron City,* Kotlín, 1901) Vajanský strictly followed the line "*We against the others*" (the others stood for renegades) thus raising the ideological aspect of literary works to the first position. Because he knew European literature so well, admiring mainly Russian prose (I. E. Turgenev), Vajanský made several attempts to depict all complexities of social relationships and individuals in his novels. But his efforts resulted in improbable stories hardly comparable with reality. Although they had some realistic features, the overall impression was still romantic.

Martin Kukučín (1860–1927), author of numerous short stories about village life and a talented humorist, was the first writer of this period who applied realistic principles consistently. He resigned to the ideological principle and based his writing on personal experiences with village life and its representatives. His prose is full of realistic true-to-life types, opening a window to real life and showing that the future of the Slovak nation is guaranteed by ordinary people. Prose writer and dramatist Jozef Gregor Tajovský (1874–1940) progressed even further in depicting Slovak reality. He dared to view Slovak society, which was sacred for Vajanský, quite critically. Looking at social life in Slovak villages he found tensions and antagonisms instead of idyllic peace and quiet (collection of short stories *Fairy Tales,* Rozprávky, 1900; *Chatting*, Besednice, 1903; *Sad Tones,* Smutné nôty, 1907; *From Under the Scythe*, Spod kosy, 1910; *Cherry Laurels,* Tŕpky, 1911 etc.) His probes into village life were made through short prosaic forms, such as causeries and short stories. He preferred social themes that evoked compassion and empathy with the poorest over complex compositions. He became popular, however, for his dramatical works (*Women's Law,* Ženský zákon, 1900; *Fortunes and Misfortunes,* Statky-zmätky, 1909).

The greatest talent of all realists was undoubtedly Božena Slančíková (1867–1951) who wrote under the pseudonym Timrava, author of many novellas about village life (focusing especially on members of the country intelligentsia) in which she makes her heroines face bitter reality, when in their search for love all they find is greediness and cowardice. Timrava's realism destroyed all illusions. She fought against sentimentalism and naïve idealism (*In One Farmyard*, Na jednom dvore, 1904; *Without Pride,* Bez hrdosti, 1905; *Great Happiness*, Veľké šťastie, 1906; *That Wonderful Country,* Tá zem vábna, 1907; *Vanity All,* Márnosť všetko, 1908; *The Tapak Family*, Ťapákovci, 1914 etc.). Timrava depicts her characters with all psychological details, working with a wide range of emotions. Existential elements appeared in her later works (i.e. *The Demise of Paľo Ročko,* Skon Paľa Ročku, 1921) where she tackled the relationship of life and death, questioning the meaning of life. She was able to look at national identity problems without illusions and was quite critical in this sphere.

Apart from Timrava there were other women writers, also realists: Elena Maróthy-Šoltésová (1855–1939), Terézia Vansová (1857–1942) and Ľudmila Podjavorinská (1872–1951). Women's movement began to develop in Slovakia during the last third of the nineteeth century. Their goal was not only emancipation but also (and mainly) their active involvement in social and cultural life as an important part of the fight for national rights. Women's club Živena was founded (1869) and later a magazine with the same name and another magazine Dennica, *Morning Star*, in 1898. These magazines contributed to the development of Slovak literature. E. M. Šoltésová stood side by side with Vajanský after publishing her novel *Against the Stream,* Proti prúdu, 1894. But her most outstanding work, *My Children,* Moje deti, in which she depicted the life of her two children who died prematurely, was written as a diary. Terézia Vansová focused on realistic presentations of

women's themes (*Stepdaughter*, Chovanica etc.) but she became popular for her sentimental novel *The Podhradsky Orphan,* Sirota Podhradských, 1889). Ľ. Podjavorinská published a collection of poems titled *From Spring of Life,* Z vesny života, in 1895 when she was only twenty three years old. Later, however, she started to write prose. Women's themes prevail in her sometimes realistic, sometimes sentimental novellas and short stories (*In Slavery,* V otroctve, 1905; *Delusion,* Blud, 1906; *Woman,* Žena, 1910). She returned to poetry through poems for children for which she became famous.

Contrary to the period of romanticism in which poetry was dominant, realism favoured prose not only in Slovakia but all over Europe. The era of realism in Slovakia gave birth to only one poet – Pavol Országh Hviezdoslav (1849–1921) – who eventually made up for a whole generation. Besides lyrical poems and cycles (*Annular Rings,* Letorosty; *Psalms and Hymns,* Žalmy a hymny; *Spring Walks,* Prechádzky jarom; *Summer Walks,* Prechádzky letom; *Grievances,* Stesky; *Aftermaths,* Dozvuky etc.) he published short epic forms (*Bútora and Čútora,* Bútora a Čútora; *Grazing Horses at Night,* Na obnôcke; *Going to Harvest,* V žatvu etc.) and long epic opuses resembling novels (*Forrester's Wife,* Hájnikova žena, 1884-86, *Ežo Vlkolinsky,* Ežo Vlkolinský, 1890; *Gabor Vlkolinsky,* Gábor Vlkolinský, 1901). He also wrote drama, the most remarkable of which was the drama in verse on a Biblical subject *Herodes and Herodias,* Herodes a Herodias (1909) and was very active as a translator of the most outstanding works of European poetry. Hviezdoslav is still considered as the greatest Slovak poet. His poetic universe is so rich, it embraces so much. It includes nation, God, nature, freedom, everyday work, hope and despair, faith and doubts. The range of themes, reflections and emotions was so vast, that Slovak language at the time was not able to express all of them and so the author had to use colloqualisms and even neologisms. His language is hard to understand today and so, while every Slovak acknowledges Hviezdoslav as a great poet, only few actually read his works. But those who do are richly awarded.

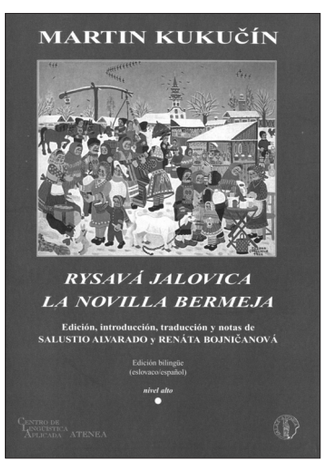
Although Hviezdoslav had quite a few followers, they were mere epigons. His example could not be followed. That is why those who entered the field of poetry after him, like Janko Jesenský (1874–1945), Ivan Krasko (1876–1958), Vladimír Roy (1855–1936) and others, introduced different poetics expressing different feelings. Through their works Slovak realism made its transition into symbolism of the Slovak Modern. This generation also had to fight its predecessors who disliked subjectivism, pesimism and lack of nationalist themes in the works of young poets. Eventually, the younger generation asserted itself.

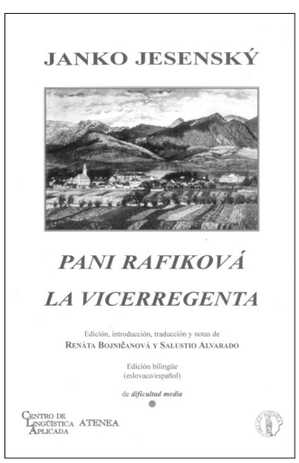
What was the contribution of realism to Slovak literature? During this period it opened up to the world and was inspired by contemporary trends in writing. An effort to keep pace with the present was evident. Only the fate of a nation lacking freedom was holding it back. In spite of that most authors moved from the *hero-nation* stage to *hero-individual* stage. Of course, it cost some effort which eventually brought fruit. Aesthetically perceived reality, either collectively (the village), or individually (poetical subject) was the most important. Slovak society was never differentiated to the extent that would allow for more extensive epical works in prose. There was only one truly realistic novel written at the time (Martin Kukučín: *A House on a Hillside,* Dom v stráni, 1904) but the setting was not Slovak. The author was a doctor who had practised in Croatia since 1894 and that is where the novel takes place. In spite of these shortcomings a lot has been said about Slovak reality in causeries, short stories and novellas written by many authors. Their works are now considered classics which implies something closed but, nevertheless, they still have an effect on our consciousness.

Translated by Alena Redlingerová

The literary historian Dr. VLADIMÍR PETRÍK, PhD. (1929) is a prominent literary historian and critic. For over forty years he has been working at the Institute of Slovak Literature of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava. He is interested in researching Slovak literature of the 20th century. On issues on the development, authors and works of this period he has published a number of books, articles and papers: *In Search of Present Time*, 1970; *Values and Motives*, 1980; *The Slovak Novel of the 1970's*, 1990.
He has paid special attention to the prose writer Ladislav Nádaši-Jégé: *Man in Jégé's Work* (1979). In 2002, he was awarded the Order of Ľudovít Štúr by the President of the Slovak Republic.

Photo: Archive





The works of two foremost Slovak realists, Martin Kukučín and Janko Jesenský, has been published in bilingual editions by the Centro de Linguistica Aplicada Atenea in Madrid, Spain. Both the books were translated by Salustio Alvarado and Renáta Bojničanová and supported by the Centre for Information on Literature.

Ivan Krasko

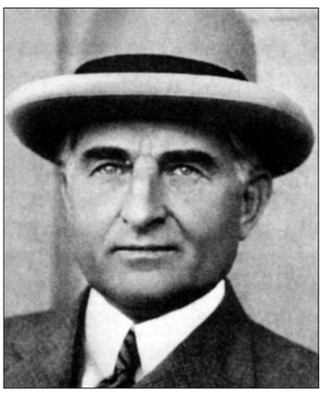


Photo: Archive

IVAN KRASKO (1876–1958), real name Ján Botto, a poet, prose writer, translator; one of the founders and core representatives of Slovak Modern and symbolism. He studied chemistry at the Czech Technical University in Prague. Like other Slovak students before him, he took active part in Detvan, the Slovak academic association in Prague, from 1900 til 1903. After graduation, he worked as a chemical engineer in Klobouky and Slané until the outbreak of WWI. In 1914 he commenced his military service. The war brought him to Poland, Russia, and Italy; in 1918, after the end of WWI, Krasko engaged in politics and became a deputee in the National Ensembly. Simultaneously he continued his academic activities in Bratislava and Prague, earning his doctorate. In 1923, he was elected a member of the Academy of Sciences.

Krasko's beginnings were influenced by Slovak romanticism and also by confrontation with the poetry of Hviezdoslav, Mihail Eminescu (whom he translated), and Paul Verlaine.

Krasko wrote two collections of poetry: *Nox et solitudo* (Night and Loneliness, 1909) and *Verše* (Verses, 1912). His work reveals a sensitive and melancholy soul (the poem „Solitude"), meditating on the mysteries of existence and the place of love in an indifferent the world. He pays special attention to the mystery of the human psyche, of interpersonal relationships and of human being. In *Verses* he intensifies the poetry of night and loneliness and in the end he breaks the circle. The reader follows his battle between his skeptical view and his realization of moral imperative in connection to a man. Often, he uses the form of an interior monologue, an analytical and philosophical examination that is as much a personal catharsis as it is a castigation of the vices of the world.

Krasko wrote also a novella *Our Folks* (Naši, 1907), taking place in the circles of the academic association Detvan; two proses with a weakened plot-line titled *Sentimental Stories 1, 2* (Sentimentálne príhody 1,2 – 1908) which represent insights into an interior world of an indecisive man. In novella *A Letter to a Dead Man* (List mŕtvemu, 1911), we can find Krasko's characteristic feature of mystery, growing into fantasy. Ivan Krasko also translated Romanian poetry (mainly Eminescu and younger poets) and German poetry (R. Dehmel).

CRITIQUE

There were those who in the temples spoke,
and there were those who in the temples listened.

Blessed are they who spoke
and said no more than they could say in the holy days.

They shall be saved who did not say everything
they imagined they knew,
and those shall be lost who said more
than they should have said on the holy days.

It will not be forgiven to those
who were called to speak the sacred Word,
but kept silence at the time of the Great Festival,
and woe to all who kept no holy hours
and went without reverence to speak in the temples of the Word.

And blessed alone are they
who in the temples reverently hear the blessed Word
and see the light of His glory.

(Verses, 1912)

HOW LATE IT IS

How late it is, do you forget!
Above the hills there mounts
the full moon, mute and pale,
a ghostly countenance;

cloud-wisps are drawn across the sky,
hiding the moon with their veil;
stray shadows roam the dusky fields,
peace hushes in the dale;

far, far away a crier calls
each hour of evening fled,
the echoes roll on in swollen waves
until they are silent and dead –

exactly as it was that time...
...The moon had traveled its span,
but you do not return to end
the conversation we began.

(*Nox et solitudo, 1909)*

IVAN KRASKO is undoubtedly a central figure of the Slovak Modern movement. His poetry is very authentic. And its character? It is full of melancholic moods and nostalgia, unfullfilled expectations, guilt, loneliness, and the desire for real love and friendship... On the formal side, Krasko's poetry is characterised by extreme entrapment, often concealment, things are left unsaid, indefinite expressions (sometime, somewhere, etc.) are used. The images of night, twilight, mist, moonlight, rain, symbolising the internal situation of the subject, give rise to a strange, poetically unusual atmosphere, interpreting a feeling of resolution (even resignation) and at the same time incompletion, unnerving imperfection, amplyfying feelings of desire which can not be realised.

VLADIMÍR PETRÍK

THE GUESTS

Courteously, though with a mystic fearfulness,
I welcomed nonetheless my funeral guests,
somber, with psalters under their arms, having arrived from distant lands.

Ceremonially, with chalky, dry and bony hands
each reverenced the icon of my dusty home,
and bowing to the waist (to me – if not, to whom?),
they sat around the table, a solemn, black-swathed ring.
Searching the psalter for long-lost hymns, they then began to sing
in deep sepulchral voice – the harshest kind of air –
of bitter fruit the tree of life was found to bear,
of Mother Earth's original condition – as one she was
before the thrice-cursed lust of slithering Diabolos...
And then as gloomily they left (under the smiles
of those who never dared to take from Eve the apple of her wiles),
and said they would return to us again next year
to visit those they now considered brothers, or at least, as near.
.....
Eunice! Where are you? Look how one by one they disappear.

(Verses, 1912)

Translated by Andrew Cincura

TODAY THE TWILIGHT...

Today the twilight died in a sudden flicker.
Perhaps a pale moon will light up the skies...
But what was it we wished to say with sighs
and voices that were trembling and too bitter?!

We wished to look full in each other's eyes;
alas, they were too narrow and too cold...
What is this grief, that has a tighter hold
when a crimson moon is gloomily on the rise,
in the glittering frost?!

And sparkling was the frost
when great full stars blazed coldly overhead
and the moon rose in sorrow, dusky-red.
Bitterness burning in the heart, unsaid,
where did we find it, how shall it be lost?!
So harshly gleams the frost! – – –

Translated by John Minahane

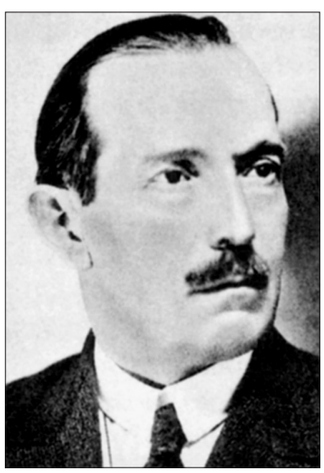


Photo: Archive

Vladimír Roy

VLADIMÍR ROY (1885–1936), educated in Bratislava, with theological studies in Scotland, was a Lutheran pastor who made his name as a poet and a leading translator from English (Shakespeare, Dickens, Galsworthy, Wells), German (Goethe, Hauptmann), and French (Dumas, Baudelaire). Roy's poetic work attempts to bridge Hviezdoslav and Krasko. As with Krasko, a dichotomy is present, expressed in contrasting pairs such as faith versus science, progress versus death, the eternal versus change. His Christian world-view did help him to achieve balance and order in disorienting times. The poems he wrote between 1907 and 1920 were collected in *When the Mists Disappear* (Keď miznú hmly, 1921) and *Through the Dew and Thorns* (Rosou a tŕním, 1921). In the first collection, he attempts to incorporate the best he found in the Slovak tradition, particularly the lyricism of the poetry of P.O. Hviezdoslav, into the new poetics typified by modernist symbolism. Besides being a symbolist, Roy was also an Impressionist, which becomes apparent in his second collection. The poems published later and collected in *Through the Veil* (Cez závoj, 1927) and *With a Wing the Fate Is Waving* (Peruťou sudba máva, 1927) show his tendency to find philosophical explanations for his problems and, not surprisingly, to explain them with the help of Christian mysticism, a tendency already observed in his second collection. In 1933 Roy finished a collection *Rippling Spring* (Zvlnený prameň), but it remained in manuscript.

The poems of VLADIMÍR ROY consisted of intimate, loving and natural lyricism... Despite the stated resonance, Roy is not an epigone of European or domestic symbolism. The characteristic signs of this movement: sadness, nostalgia, split personality („as if it had two souls"), passivity, desire for action, etc., all of this had an origin not only in the atmosphere of the period, but also in the internal working of the poet himself. Insignificant stimuli influenced Roy and provoked him to create.

VLADIMÍR PETRÍK

DARK IT IS

Dark it is above me, below me and within,
dark throughout the day as dark the night has been,
cold it is and raw down to the deep bottom
of my soul, and all is peaceful as the autumn
with an alien peace, a peace without a name,
oh, how this kind of peace fills me with shame.

(*When the Mists Disappear*, 1909)

FAITH

(To Ivan Krasko)

And she came to me softly, garbed in lilies,
as unassuming as a skylark's song,
on the snowy wings of a dove,
and knocked on my door, plainitively pleading.
And I did not open to her, but drove her away
in proud audacity...
And she departed sobbing, like an innocent child
unjustly slapped.
Today I kneel on the bare, damp ground,
strewn with thorns
–fallen from the crown of Christ–
and I bitterly weep and pray:
Come, even though I should die, but come...!
(1910)

(*Through the Dew and Thorns,* 1921)

Translated by Andrew Cincura

VIRGIN FOREST

Take me, take me into your green embrace,
virgin forest,
soothe my heart's troubles, even if just today's,
not tomorrow's.

Take me, take me, I am a son of yours,
virgin forest,
somewhere I lost my luck, and here am I
sunk in sorrows.

Take me, take me, into your perfumed arms,
virgin forest,
maybe my jaded soul has music still
to pour in torrents!

(Rippling Spring, 1933)

Translated by John Minahane

Photo: Archive

Martin Rázus

MARTIN RÁZUS (1888–1937), a poet, prose writer, dramatist, journalist, and politician. He studied theology in Bratislava (graduated in 1911) and for a short period in Edinburgh (1912); afterwards he became a protestant clergyman in various places in Slovakia. In the 1920's he became engaged in politics, supporting the idea of Slovak autonomy within the Czechoslovak state. This was not in accord with the official policy of one Czechoslovak nation and lead to discrepancies.
Rázus started writing poetry during his studies, mainly after 1912. He did not incline to modernism; he preferred appellative poetry with a clear message. By the end of WWI he published three collections of poems, *From Quiet and Stormy Moments* (Z tichých a búrnych chvíľ, 1917), *That's War!* (To je vojna!, 1919) and *Hail, Dear Land!* (Hoj, zem drahá!, 1919). In later collections, *Milestone* (Kameň na medzi, 1925), *Arrows of the Soul* (Šípy duše, 1929) and *Journey* (Cestou, 1935), an increasing nationalism springing from a problematic co-existence with Czech nation, can be seen.
Rázus's prose also has mostly educative and ideological character. In 1929 he published four volume novel *Worlds* (Svety), where we can find everything that defined him as a writer after 1918: political and social struggle, the battle of political parties for voters, religion, relationships between Czechs and Slovaks. The motif of drawing the intelligentsia into social and national affairs is repeated in his other novels, as *Julia* (Júlia, 1930), *Message from the Dead* (Odkaz mŕtvych, 1936). Almost all his work has ideological and educational character, except two autobiographic novels, *Maroshko* (Maroško) and *Maroshko Studies* (Maroško študuje).

UNDERDOG

You've been and always will be
underrated,
your best by those above
deflated.

Your blood their wine,
their pearls your sweat,
you sansculotte, you
slaving wretch.

Your anger, like a bomb
or dynamite,
is capable of smashing
worlds of might.

This one you rob that
one to favor,
each time you find a
brand-new savior.

Sinews, I know, at the voice
of command,
will grasp, like a bag,
and shake the land.

But just as your world
begins to sprout,
again, poor thing, you're
down and out!

(*Journey*, 1935)

LAST ACQUAINTANCE

When all forsake me – you abide
as evening shadows low;
with silken glances as a bride
your eyes upon me glow.

Embraces to stone shall turn one day
and pains sift into dust:
I only know how good to stay
alone with you, if I must.

The bluebird will sing in shaded night;
from the roof you will hear its wail;
my triumphs will pass before you sigh,
and I, at last, will fail.

I'll place my heart within your palm,
my head upon your lap;
my soul, with the glimpse of the distant dawn,
shall rest without mishap.

When all forsake me – will you come...?
In scenes beyond compare
the loveliest world will bloom for some,
but you – will you be there?

(*Slovenské pohľady, 1935*)

Translated by Andrew Cincura

Božena Slančíková-Timrava

WHO TO MARRY?

(extract)

(From a young woman's diary)

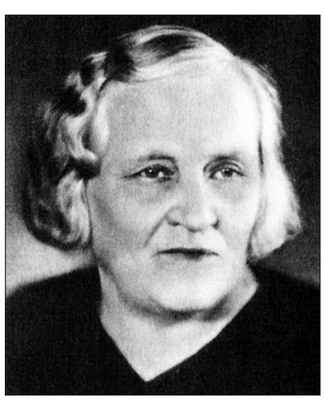


Photo: Archive

TIMRAVA (1867–1951), by real name Božena Slančíková, is a prose writer and a dramatist and belongs to the most noteworthy writers of the late literary realism in Slovakia. She was born into a vicar family and nearly all her life, except a short period spent in a city, she lived in small villages in the country. There was a very creative atmosphere in her family as her siblings wrote as well. Timrava was interested in people and mainly in relationships between men and women. She based her stories on personal experiences: she knew both the intelligentsia and peasants well and she depicted these two classes in her novellas and short stories. But people and their reactions interested her more than social issues. Her stories are always simple, but not her characters. Nearly all her stories are based on the clash of illusions and reality, leading to disillusionment and ultimately to conciliation with reality. Timrava's heroines go through this painful process in novellas written between 1896–1900: *Who to Marry?* (Za koho ísť?), *Unloved* (Nemilí), *Too Late* (Pozde). This was a reaction to sentimental depiction of love affairs in Slovak prose of those times. Timrava's analysis of a love affair is very sober, even cruel. Emotions are always shattered at the sharp edges of reality.
The most famous of her "rural" stories is novella *The Ťapáks* (Ťapákovci, 1914), depicting a farmer family sticking to a traditional way of life and refusing to adapt to the new, changing conditions. Novella *The Demise of Paľo Ročko* (Skon Paľa Ročku, 1921) brings a profound analysis of the psychology of a rural person. Timrava also reacted to the dramatic events of WWI in her novella *Heroes* (Hrdinovia, 1919), depicting a Slovak village derailed by the war and a gallery of "heroes" and real heroes. Timrava is a truly original authoress in both imagination and attitude. She did not continue the past literary trends, as she grew up and lived most of her life in a small village in southern Slovakia, almost completely isolated from cultural movements.

Now, when everyone is fleeing from the towns, as if they'd been stricken by an epidemic, I've also come to spend the summer in the village. Actually, my intention is to ensnare some villager or other, as I've failed to find a husband in town, despite there being no shortage of philanderers.

I've already lost all patience, being twenty-five years old, and therefore I shall put all I have into desperately snatching at this last hope.

My uncle, the village priest, has been inviting me to visit them every summer, but I have always scorned the idea, saying: "What do I care for the village? How can you hope to find a gentleman there?!" Now, disappointed with gentlemen who only court you, but are unwilling to be caught, I've begun to daydream of naïve villagers, who do not court, do not woo, do not fall in love, but – allow themselves to be caught.

I noticed that my uncle was not exactly overjoyed at my arrival in his home. He shook his head doubtfully. "I don't know whether you'll like it here," he told me. "Here the intelligentsia is me, two teachers and the Jew who sells spirits. You'll run away!"

Aunt Tereza, uncle's sister, who had looked after him ever since he was a child – he being a bachelor – cheered me up, saying that the teachers were both single young men and that I could let them court me, to make the time pass quicker.

"Oh, no!" I thought, "courting's the last thing I want! I've had quite enough of that. It's a wedding I want, a wedding!!" But otherwise Auntie's news filled me with pleasure and

I immediately imagined one man of slight build with an innocent face and inexperienced – the other half-wild, fiery, but also – inexperienced.

In the evening, when my aunt had shown me to the room that was to be my bedroom, I wrote a letter home with the question: "Would you let me marry a village schoolmaster, or wouldn't you?"

Today my uncle introduced me to the teachers. They both arrived at the same time for a game of cards, as was their custom every afternoon. They bowed politely when Uncle introduced me and immediately sat down at the table. We were sitting out here in the courtyard in the shade of a tree, in the company of Auntie's ducks and hens. I was sitting to one side, reading a novel – so I had time to observe both the teachers. One, named Rudolf Mišov, was tall and thin; he had black hair combed down over his forehead and sharp, restless eyes. He had brought with him a bottle of beer in each of his jacket pockets – he said little and looked very serious. That was the choirmaster.

The other one, Samuel Bút by name, was a fat, round-cheeked young man with a handsome face, but otherwise absolutely nondescript; he walked with a stoop as if he'd been carrying heavy knapsacks ever since childhood. He ate the sour cream Auntie had brought them and spoke in sudden spurts, as if chopping each word off from the next, while recounting how his neighbour, the herdsman's wife, beat her husband and how his other neighbour, the Jew, had thrown the blacksmith out of the grocery store for insulting him by calling him Aaron and Moses. Although he chatted on endlessly, Bút ate and drank the most, while my uncle and the schoolmaster just looked at him admiringly and laughed at his tales. It could be seen that all three of them got on very well together. They played for about three hours. Then Bút left first, without saying a word to me – maybe he didn't want to interrupt while I was reading – so I laid my book down in my lap, so that at least Mišov could address me. Sure enough, after a moment or two he asked me how long I was going to be here.

"For as long as I like it here," I answered, taking Bút's place at the table.

"That won't be long!" my uncle's responded with a sigh, which surprised me. He propped up his fat chin with his palm and stared at the ducks and hens in the courtyard. It was a pleasant evening. Swallows flew in circles around us, twittering cheerfully. I, too, felt overcome with good will and began to twitter as if competing with them, so that Mišov would see what an agreeable city girl I was and would admire me. From time to time I looked warmly into his eyes, expecting him to drop his gaze in confusion. But no! He watched me, sitting quietly, saying nothing, and studying my face. But the merrier I spoke, light-heartedly arguing with my uncle about the better writers and music, the more suspicious the expression in his eyes seemed to me. In the end, I sensed that he was not in fact gazing in admiration, but staring, as if he condemned my boastful, self-confident behaviour and wanted to silence me with his eyes and perhaps even expected me to lower my eyes before him!

Well, I wasn't going to do that! I didn't want to give in to him. Was some village schoolmaster to have intellectual superiority over me? So I defiantly prattled on about Victor Hugo's novels; in fact I mentioned works by writers from all over the world, to the delight of my uncle, who was glad to see how well educated I am. After about an hour, Mišov left. I boldly kept going to the end and neither he nor I lowered our eyes, but I was not satisfied with myself. "A fine state of affairs," I thought, feeling disgruntled, "to be examined by such a teacher. I gave away more than if I'd lowered my eyes before him."

"What kind of people are these teachers?" I asked my uncle, rousing him just as he was beginning to nod off. When he'd yawned, rubbed his eyes, stretched out both arms and folded them, he finally said: "Bút is the assistant schoolmaster – he used to be a cobbler, but as we didn't get anyone else, we asked him to come here. And we haven't regretted it. Bút is a good teacher, and what's more he mends our shoes, so we don't have to send them to town. In the summer he studies hard to pass the exams and get a teaching diploma."

"And Mišov?"

"He's the son of the teacher from the next village. He wanted to be a doctor, but he didn't have the money to study, so the state trained him to be a teacher, but he hasn't stopped dreaming of being a doctor. He teaches children in the winter as well and during the summer he goes looking for herbs in the fields to make poultices and ointments for ordinary folk. So they've nicknamed him the quack. But people wouldn't exchange him for anything in the world. Three times he's been offered a job elsewhere and three times they've raised his salary; it'll soon be more than mine – that's how ordinary folks show their gratitude to those who help them."

"Ordinary folk! – but he's making himself ridiculous in the eyes of the educated world – doesn't that worry him?"

"What educated world? I'm the educated world here and I don't scorn him for it. You do?" my uncle asked, scrutinizing me through the darkness.

"What's it to me? He doesn't interest me!" I claim without blushing.

Life goes on quietly and peacefully, one day like the next, today like yesterday. In the morning Uncle keeps an eye on the swarm of bees and catches the queen in a glass jar to stop her from settling in a tree, so he doesn't have to strain his fat body on her account. Auntie doesn't set foot out of the kitchen; she spends the whole day cooking, baking and working hard with the servants. Mišov walks through the fields with his stick in search of herbs and makes poultices and ointments, while Bút sews shoes and boots for the intelligentsia in the area. In the afternoon, however, they both come to play cards and I now play with them, but neither of them is courting me. Bút might want to, but he doesn't know how, so he just tells us stories about his neighbours. Mišov knows how, but doesn't want to; he is unusually serious, says little and is deliberately being as phlegmatic as possible. He holds his head high and straightens himself up – as if he wasn't tall enough as it is! – I don't like that. We've been together for two weeks already and we are where we were at the start. In town they'd have got down on their knees and declared they loved me long ago and maybe they'd have already left me!

Another two weeks have passed. I'm beginning to find the teachers agreeable; both of them are in love! Mišov has been neglecting his walks in search of herbs and instead he leans up against the grey pillars of his house, gazing in the direction of the parsonage. Bút is now ashamed to make and mend shoes, and instead of this he spends the whole morning walking around his garden and casting glances at my window. After lunch, I've hardly risen from the table when they both arrive and are here until dusk. First we go and have a look at the bees, until the heat of the sun has cooled, then we have tea. Auntie prepares the table, while I fill Uncle's pipe with tobacco, and so we play around like this, looking into each other's eyes. Auntie suspects something and is glad she'll have a relative in the village if I marry one of the teachers. Uncle teases me and is tickled beyond words when I call them silly things, but today, when he caught me in my room secretly looking one moment at Bút's garden through the window facing south and the next at Mišov's school through the window facing west, he got cross and stopped teasing me. When we were taking a walk in the evening, he then talked to me about youth, which passes, about beauty, which passes, about love, which also passes. – While he was talking, the thought that was going through my head was: "Which of these teachers should I choose?"

After pondering the matter for three days, I've made up my mind to marry the one who loves me best. In order to find this out, I have determined to make them jealous. So when Mišov

arrived in the morning – there was to be a funeral with verses – and he brought me a large bunch of mountain flowers, I set to work. Hardly glancing at the unusual, rarely seen flowers, I put the bouquet on the window sill and began diligently admiring Bút's garden. Mišov sat down at a distance from me – he has never sat close – and I saw he'd noticed my indifference, but ignored it; only when I "didn't hear" his questions did he get up from the table and, coming up behind me, he looked out of the window.

"Samuel Bút," he said and calmly went and sat down again in his former place.

"Is he coming here?" Uncle asked.

"No, he's just walking around his garden," he replied and asked Uncle something about the funeral. I had thought he would hurry off immediately, but he made no move and I couldn't detect the slightest trace of agitation in his face. I "accidentally" knocked the bouquet off the sill, then accidentally trod on it, looked down – what's that? – and pushed it aside with the tip of my shoe. "Will that make him angry now?" I wondered.

All in vain! He noticed that, too, but instead of giving a mocking smile, he asked me to accompany them to the church to hear his verses, "so at least one sensible ear – apart from the priest's – would hear him." Then he yawned and as time passed did so more and more frequently, as if he was terribly bored. "Did you write the verses last night?" I asked him, put out by his indifference. "Oh, they were done ages ago. My grandfather wrote them thirty years ago!" was his reply, followed by a yawn. Uncle, in spite of being absorbed in holy thoughts – he was reading the Bible – laughed, and I couldn't help laughing too, but he remained grave and continued to yawn discreetly – which surprised me, because with him I had never yet noticed such indecorum.

I went to the church to hear his verses, but I didn't like them; I was angry because he didn't care even though I had insulted him and also because he didn't make a single mistake when reciting in front of the pews and when I looked at him, he calmly returned my gaze, as if I meant nothing to him.

I began to doubt his love for me and couldn't wait for the afternoon, when Bút would come and cheer me up.

At about three in the afternoon Bút came to call me to play cards – I had deliberately retired to my room, knowing they would send him for me. I didn't go until I'd spent a good while praising Mišov's verses; I fondled the bouquet and showed Bút the gift of rare flowers, all the time examining the expression on his face.

"Of course, I know," he said, but in an unchanged voice, "that you have quite fallen in love with him!"

"That goes without saying!" I declare jokingly, to see his reaction. But his expression was just the same – calm. His cheeks weren't flushed with anger, and there was no spark of jealousy in his eyes.

"Neither of them is jealous! – They don't love me!" I thought in despair. However, when we were playing cards I noticed that today these inseparable friends and colleagues, who have lived in complete harmony, could not bear each other's presence. They quarrelled over every trifle like two cocks on the same dunghill and Bút often turned to me with the question, "Well, I'm right, don't you think?"

Mišov didn't even look in my direction and took himself off home earlier than usual.

"I'm going to have a look at the rye beyond the poppy field!" he excused himself to my uncle.

"Herbs! Not rye. He's run out of poultices and has nothing to make his herbal remedies from," Bút joked at first, when Mišov had left. But a while later he also departed – perhaps to mend shoes. I ran up to my room to watch them out of the window. Mišov was waiting for Bút at the point where the paths crossed.

"You know what?" Mišov said, "It'd be a pity to start a quarrel on account of some woman! She came and she'll go. We'll just be left to regret she's gone. Is it worth sacrificing our friendship for that heartache? Be sensible and leave her be!"

"You can leave her be!" Bút retorted. Mišov looked Bút in the eye, turned round and strode off uphill through the village to the school, whistling to himself.

Uncle came to invite me to go for a walk and as I was very quiet, he may have thought I was sorry the teachers had hurried away so early, because he began to tell me how depraved young people are nowadays, that they are not "like we were" and that they didn't deserve the notice of a self-respecting girl. I listened to him patiently, but no sooner had we reached the house than I escaped to my room to look out of the window. It was already getting dark, but I could still see that Bút was walking around his garden with his dog and Mišov was leaning against a pillar; he was not looking here, but had turned his head away in the opposite direction, gazing at the evening sky shimmering beyond the village backyards. I watched him for a long time and he didn't look downhill. Angry at this, I threw the bouquet out of the window into the street and sat down on the sofa in the corner, intending to daydream about the elegant dandies in town, just to spite him. At that moment, however, I heard footsteps and immediately hurried over to the window. Mišov was coming downhill, Bút uphill and they met below my window.

"Where are you going, cobbler?" Mišov asked, stopping in front of Bút. At first Bút was taken aback, but the next moment he dealt his colleague a clout over the ear. Mišov paid him back with two, thrust both hands into his coat pockets and walked on, whistling, as if nothing had happened. Bút stood there for a minute, rubbing both his cheeks, then shook his fist at the departing man, muttering, "Just you wait, you quack! You haven't heard the last of this!" and set off home.

"A village duel!" I clapped my hands in delight. "They are both jealous! – But which of them loves me more?" That I still did not know.

Translated by Heather Trebatická

Mikuláš Galanda

Ľudmila Podjavorinská

Vague Longings

(extract)

Photo: Archive

ĽUDMILA PODJAVORINSKÁ (1872–1951), real name Riznerová, a poet and a prose writer, the founder of modern Slovak literature for children. She was born into a teacher's family and remained unwed her entire life; she was an assistant teacher. In 1895 she published a collection of poems, *From the Spring of Life* (Z vesny života), where she reverted to the romantic style of writing. She inserted more realism into her prose, although even there she oscillated between the two approaches. Critically acclaimed are especially her novellas *In Servitude* (V otroctve, 1905), *Fallacy* (Blud, 1906), and *Woman* (Žena, 1910) where her prose-writing, based on the intimate knowledge of women characters, reached its peak. Since 1900 she focused on writing for children. After rather conventional beginnings she fully developed her style based on intimate knowledge of the children's world. Books as *Scaredy Bunny* (Zajko Bojko, 1930) or *Tweet-Tweet* (Čin-Čin, 1943) are classics among children's books in Slovakia.

The pleasant spring days have given way to a hot summer. The grass on the treeless hill above Mikula's cottage has turned yellow under the burning heat of the sun and the hill looks even more barren. But the past two months have brought no change to the house below it: the walls are as shabby as in spring, and the roof just as tattered. Only the houseleek growing in the thatch has flourished. After all, no one has thought to repair the cottage; Mikula wouldn't care if it collapsed there and then. His wife is sometimes moved to tears at the sight of the cottage, but she is the only one. "We've neglected it. It's a shame we've let it get into this state. If we looked after it, it would be somewhere for Zuzka to live. As it is, when we old people die, the poor girl will have nowhere to lay her head."

"Huh, why do you keep on worrying?" Mikula usually declares. "Who are we working for, if not for her? Zuzka'll have two or three hundred and for that she can buy a better house than this hovel."

But these words can't put Mikulová's mind at rest. She'd rather see her daughter settled in a permanent home than roaming through the world without a roof of her own over her head. She's already getting on for twenty-two and it's time she got married. But this thought hasn't so much as crossed Zuzka's mind. It's true that at first she seemed to welcome Samko's love, as if she'd have liked to be his wife, but now his visits seem to irk her and she deliberately avoids him. Her parents, knowing what the village folk think about them, suspect it would be difficult for Samko to persuade his mother to accept a daughter-in-law she despises. So they haven't tried to talk Zuzka into making an effort to become part of the Melans' household, even though it is the fervent secret wish of both of them. And, after all, Zuzka herself has been behaving so strangely – at first she'd been glad to see Samko, but now she coldly rebuffs his attentions.

The Mikulas' living room has been transformed into workshop. There are wooden spoons and beaters piled up on the stove, on the bench and under the bed. A worktable stands in the middle of the room and knives and chisels lie scattered on the floor among the wood chips and shavings. Of course, it would be better to work in a shed, but the cottage stands alone, with no outbuildings and there is not a patch of ground sheltered by the roof. Anyway, they don't mind the mess in their cottage; they sleep on the ground in hallway and usually eat on the doorstep. They are not used to comfort and though they've now been at home for eight weeks, their abode resembles a barn even from the inside. Mikula doesn't hold with keeping an orderly household. Of what use would all that paraphernalia be to them? One day they're here and the next they are three villages away.

Zuzka sits alone on the doorstep, gazing into the distance. It's approaching noon and the sun's hot rays are burning down on the cottage. Only the little patch where she is sitting is still in the shade, making her face look even gloomier. She is holding her head in her hands and staring in front of her, but her mind is no doubt far from the romantic beauty of her surroundings. Gazing like this, lost in wistful thought, has recently become her everyday occupation. In the time she has been at home she has grown to look serious; she is pretty, you could even say her lovely face has been softened by this trace of melancholy, lending her regular features a beauty of their own. A shadow seems to have settled on her eyebrows and her eyes, once twinkling and smiling, have become deep and musing. When sitting like this, her hand propping up her chin, her gaze resting on the blue chain of hills in the distance, she looks quite the embodiment of yearning.

The house is quiet; her parents have gone to town to buy food, so she is all alone. It is noon and a dead silence hangs over the fields, caused by the heat of the summer. People have returned from the stubble fields and are resting in their homes. The heat makes everything seem sad – just down on the road that winds along the foot of the hill, twittering sparrows are bathing in the dust, while the tireless crickets among the stubble on the other side of the brook endlessly chirp their monotonous, melancholic songs. The shade disappears even from the doorstep and the sun shines down on Zuzka's bare arms.

A young lad is just approaching along the road from the village. He has a short, slightly stooping figure and his face is burned by the sun. Catching sight of Zuzka, he comes towards her along the narrow path leading up to the cottage and stops in front of her. She starts, but does not get up; she just rests her gaze him.

"What are you doing, Zuzka?" asks the young man in an uncertain voice.

"Nothing," the girl retorts, looking down into the village. "What do you want, Samko? Why've you come here again? I've already told you not to, but you take no notice! You should have some sense by now – you know very well our parents are against it," she says coldly, almost severely, to the lad, who looks abashed. He stands before her disconsolately, his eyes lowered, playing with an ear of corn he is holding in his hand.

"Yes, well I wouldn't have come, but I couldn't stop myself," he sighs sadly. "But if you only knew how I feel when I hear you talk like that! After all, you weren't so strange before. You were quite different when you first came back and I – I thought you liked me at least a little bit..."

"Well, you see, Samko, there's nothing else I can do," she speaks a little gentler, moved by the pain in the young man's voice. "You see, your mother's sent me another message and yet

I've never done her any harm. She's even declared I'm a witch, that I've cast some spell over you... I won't even be going to the music – everyone avoids me like the plague. They'd never let you marry me, so we must part once and for all. You just marry Dora and all will be well."

A bitter smile briefly lights up Samko's face.

"It's easy for you to talk like that. But I just can't bear the thought of you not being my wife. Look, Zuzka, if you knew how much I love you, you wouldn't talk like that..."

Zuzka shades her eyes with her hand and stares into the distance. Not long ago Samko's words would have filled her heart with happiness, and now – now they are spoken without arousing any response at all. It is as much as she can do not to feel bored by them. His loving gaze gives her no pleasure, nor his tender, simple declaration of love – all this is overridden, drowned, by a kind of vague longing that is not clear even to her. She is missing "the wide world" and all that is associated in her mind with these words. She has already got used to an unsettled, adventurous life, just as her father has, and to some extent her mother too. Her longing for the world is growing every day and it doesn't even occur to her to resist it; for ever since her stay in Mrázovce she has been inclined to believe that roaming through the world is their fate, their lot! And wonder of wonders! While she was out in the world, she didn't even think about Štefan, and now she can't get him out of her mind. In the time she has not seen him, he has become so dear to her, so interesting, that she'd be a hundred times more willing to follow him, even into the wide world, than tie herself to comfort with Samko – soft, unpretentious, indulgent Samko. While she was out in the world, Štefan's name never even entered her mind, but now she keeps whispering it to herself with painful yearning...

A little white cloud is silently moving across the deep blue sky, like a thought floating in the pure depths of her soul. Zuzka lifts her eyes and musingly follows its lovely flight.

"Look, Samko, if I had wings like that little cloud up there, I wouldn't be sitting here now," she says to him, not taking her eyes off the cloud. He looks up, too, but his gaze immediately falls back to the girl's face and rests there in wonder. It seems strange to him that she should notice something that has never caught his attention.

"And where would you be, Zuzka?"

"I'd fly away from here and go wherever I wanted. Maybe I'd fly to the end of the world..."

"And wouldn't you think of me – wouldn't you be sorry to leave me behind?" says the young man sadly.

"Of course not. You're used to living here and you'll be happy with Dorka, but I – I wouldn't want to be here. I'd feel sad."

"Not even if you were with me, Zuzka? Goodness, and I'd been so looking forward to setting up house with you... and that's not what you want? You have no heart..." Tears appear in the sincere lad's eyes and roll down his cheeks to fall like two drops of dew at Zuzka's feet. She looks up in amazement and bursts into the merry laughter Samko has always found so captivating.

Translated by Heather Trebatická

Janko Jesenský

The Sun Bath

(extract)

Photo: Archive

Shkorec, the city notary, was on the verge of despair. His lean and tortured face was nothing but an accordion-like patch of furrows and wrinkles hanging from his forehand. Each day he found it more and more difficult to cross the large city square. A vague feeling of fear overcame him every time he traversed the bare, flint-paved area. He imagined that he would get dizzy and, lacking any support, fall down in the middle of the square. Other people often have a similar feeling when crossing a narrow footbridge.

Shkorec fought his fear by crossing the square as often as possible. Finally, he really got a dizzy spell and was forced to lean against the lamp pole, there in the middle of the square in sight of all the people, until he ventured to continue on his way.

Shkorec confided his fears to the city physician, Doctor Edut. A relatively young, beardless man with thick sideburns, a good and serious face, Doctor Edut took Shkorec for a stroll outside the city limits.

"It's your nerves," the doctor said. „You need exercice, my dear friend. Sledding, skating, and skiing in the winter, walks and baths – especially sun baths – in the summer, and you'll recover."

"I don't trust either air or sun any more," Shkorec resisted, frowning. "Darkness, brain darkness, is about to get me. May I lean on your arm? I feel more secure when supported by someone."

Both men walked on a field path between two steep slopes. The earth was covered with new, light-green grass. The sun warmed the bodies of both men pleasantly through the thick felt of their coats. The air, transparent and light, filled their nostrils and lungs, caressing their cheeks like an invisible fine handkerchief. The squally spring breezes stirred the winter crops and shook fragrant petals from blossoming cherrz/trees. The path was dusty. Lumps of dry mud crumbled under their feet.

"So, you don't believe in the healing powers of air and sun!" Edut laughed sarcastically. "You don't need to. However, look around and try them. Do you know what this path looked like three weeks ago? It was nothing but pools of mud up to one's knees. And look it now! It is like the palm of your hand. And these slopes? They were very sad and bare. Look them now! They're green. You, my friend, are sludge and mire, a bare and sad slope. Go out into the air and sun and you'll become young again, like that birch grove over there! Yes, I assure you, you will."

"Your words are nothing but pholosophical and poetic speculations."

"Not at all! These are the facts of medical science. Listen! In June we can start the sun bathing. And we'll include the Veterinarian Papst in our activities to cheer you up. He is also a nervous wreck. He is always holding his head and dancing around, even when sitting with a beer glass in his hand."

And so, it happened thet Notary Shkorec, Doctor Edut, and Veterinarian Papst went, weather allowing, every summer afternoon to bathe at the floodgate, a twenty-minute walk beyond the city boundary. The location was beautiful. Protected on one side by a green hillock with luxuriant, soft turf at its foot, the place was edged on the other side by thick willow bushes. Fine river sand, ideal for lingering and bathing in the sun, covered the place at the river bank. On the other side of the hillock, there passed the highway. From it, true, some curious spectators could have peeked at the bathers. Nevertheless, who would be so

JANKO JESENSKÝ (1874—1945), a poet and a prose writer, studied at a Law School and in 1905 passed the bar examinations. Since then he worked as a solicitor. After the outbreak of WWI he was drafted into the army, spent some time in Russia as a prisoner of war and afterwards joined the Czechoslovak legions to fight against the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After the war and the establishment of Czechoslovakia, Jesenský became a high-ranking administrative official.
Jesensky made his debut in 1905 with a collection of poems titled *Verses* (Verše). His poems are often ironic and self-ironic and predominantly about love. This new tone and poet's attitude towards love and women seemed frivoulous, even cynical, compared to the literary taste of that period and Jesenský concealed behind it his discontent with the period's literature. In *Verses II* (Verše II, 1923) we can find reflexive and meditative poems showing the poet's disappointment with his inner development and with the development of society. Similar themes can be found in the collection of poems *After the Storms* (Po búrkach, 1932). During the WWII he published just one lyrical epic, *Our Hero* (Náš hrdina, 1944). Poems with motives of resistance and with anti-fascist feelings were publihed only after the end of war in 1945: *Against the Dark* (Proti noci), *Reflections* (Reflexie), *On the Wrath of a Day I, II* (Na zlobu dňa I, II). His last collection *The Flowers of Autumn* (Jesenné kvety, 1948) was published posthumously.
Besides poetry, Jesenský also wrote prose: humorous short proses, stories, and novellas criticising and laughing at the narrowmindedness of small-town people. His proses were published in various journals since 1897. These stories were collected under the title *Tales from a Small Town* (Malomestské rozprávky, 1913) and *From the Old Times* (1935). His experience of being a Russian captive during WWI was presented in an autobiographic book *On the Way to Freedom* (Cestou k slobode, 1933). Jesenský's best prose, a two-volume novel *Democrats* (Demokrati, 1934, 1938) belongs to the best satirical works of modern Slovak prose. It is a sarcastic study of political conditions in Slovakia between the wars. Jesenský exploited his experience of a high ranking official to cast light on the political system in a democratic state where corruption, abuse of voters and dictatorial methods prevailed.
Jesenský also wrote literary essays and translated Russian poetry, mainly Russian symbolists (Blok, Yesenin) and Pushkin.

irrational to peek at the bathing men? And who would be walking on the highway on a summer afternoon anyway? It was certain thet neither Marina Sirenakova nor the freckled but still beautiful Rosetka Mandalikova would pass by, nor would the young, curly and powdered Betty Rishkova, the wife of the deputy judge. They went out only evenings, in the light of the moon and stars. And one did not need to be ashamed if villagers, farmers, and tramps were to walk by.

Thus, the three town gentlemen bathed happily. Adding to their sun bathing the callisthenics of Mueller's system, they walked along the bank of the river, threw their hands forward and back, tossed themselves on their bellies, kicked and twisted their legs, and rolled on their backs in time to the doctor's command. One could recognize the doctor by his thick sideburns and red trunks. In addition, he had the strongest legs and the bushiest chest. The notary wore blue trunks, but one could recognize him also by his elongated head, the tuft of wet hair running down onto his forehead, and his splinter-like thin legs and arms. The veterinarian could pride himself on his red and white stripped trunks and round bald head. Otherwise there was no great difference among them.

Summer was beautiful, hot, windless. Our three bathers could take advantage of good weather every afternoon. Their skin darkened from head to toe. The notary recovered from his nervousness and walked across the square three times without fear. The veterinarian stopped fidgeting and elbowing his companions during beer sessions at the city bar. Doctor Edut was happy that his professional advice had helped Shkorec, and he suggested sun bath and Mueller's callisthenics to his other patients also.

But life in a small town should not be seen only in the narrow frame of serious thought concerning health. At times, we also have reason to laugh. Our farces, even if not presented on stages by famous actors, are nevertheless funny. The actors are individual citizens, at times even the honorable members of the town council.

Matt Jakub – half-artisan, half-farmer – was mowing clover on his tract near the floodgate one afternoon. The sun was scorching hot – how could one keep from getting overheated? Red and sweating , he was really being scorched by the sun. His feet were burning in his boots. Jakub decided to dip them into the nearby river, even though he was well aware that he would be acting against the town's tradicion, that a normal human being should not bathe from baptism until death, with the exception of a few baths in the trough as infants.

Tradition or not, Matt threw away his scythe and climbed the hillock running down the other side to the floodgate. But he suddenly arrested his steps. Three completely naked men with mustaches and beards, in short multi-colored trunks, were turning their heads, now to the left, now to the rigt. Jakub, too, turned his head a looked upward to the sky to see whether some balloon or .... But there was absolutely no trace of any balloon. The sky, blue and deep, arched above him without a single cloud. Why did they twist their heads again and again? One of the naked impudents suddenly shouted, and all three men – would you belive it? – started to smack their thigs. The slapping was as loud as that of women paddling laundry at the creek.

Matt, observing the three men, was bewildered. Suddenly he knew! Yes, these three men were certainly the three madmen he had read about in the newspaper. They had escaped from the institution and now they were hiding ine the vinicity. He crouched and crowled on all fours back beyond the hillock. He was afraid they might become aware of his presence and might – heaven forbid! – set out after him. He did not dare look back even once. He slid down to the highway and almost ran, eager to report the whole affair to the honorable town council. What danger! If they had noticed him and set out after him! "I would have really been in a fix!" Jakub thought, shivering, when he met with Joe Mrvenchik, a farmer from the Low Street, who was going out, scythe on his shoulder, to mow. Jakub recalled thet he had forgotten his own scythe on the clover tract.

"Dear neighbor, I left my scythe out there on the clover flield. Take care of it for me, will you? I must go downtown on a serious matter."

"What matter."

Jakub blinked toward the floodgate. "There, at the floodgate – watch out!"

"What happened?"

"Three madmen are taking baths. They escaped from the institution and now they're there bathing, threatening heaven with their fists, and slapping each other."

"You don't say."

Jakub swore he was telling the truth.

"I am going now to report everything to the town committee," he said seriously. "And you, be careful that they don't notice you!"

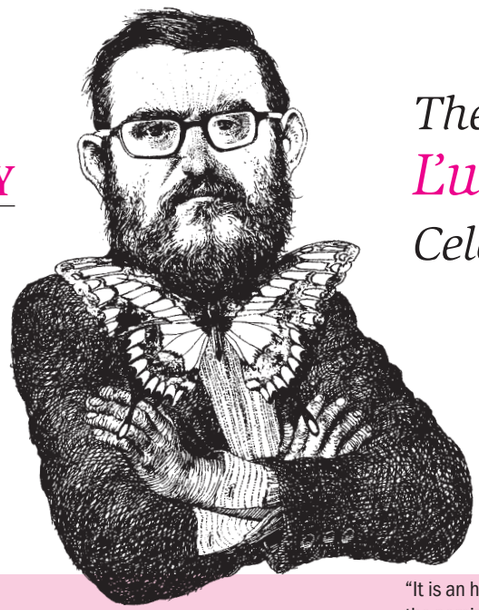
Mrvenchik, playing it safe, wanted to return home, but he met John Holub, a townsman from the Upper End. Together, both men bolstered each other's courage and went to the hillock to see the madmen from afar. Two women, passing by, stopped to see what was going on. Then three bootmakers stopped on their return trip from the fair, carrying their unsold boots on long sticks. Before long a whole crowd of people was standing of the hillock, laughing at the movements and gestures of our three bathers who, in turn, were first jumping in the water, then on the bank, in accordance with the system of Mueller's callisthenics. The laughter of the people on the hillock was quiet and subdued; they did not want to attract the attention of the bathing men. One of the men suddenly jumped up to the bank of the river. The other one sprang up quickly after him. The third one climbed out of the water also. The bootmakers, frightened by this sudden change in the behavior of three men, grabbed the sticks with the unsold boots and shouted, "They are coming at us!"

All of the assembled men and women ran back to the highway.

"The beak is coming," someone called.

Translated by Andrew Cincura

IT IS ONE THING TO FINISH A STORY AND ANOTHER TO START ONE



The Poet L'ubomír Feldek Celebrates

ĽUBOMÍR FELDEK (1936) is a very interesting persona of the Slovak literature. Today he presents a unique view on the 40 years of our past, because he believes, that something good has happened in literature after all, and perhaps it is also thanks to him. He kept on going back to freelance writing but in the time he did not, he helped to deliver works, which without him would probably never, and certainly not in that time period, see the light of day. His writing is not the only contribution to culture. During his days in the publishing house Slovenský spisovateľ he achieved the publication of several "forbidden" authors. When formal restrictions no longer existed, culture came face to face with other obstacles. Right after the revolution he began to exploit his organizational skills in order to help Milan Sládek, a world renowned mime, to return to Slovakia. It was Feldek, who, together with others discovered the now popular Arena theater in the Bratislava neighborhood Petržalka. For 3 months he even acted as its director, while Milan Sládek was waiting for his citizenship. After that, he was the theater's dramaturge. Feldek, along with J. Stacho, J. Mihalkovič, J. Ondruš and J. Šimonovič prepared a program issue of the Mladá tvorba magazine (# 4/1958) containing the poets' complete and coherently formulated program from the areas of poetry, translation and literature for children and youth. Literary criticism, later on, dubbed this group the Trnava poets' group, the concretists or the neopoets. Feldek was a dominant protagonist of this generation's creative force. His poetry, prose, children's literature and translations remained truest to the base principles, whose inspiration sprung particularly from Czech poetry, predominantly from the work of Vítězslav Nezval. Feldek debuted with a 1961 collection titled *The Only Salty Home* (Jediný slaný domov). It was praised both by readers as well as literary critics, not only as a whole, but mostly for its second part. The extensive poetic piece *Severné leto* (A Northern Summer) caught the eye of the critics and fully revealed the young author's unique talent. His debut was followed by several collections: *A Chalk Circle* (Kriedový kruh), *Paracelsus, Two People Around the Table* (Dvaja okolo stola), and *Notes on the Epic* (Poznámky na epos). The author's coherent conception, its basic characteristics being intimacy and uniqueness, is their unifying parameter. The prevailing theme in these collections is the partnership of man and woman. In addition to his poetry, Feldek has also written prose and poetry for children. Here, the predominant principle is the partnership dialogue between a child and an adult.

Ľubomír Feldek, and the illustrator Martin Kellenberger were nominated for the Hans Christian Andersen 2006 prize for their work for children and youth. The nominations of national IBBY sections for distinguished international awards were judged by an international panel of judges in Macau, China. For these nominations, Feldek and Kellenberber were awarded diplomas in the Writers' Club in Bratislava on October 12th.

"It is an honor for a Slovak writer to make it among the nominees. It makes me very happy. I realize that our inner confidence is worthy of it. Slovak literature is built on fairy tales and as I wrote in the afterword of my book, it is the fairy tales that write us, not us that write the books", noted Feldek.

A unique present to this popular poet, writer and translator's 70th birthday was prepared by the publishing house Ikar and his well known wife Oľga. It was with their endeavor that Feldek's book *Sedemdesiat o láske* (Seventy About Love) was published. In ten units, Mrs. Oľga uncovers the innermost parts of her husband's soul, woven into his poetry over the years. Each unit contains seven poems which she has come to love. From the hundreds of poems, she chose the ones he had written before they met. These are followed by poems written when they met and she fell in love for the last time. A separate chapter is dedicated to verses about lovemaking. Another selection characterizes their life together and their children, who were his inspiration. Nostalgia and sadness, the reminiscence of the omni-inspiring Orava and singable poems, are the spices added to life's colors. From his assorted works there are also translations, to which Feldek always submitted his entire self. The book is accompanied by its compiler's humorous observations, partly from their life, and supplemented by family photographs. The book was introduced to the world by Dušan Jamrich on October 17th 2006 at the Svet knihy bookstore in Bratislava.

Eva Melichárková
Translated by Saskia Hudecová

Ľubomír Feldek *is seventy? A poet, prose writer and translator full of creative powers who is constantly showering us with multiple new ideas, whose collections of poems, memoirs, translations and reeditions briskly pop-up one by one, whose drama translations are always in demand? Unbelievable! And what about those festival presentations, book readings and radio appearances? How many young men can match that?*

JARMILA SAMCOVÁ

Ľ U B O M Í R F E L D E K

IN HONOUR OF ROBINSON JEFFERS

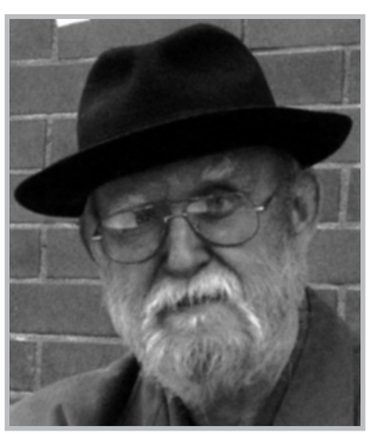
You lived in a holiday house on the Pacific shore
Robinson certainly
as a young man you bore the idea
in mind to abandon
people at least partly
eventually why shouldn't
a healthy man do this
with a good woman

I live in a different
country and in another time but I did
the same living
in a holiday house if I can give the name to the walls
surrounding me
within and while inside sleep
my wife and children I
am sitting by an inside
window and watching how
there outside before the dawn the mighty
ocean
tosses and turns

a masculine soul

Translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith

JAROSLAV



"I don't feel well,
but joyfull."

said Seifert
when in the hospital
they told him solicitously
he'd got the Nobel prize.

In those few seconds
as an opalescent
television shovel
bore him to the grave,
he managed to conduct
a fast course in poetry.

In six words
he explained to millions
where that dog was buried,
the one with the odd name
Beingapoet.

Translated by
Martin Solotruk and James Sutherland-Smith

IN MY FATHER'S PRAGUE / NOTES ON MEMOIRS *(extract)*

HOW I FAILED MY STATE EXAMS

At about the time of my departure from the Mladé letá publishing house, I was to finish my studies at the Pedagogical Institute, though I couldn't sign in for my final exams as I was missing a required credit in political economy.

Nobody can be blamed for my failure to pass but myself.

I was then living in a leased apartment at no. 1, Gunduličova street, just a step away from the Štefánka café; I used to have a quick breakfast there on my way to school. I usually got stuck there. It was our habitual hang-out with my friends, and was incredibly far from Kalinčiakova street. Predictably, my school attendance was increasingly suffering, which was why I wasn't given the credit.

One of the absentee's options to come clean was to pass an additional examination for the credit. So there I was hoping to be examined. Oddly enough, the same trouble was being addressed by Oktávia Müllerová, the most beautiful girl of our class. Together, we found ourselves in the office of our professor – his name was Pezlár. My question was to explain the meaning of monopolist's rent. I happened to know – and as an example of goods that is no longer produced elsewhere but there where it is (and, consequently, its price can be increased by this monopoly's rent) I referred to the Tokay wine. There was a map hanging on the wall in Pezlár's office. He gave me a stick, prompting me to show this Tokay region. Cock-sure that the credit is mine and in an attempt to cheer up Oktávia, I began to rummage about somewhere the Šumava region, on the obviously opposite end of the map. Oktávia giggled and I wasn't able to get any nearer with the stick. Pezlár, too, was clearly trying to impress the gorgeous student, and he was more to the point than me. My course record book hit me in the head and I was soon hitting the road, too, without the credit. Later, I saw a notice posted in the school saying that those missing a credit still have the chance to get it done by September 30 – a week before the state exams. Unfortunately, I had no juice left to make it – consoling myself at the thought of my favourite poet Vítězslav Nezval, who never finished university either.

In the afternoon of September, 30 my friends – Jano Stacho, Miro Válek and I – were sitting in the journalists club, penniless to the point of not being able to order a coffee. We were lucky to have there the waiter Filo, who served us on trust. I consulted my watch and said to my friends:

"Guys, I have just failed to finish university."

"What is this nonsense?" Válek asked, agitated.

I explained that his agitation is useless – there was too late for venturing anything.

"It isn't late," Válek said. "Have you got your course record book on you?"

I did.

"You'll go and see Pezlár at his home."

"I have no idea where he lives."

"The police at Lermontovova street will give you his address for three crowns."

"I don't have three crowns."

Válek and Stacho emptied their pockets to find the last three crowns and chased me out to the streets. I wasn't expected to return without the credit – they would wait there.

At Lermontovova street, there was a rather debonair member of the National Security Corps, and although there, too, they were

about to call it a day, he was still willing to finger through his files.

"Which Pezlár do you want? We have two. One is Ľudovít and the other Otto."

Another unexpected problem.

"I don't remember his name," I said.

"No problem," the policeman said. "Take them both."

Another problem.

"I only have three crowns." I said. "I can take only one, but it may be the wrong person."

The policeman had me explain my trouble, then exclaimed:

"Here are your two Pezlárs for three crowns – and out with you!"

The complications seemed endless. The addresses of both Pezlárs weren't exactly handy, it was getting dark and I had no money for the tram. I was though a fortunate stowaway and got to the first address clean. It turned out to be the wrong one, Otto. I was then another lucky stowaway to the other address. Ľudovít Pezlár let me into his living room, where he was consuming a water melon. He was in a good mood and gave me his credit without examining me.

I returned with my course record book signed to the journalists club. My friends got terribly excited about my success – theirs too, in the end. Even the local chef got so excited as to treat us, royally, on credit. In fact, my friends got a bit too excited, and ended up wrestling, Greek-Roman style, in the men's room. Válek was the one who slipped and broke his arm. The rest of the night was spent at the emergency department in a hospital.

In a week's time, then, I was able to have my university studies completed. Although now with a proper course record, I still didn't even try to make it – the time was too short for me to come prepared.

MY CAREER AS A MANUAL WORKER

And so, in 1959, I embarked on my next career as auxiliary worker in the Pravda printing works.

My job there was to serve one of the simplest machines in the world – the pulling press, which the typesetters called just "press". The typesetter was to give me a column of metal type, which I was to transport to the press. The next part was to hit the pedal and make the colour cylinder move. When the colour was set on the type, I would ease my leg off the pedal and put some wet paper on the type. Then the leg hit the pedal again and another cylinder came pressing the paper against the type. When that cylinder finished pressing, and the letters appeared imprinted on the paper, the galley proof was ready to be delivered by me to the office room. An easy job – but, as any work, this, too, had the devil of competitiveness in it.

On that press, I was changing shifts with yet another auxiliary worker by the nickname of Puki, the epitome of manual dexterity. He would skip one pedal-hitting, doing it only once, and would place the proof on the type on constantly running cylinders in the only second he had left for that between the intervals of the two exchanging cylinders. For some time, I had been studying every single movement of his to conclude that I should be able to do it myself. That proved to be the end of my pulling press episode. Today I still have this quite physical remembrance of it imprinted on my fingers, which got stuck between the type and the pressing cylinder – don't ask me how they managed to fit there.

I was barely recovered when bad news came from Žilina – my father had been arrested by the State Security on April, 30.

Due to these two events – the injury in the printing works and my father's arrest – I was beginning to see the light.

When my disability was over and I was ready to work, I quit my job in the printing works and set out home to Žilina, to help relieve my mom in this discomforting situation. There I found the notice from the Pedagogical Institute concerning the state examinations deadlines I was invited to attend. Unable to make up my mind, I left the notice sitting on the table. It was still there when the State Security rang our bell and searched our apartment. One of the secret eyes laid his hands on that notice. I startled – he seemed to have been studying it forever. I was only able to breathe again when he had put it back where it was – apparently he didn't find anything important. Me, for one, suddenly found it *very* important that the Pedagogical Institute I had been so disgracefully ignoring was a pocket of decency in the ocean of indecency around. They could have easily expelled me, had they wanted to do so! I firmly decided to sign in for the next date of examinations while I still had the chance and before that chance would have been gone.

When I had signed in for the fall examinations, the Dean Mikuláš Gašparík had me for a talk in his office. When encountered by us as students, he seemed inaccessible, even fearful. Luckily, that proved but a mask concealing a man of good heart. This time again, his face was seemingly cross:

"The school knows everything about you. We have received everything. There was a suggestion that you should be expelled. I said no. I hope you will be well prepared for the examinations. If anyone asks you anything, say nothing."

"Please, don't worry. I'll be well prepared," I assured him.

"Unfortunately, there is one thing I cannot assure you about," Dean Gašparík said finally. Your opponents believe that a person like you cannot be an educator of young generation. Even if you pass the examination, you're unlikely to receive placement."

I smiled, surreptitiously. At that time, a student graduating from university had no choice but to start work at a place where he had been sent to, which was then referred to as "receive placement". A lot of friends of mine were desperate about their placements, trying hard ways to escape this. And here I was without any imminent threat of being placed. Punished, I was free.

"There is nothing I could be more pleased to hear," I said, but soon got embarrassed.

Dean Gašparík was suddenly giving me that cross look again.

I thought Mikuláš Gašparík would find these lines a welcome little amusement at his age now, and was ready to send him my book once it had appeared. Unfortunately, the late Mr. Gašparík will no longer be amused – I recently read the announcement of his death in the newspapers. At least, I will "play" him *Homesick Blues* on his way heavenwards. This translation of mine of the famous poem by Langston Hughes is at home in those times – it was published in our collective issue.

Translated by Ľuben Urbánek

Štefan Žáry

ŠTEFAN ŽÁRY (1918) is, according to the textbooks of Slovak literature, one of the foremost poets of *nadrealizmus*, a particular Slovak version of surrealism. In fact, at his age, he is no longer under any pressure as a writer, as his place in literary history has already been secured in several areas: poetry, fiction, literature for children and youth; additionally, he is permanently acclaimed as translator of poetry (P. Eluard, F.G. Lorca, P. Neruda, S. Quasimodo, G. Ungaretti). As poet and author of several pieces of autobiographic and documentary prose (*Apennine Air* / Apeninský vzduch, 1947; *Down South* / Dolu na juhu, 1955; *The Recent Bygone World* / Nedávny dávny svet, 1995) thoroughbred fiction (*Azure Anabasis* / Azúrová anabáza, 1972; *A Year with a She-Wolf* / Rok s vlčicou, 1982) and memoirs, in particular of his companions in writing (*The Removal of Masks* / Snímanie masiek, 1979; *The Hundred-Tower Poet* / Stovežatý básnik, Essay on Vítězslav Nezval, 1981; *Golden-Mouthed Tellers of Tales* / Zlatoústi rozprávači, 1984; *Meetings with Poets* / Rande s básnikmi; 1988, *The Pedestrian of Bratislava* / Bratislavský chodec, 2004)) he is still fully part of the business. For one, living the rich life of a poet and human being and Slovak intellectual that has been able to witness and survive the frequent and abrupt transformations of our cultural and political scene, yet also, living the life of the people he knew and was influenced by so much as to have dedicated to them several memoirs of his. His focus is on those who have, like him, been full-time *literati*, making comparisons and testimonies – so we can further enjoy poetry and his constant presence in Slovak literature, in which he had been now present for more than one century.
Throughout his life, Štefan Žáry has been and is a poet. In poetry, he was able to find his way how to make life easier and not to succumb to the burden of facts and circumstances; instead, managing to find the underlying eternity of both his personal and social problems of the day. It is this human relaxation, emancipation of the natural creative powers that allows him in his respectable age to publish new and fresh works, as witnessed by a volume of poetry *Orchidea nostalgis* (2004). In this book, he seems to be making his case that the blessing of his long life does not deprive him of any joy or suffering, and that he still remains just like the rest of us, with his memoirs, passions, mourning and adoration of art. Obviously, the list of *his* priorities would be rearranged, as Štefan Žáry has spread his gift of unusual verbal dexterity, his clear and wise, serious and playful sentences and moods all throughout his extensive oeuvre.

A YEAR OF MERCY

They have taught us to forgive
brothers and other relatives
abuse, a broken plate,
adultery. With an easy
gesture of a white forefinger
we take to mercy, graciously
nod until out jawbone
dislocates. Our ass
laden with abundant indulgences
beckons from city to city,
from street to street,
from parsonage to brothel -
and his ears reach over the pyramids
to tickle between the legs
a merciful divinity.

SOMETIMES SUCH A SILENCE COMES INTO BEING

it almost shouts and with its quiet
threatens to crack eardrums.

Also the silence of the forest
can become the roaring of a beast -
able to crush alive
and pull down citadels.

Only a sorrowing soul
is unavoidably silent -
though within it occur
cosmic collisions.

Translated
by James Sutherland-Smith

Mikuláš Galanda

DON'T ENDURE THE MOMENT – YOU'RE MUCH TOO

beautiful! Just now, only now.
At this instant.
This is too say that the longer
you endure the more expensively
you'll have to pay for your broad-mindedness.
Your sporadically plaited
life is clearly reminiscent
of a worthless rosary on whose
bare thread glitters
only a few shiny beads.

You, beauty, endure -
with regard for the moment! That
which has engraved on the memory
your ghostly profile. To make the moment
eternal robs it of intensity.

ADDRESSES

Do not give in so easily, my will,
raise hundred-towered roofs
of craning poplars
over the riverbanks.

In midday mist
a glittering rose waters the lilies.

Death is distant.

She addresses the banks
and the waves rolling against the
stream.
Although it is not certain
if they will answer kindly
or go rigid in the stooping clouds.

ORCHIDEA NOSTALGIS

To start all over again!
Hunkered-down in the innards,
to thrust oneself on the world with
a doughty heave
from the gorge between the haunches,
the slippy banana-hued mass
vocally a-quiver.

And the world, again pure as a virgin,
celluloid-wrapped, cocooned,
again conceived and sealed
with barrier-fenced hymen –
will not cease to offer sweet nectar,
like orchidea nostalgis
softly submitting to the butterfly.

Translated by John Minahane

The Magical Devil's Rock

Interview with Štefan Žáry by Viera Prokešová

ŠTEFAN ŽÁRY (1918), poet, prose writer, essayist, and translator.
His original and extremely remarkable literary work is already a lasting contribution to modern Slovak poetry and literature.

Photo: Peter Procházka

VIERA PROKEŠOVÁ: The poetry of your young and younger days *Hearts on a Mosaic* (Srdcia na mozaike), *Stigmatized Age* (Stigmatizovaný vek) is characteristic with the notion of anxiety from the time yet to come, from the day-to-day living and tomorrows. Do the themes of death and downfall belong to our youth, even though we never manage to get rid of them?

Štefan Žáry: The legendary youthful anxiety and flirting with death is a common phenomenon of the Freudian type (trauma) which gradually disappears by the time of adulthood. Or it may be active latently. Whether this phenomenon is inherited or simulated, it is cultivated intentionally. It stimulates creation and makes it more interesting, more mysterious. It was so in my case, too — at times more obvious and at others more subtle - from my first publication *Zodiac* (Zvieratník) to Orchidea nostalgis */Orchidea nostalgis/*. I did not act or pretend, my seeping into the text was spontaneous. Perhaps a touch of romance of surrealism? What is interesting though is that this phenomenon avoided my prose.

VIERA PROKEŠOVÁ: Autobiographical memories mark your poetry and prose significantly; you write about your childhood and youth spent in the Bystrica region, and later also about your trips to Italy. Besides memory and imagination, what is the most present when writing this kind of work, is it mostly (let's call on the writer Ján Smrek for help) the collection *Eyes Only* (Iba oči) ?

Štefan Žáry: Autobiographical elements appear in the book like weed in a field of wheat. They pop up, even though you do not want them to. It is up to the reader whether he takes this as a positive or a complete demise. The variety of monotony, however, cannot be denied. There is no Berlin wall between the motherland, unique in any kind of way, and the whole wide world. At least for me, it was not there between Bystrica and Paris, Havana or Beijing. They mix freely in my prose and poetry. Does the author need just Smrek's *Eyes Only* (Iba oči) when collecting his impressions? No! Just so he needs Midas' ears, Tantalus' punishment, Augian-stables – but most of all some kind of magical devil's rock, Lapis infernalis, which connects sense with magma.

Viera Prokešová: In your expansive series of books you present us with portraits of your artist friends, as well as the portrait of the bohemian Bratislava. Is it Orchidea nostalgis, a kind of sadness for what had been lost, or perhaps also a joy that a different Bratislava is now being discovered by young poets? Is there a similar opportunity for them, or has it ceased to exist with the fast passage of time and we bring a happier Bratislava back, you – by writing and we – by reading?

Štefan Žáry: I am often reproached for not publishing the obligatory Memoirs. So, then, are the four books of memories of my peers complemented by an Anecdotical dictionary and a Small literary museum, not connected volumes of Memoirs? I smuggled myself into each one of those essays, so apocryphally, I revel in the text almost blatantly. Some things I did not want to let in, some I forgot and for others I did not have enough time. Cohabitation, rivalry and arguments over taste remain. They happen also today. Neither has the bohemian Bratislava ceased to exist. It is a different Bratislava and a different kind of bohemian expression though. To me, they are unfamiliar, I do not like them. And even though they terrify me, the historical mind tries to understand them.

VIERA PROKEŠOVÁ: A substantial part of your creative activities consists of translations. How do you choose the authors, whose works you want to translate, what do they have to possess in order to interest you? You also watch how other work of "your" authors is translated (for instance, after you, Federico Garcia Lorca's poems were translated by Ján Šimonovič and not too long ago by Ján Zambor).

Štefan Žáry: Simultaneously with my own attempts of work I became interested in foreign language poetry. In higher high school grades we were introduced to an excellent array of excerpts of French literature – from René to Rimbaud, even to the threshold of surrealism. I fell in love with it and tried to translate Rimbaud's *Le Dormeur du Val* /The Sleeper in the Valley/ and Appolinaire's *Les Cloches* /The Bells/. Shortly after, I came across Čapek's Francouzská poesie /French Poetry/ and my interests were sealed. The later and more difficult effort to translate the complete work of Rimbaud was more impertinent rather than courageous. In any case, till today there has not been any translation to succeed this effort (more than 60 years): it beatifies Slovakia, Slovak identity and the Slovak language.
Translation of world literature, continuously, became a balanced part of my work. As a Latino-French translator I was also offered Italian and Spanish literature. First were the Hispanics: Lorca, Guillén and Pablo Neruda. I knew Pablo personnally because he spent a longer period of time here. My military service and a work-related visit in Italy were full of friendships and personal contacts. Ungaretti, Montale, Pavese and Pasolini. The Nobel Prize winner Quasimodo – whom I was translating for the upcoming mass edition - and I, worked as consultees. Personal contact can bring people together as well as set them apart. It is more beneficial when it comes to personal charisma than in work-related disputes. In the final work, however, it may not appear. This kind of rivalry is inspiring. For instance, there is a dozen Slovak translations of Rimbaud's *Le Dormeur du Val* /The Sleeper in the Valley/. Which one is the best? When I delivered my newest version of one of Rimbaud's poems for journal Výber to the editor, Feldek, he gave preference to my ancient translation from before the 1950s. Supposedly it sounds lovelier; perhaps it is so because as a high school student he recited it at the Hviezdoslavov Kubín recital contest.
There are also numerous translations of F.G. Lorca. We can compare. I often quarelled with my competitor, Ján Šimonovič (who later became a good friend of mine). The last translation by Zambor is true to the original and smooth. I appreciate it. Either way, though, I consider my translation of Lorca to be the best. Does this make me an outrageous snob? No, ladies and gentlemen! But it is my step-child and I think it flows lightly, does not act all too literary, and it has the most euphonic sound for the Slovak ear and soul.

Translated by Saskia Hudecová

Anton Baláž

VYDRICA – ein historischer und sündiger Stadtteil Preßburgs

(Leseprobe)

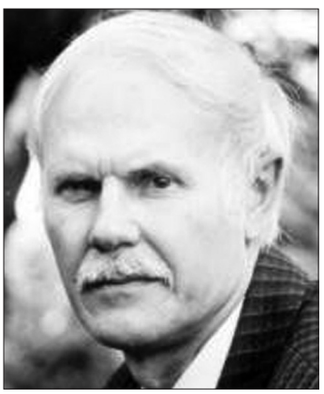


Photo: Peter Procházka

ANTON BALÁŽ (1943), Prosa-Schriftsteller, Drehbuchautor für Film und Fernsehen, Runkfunkautor, Publizist. Nachdem sein Debüt *Die Götter der Jahreszeiten* (Bohovia ročných období, 1971) von der Zensur verschrottet worden war, betrat er die offizielle Literaturszene mit den historischen Romanen *Kellerträume* (Sen pivníc, 1977) und *Die Schatten der Vergangenheit* (Tiene minulosti, 1978). In seinen weiteren Romanen *Die Venus aus dem Glashaus* (Skleníková Venuša, 1980) und *Hier solltest du leben* (Tu musíš žiť, 1983) beschäftigt er sich mit den gesellschaftlichen Problemen; beide Werke wurden verfilmt. Der Roman *Das chirurgische Dekameron* (Chirurgický dekameron, 1989) schildert die letzten Jahre des totalitären kommunistischen Regimes. In den Erzählbänden *Hühott, Ihr Pferde Stalins* (Hijó, kone Stalinove, 1992), *Eine Chronik der glücklichen Morgen* (Kronika šťastných zajtrajškov, 1997) und besonders im Roman *Das Lager der gefallenen Frauen* (Tábor padlých žien, 1993) beginnt eine groteske und fantastische Sicht der Realität in der Poetik Balážs zu überwiegen. Der Roman fand bei den Lesern großen Anklang und repräsentiert einen der künstlerischen Höhepunkte im bisherigen Schaffen des Autors. Der Regisseur Laco Halama verfilmte das Buch 1997 und im Jahr darauf bekamen auch die Zuschauer der Berlinale die Gelegenheit, den Film zu sehen. In der zweiten Hälfte der 90er entdeckte Baláž für sein Schaffen den Holokaust der slowakischen Juden sowie die Nachkriegsschicksale der Überlebenden, die sich bemühten, ihrem Dasein einen neuen Sinn zu verleihen. Das tragische Los der jüdischen Gemeinde bildet den thematischen Schwerpunkt nicht nur in den Hörspielen *Die Schrunde,* (Trhlina), *Die Wiederbelebung* (Oživovanie) und *Ophelia ist nicht tot* (Ofélia nie je mŕtva), sondern auch im Roman *Das Land des Vergessens* (Krajina zabudnutia, 2000). Im Jahr 2003 erschien sein Prosa-Erstling *Die Götter der Jahreszeiten* erneut, der auch im Abstand von drei Jahrzehnten seit der Erstausgabe als authentische Aussage vom Leben der damaligen jungen Generation wirkt. 2004 kam ein weiterer Roman *Der zarte Lockvogel* (Nežná volavka) heraus. Der Roman zeigt das abgewandte Gesicht des gegenwärtigen Bratislava mit seiner Straßenprostitution, der heutzutage aber die Noblesse und erotische Ausstrahlung der Damen des ältesten Gewerbes der Welt aus dem Roman *„Das Lager der gefallenen Frauen“* fehlt.
Die abgedruckte Leseprobe stammt aus dem noch nicht erschienenen Buch *Vydrica - ein historisches und sündiges Stadtviertel von Preßburg* (Vydrica historická a hriešna). Der Autor hat hier das Schicksal des alten Stadtviertels Vydrica von Bratislava, einst Mittelpunkt der profesionellen Prostitution, künstlerisch bearbeitet. Gerade dort hat Thomas Mann, neben anderen Künstlern, einen Teil seines Romans *„Doktor Faustus“* angesiedelt. Im vorliegenden Ausschnitt schildert der Autor die fatale Begegnung des Mannschen Heldes mit dem sündigen Stadtviertel Vydrica.
Anton Baláž hat für sein Werk mehrere Auszeichnungen und Preise erhalten: den Preis des Verbandes der slowakischen Schriftsteller (1983) für den Roman *„Hier solltest du leben“*, den Preis des internationalen PEN-Clubs (2003) für den Roman *„Das Land des Vergessens“*. Für die Hörspiele *„Ohne Adam leben“*, *„Im tiefen Schnee unserer Erinnerung“* und *„Die Schrunde“* hat er sich Preise und Prämien bei verschiedenen inländischen und ausländischen Festspielen erworben.
Anton Baláž gehört zu den wichtigsten Repräsentanten des Gesellschaftsroman. Er geht von der realistischen Tradition aus, und sein Stil ist geprägt von Dokumentarismus und Publizistik.

DIE HETÄRA ESMERALDA, EINE DER LOCKEREN BRÄUTE VON VYDRICA

Nach der totalen Niederlage Hitler-Deutschlands schrieb Thomas Mann als einer der anerkanntesten Schriftsteller der Welt im amerikanischen Exil seinen letzten Roman „Doktor Faustus“. Es ist die Geschichte des fiktiven Komponisten Adrian Leverkühn und Mann entwarf ihn als einen Roman über die künstlerische und moralische Krise eines genialen Schöpfers. Pavol Eisner, der Übersetzer des Romans ins Tschechische (eine slowakische Übersetzung ist bisher nicht verfügbar) schreibt im Nachwort zur Übersetzung, dass Mann außer dem Thema einer Krise der zeitgenössischen Musik im Roman auch ein weiteres Motiv verarbeitete, nämlich „die Beziehung von Genialität und Krankheit, der Relation zwischen einer epochalen schöpferischen Tat und dem körperlichen wie seelischen Versehrtsein eines Organismus“. Und die Ursache dieser tiefen Versehrtheit gründet darin, dass sich Adrian bei einer Prostituierten mit Syphilis ansteckte. Dies geschah im Mai 1905 in Preßburg „im Haus einer gewissen Frauensorte“ – also in einem der Freudenhäuser von Vydrica. Thomas Mann wurde somit zu einem weiteren, in diesem Fall weltbekannten Künstler, der im Roman „Doktor Faustus“ seinen Helden in die Preßburger Vydrica führte. Und obwohl der Begegnung Adrians mit der „Hetäre Esmeralda“ in der Vydrica nur ein Kapitel des Romans gewidmet ist, gehört dieses Treffen und seine Folgen zum bedeutenden Kern von Manns faustischer Geschichte. Um die Zusammenhänge zu begreifen, soll kurz zusammengefasst dargestellt werden, was vor Adrians schicksalsträchtiger Reise nach Preßburg geschah.

Im Jahr 1904 unterbrach Adrian sein Studium der Theologie in Halle und ging nach Leipzig, um an einem privaten Konservatorium Musik zu studieren. Nach seiner Ankunft in der ihm unbekannten Stadt, bot sich ihm ein Mann als Führer durch die Sehenswürdigkeiten an, der in ihm zwar kein großes Vertrauen weckte, sich jedoch als solcher legitimieren konnte und ihn in den folgenden zwei Stunden durch die Leipziger Kirchen und Gotteshäuser sowie ans Grab des Hl. Johann Sebastian, aber auch zum Rathaus und durch die Gassen rund um den Marktplatz führte. Als es zu dämmern begann und Adrian Hunger bekam, bat er seinen Begleiter, ihn in irgendeine Kneipe zu führen, wo er etwas essen könnte. Sie gelangten zu einem Haus mit „einer Latherne über der Tür, just so rot war wie die Mütze des Kerls“. Der unerfahrene Adrian begriff den bösartigen Scherz seines Führers nicht, bezahlte, was er ihm schuldig war und

klingelte an der Tür, ohne zu wissen, dass es sich um eines der städtischen Bordelle handelte. Sein Erlebnis und seine schicksalhafte Begegnung mit Esmeralda schilderte Adrian später seinem Freund, dem Gymnasiallehrer Zeitblom, der zugleich der Erzähler dieses Mannschen Romans ist auf folgende Weise: „Ich schelle, die Thür geht von selber auf, und auf dem Flur kommt mir eine geputzte Madam entgegen, mit rosinfarbenen Backen, einen Rosenkranz wachsfarbener Perlen auf ihrem Speck, und begrüßt mich fast züchtiger berden, hocherfreut flötend und scharmutzierend, wie einen Langerwarteten, komplimentiert mich danach durch Portièren in ein schimmernd Gemach mit eingefaßter Bespannung, einem Kristall-Lüster, wandleuchtern vor Spiegeln, und seidnen Gautschen, darauf sitzen dir Nymphen und Töchter der Wüste, sechs oder sieben, wie soll ich sagen, Morphos, Glasflügler, Esmeralden, wenig gekleidet, durchsichtig gekleidet, in Tüll, Gaze und Glitzerwerk, das Haar lang offen, kurzlockig das Haar, gepuderte Halbkugeln, Arme mit Spangen, und sehen dich mit erwartungsvollen, vom Lüster gleißenden Augen an.“

Adrian begreift beim Anblick dieser „Töchter der Wüste“ (eine schöne Metapher Manns für die Prostituierten) mit den entblößten Halbkugeln ihrer Brüste, wohin ihn sein mephistophelischer Begleiter geführt hatte. Er bemüht sich, die Situation zu meistern, wobei ihm ein geöffnetes Klavier zu Hilfe kommt, das sich im Salon befindet. Er geht darauf zu und spielt stehend einige Akkorde aus dem „Freischütz-Finale, bei dem Eintritt der Pauke, Trompeten und Oboen auf dem Quartsextakkord von C. Weiß es im Nachher, wußte es aber damals nicht, sondern schlug es eben nur an. Neben mich stellt sich eine Bräunliche, in spanischem Jäckchen, mit großem Mund, Stumpfnase und Mandelaugen, Esmeralda, die streichelt mir mit dem Arm die Wange. Kehr ich mich um, stoß mit dem Knie die Sitzbank bei Seite und schlage mich über den Teppich zurück durch die Lusthölle, an der schwadronierenden Zatzenmutter vorbei, durch den Flur und die Stufen hinab auf die Straße...“

Adrian entgeht also diesem Nachtlager teuflischer Wonnen – entkommt seinem Schicksal aber nicht. Als er später im Brief seinem Freund, der gleichzeitig der Erzähler Romans ist, seinen kurzen, unfreiwilligen Aufenthalt in diesem öffentlichen Haus gesteht, stellt dieser fest, dass Adrian bis dahin keine Frau berührt hatte und „nun hatte das Weib ihn berührt – und er war geflohen... Der Hochmut des Geistes hatte das Trauma der Begegnung mit dem seelenlosen Triebe erlitten. Adrian sollte zurückkehren an den Ort, wohin der Betrüger ihn geführt.“ Der Erzähler und sein Schöpfer Thomas Mann leiten diese Überzeugung aus der Freudschen Lehre ab, die zu dem Schluss kommt, dass „die stolzeste Geistigkeit am unmittelbarsten der tierischen Sphäre, dem nackten Trieb, Aug in Aug gegenüberstehen“. Deshalb ruft der Erzähler dem Leser erneut Adrians Begegnung mit den Prostituierten ins Gedächtnis. „Ich sah die Stumpfnäsige neben ihm – Hetaera esmeralda – gepuderte Halbkugeln im spanischen Mieder-, sah sie mit dem nackten Arm seine Wange streicheln. Heftig, über den Raum hinweg und in der Zeit zurück, verlangte es mich dorthin. Ich hatte Lust, die Hexe mit dem Knie von ihm wegzustoßen, wie er den Schemel beiseite stieß, um den Weg ins Freie zu gewinnen. Tagelang spürte ich die Berührung ihres Fleisches auf meiner Wange und wußte dabei mit Widerwillen und Schrecken, daß sie seither auf der seinen brannte.“ Der Erzähler macht sich trotz des Abscheus, der ihn bei der Vorstellung von Adrians Berührung durch die Prostituierte befällt, bewusst, dass dies für seinen Freund ein fataler Körperkontakt war.

Und Adrian folgt, wie die Helden der griechischen Tragödien, diesem schicksalhaften Ruf. Als er ein Jahr später, währenddessen er dem instinkthaften Werben zu widerstehen vermocht hatte, in das öffentliche Haus zurückkehrt, und diesmal wegen jener kommt, deren Berührung immer noch in seinem Gesicht brennt und die er wegen ihrer dunklen Hautfarbe Esmeralda getauft hatte, findet er sie nicht mehr vor. Er bringt in Erfahrung, wohin sie ging und reist ihr nach. Dies geschieht, wie bereits erwähnt, im Mai 1906. Als Vorwand für seine, in dieser Zeit weite Reise nach Preßburg wählt er die Premiere von Straussens Oper „Salomé“ im Steierischen Graz, bei der er aus musikalischen Interesse anwesend sein möchte. Allein macht er sich von Leipzig aus auf den Weg und der Erzähler führt an, dass sich nicht genau feststellen ließ, ob er tatsächlich aus Graz nach Preßburg gekommen war oder einen Aufenthalt dort nur vortäuschte und sich schließlich auf „den Besuch von Preßburg, ungarisch Pozsony genannt, beschränkte. In ein dortiges nämlich war diejenige, deren Berührung er trug, verschlagen worden, da sie ihren vorigen gewerbsplatz um einer Hospitalbehandlung willen hatte verlassen müssen; und an ihrer neuen Stätte machte der getrieben sie ausfindig.“

Der Erzähler beschreibt dieses „Haus einer gewissen Frauensorte“ nicht näher, bekennt jedoch dem Leser, dass seine Hand zittere, wenn er Adrians und Esmeraldas Zusammentreffen schildern solle – eine Begegnung zwischen der Reinheit des Geists und dem Schmutz der Körperlichkeit. Esmeralda konnte sich an den *„flüchtigen Besucher von damals“* erinnern, und Adrian gesteht ihr, dass er die Reise nach Preßburg nur ihretwegen unternommen habe. Und Esmeralda? Sie dankt es ihm dadurch, dass sie Adrian vor ihrem eigenen (infizierten) Körper warnt! *“Ich weiß es von Adrian,“* betont der Erzähler den Schicksalsmoment: „sie warnte ihn; und kommt nicht dies einer wohltuenden Unterscheidung gleich zwischen der höheren Menschlichkeit des Geschöpfes und ihrem der Gosse verfallenen, zum elenden Gebrauchsgegenstand herabgesunkenen physischen Teil?“ In den Augen des Erzählers hebt sie sich durch diese Tat über ihre beklagenswerte physische Existenz empor, und er betrachtet ihre Warnung als einen Akt der Liebe! Vielleicht führte gerade dies, zusammen mit Adrians Gottesversuchung, dazu, dass „der Gewarnte die Warnung verschmähte und auf dem Besitz dieses Fleisches bestand?“ In dem folgenden Liebesakt „scheint [es], daß sie alle Süßigkeit ihres Weibtums aufbot, um ihn zu entschädigen für das, was er für sie wagte.“

Fünf Wochen später, nach der Rückkehr nach Leipzig, macht sich bei Adrian eine „spezifische Erkrankung“, also die ersten Anzeichen der Syphilis bemerkbar, und er begibt sich in ärztliche Obhut. Er nimmt die Behandlung beim Facharzt Dr. Erasmus auf. Doch als er sie nach kurzer Unterbrechung fortsetzen möchte, findet er den Arzt tot in dessen Behandlungszimmer vor. Der Arzt, zu dem er anschließend in Behandlung geht, wird jedoch kurz vor der zweiten Sitzung vor seinen Augen gefesselt von „zwei stämmig gebauten Männern“ abgeführt. Diese kafkaesk anmutenden, absurden Situationen (ebenso wie der mephistophelische Hintergrund seiner faustischen Geschichte) bringen Adrian dazu, seine Heilung aufzugeben. Die Syphilis, die das Gehirn des Menschen angreift, bewirkte zunächst (wie bei Nietzsche) seine musikalische Genialität, um ihn später mit einer schweren Hirnschädigung zu beglücken. Adrian bedauert jedoch nie seinen Besuch bei Esmeralda, und die Hetäre Esmeralda wurde in Gestalt der Ton-Chiffre h-e-a-e-es Bestandteil seiner genialen Musik.

Die Episode aus Vydrica zeigt in Manns Roman, wie auch große Künstler Verführungen verbotener Leidenschaften erliegen können, wie sie alle körperlichen Risiken in den Wind schlagen, nur um ihre körperlichen Bedürfnisse zu stillen. Mit der Überschreitung der Grenzen der Körperlichkeit hatte auch der Autor des Doktor Faustus während seines ganzen schöpferischen Daseins zu kämpfen, und seine homosexuellen Neigungen bescherten ihm nicht nur die Geschichte um Adrian Le verkühn, sondern auch die großartige Novelle *„Der Tod in Venedig“*.

Milan Kundera beschreibt in seinem Essay *„Der kastrierende Schatten des hl. Leonhart“* wie das Bild Franz Kafkas als eines „Heiligen unserer Zeit“ durch die Biografie von Max Brod und dessen spätere unzählige Reproduktionen erzeugt wurde.

Kundera deutet es um und legt dar, dass Brod nicht zögerte, für die Erschaffung dieses Bildes von Kafka, dessen Tagebücher zu zensieren. So unterschlug er z.B. in einem Tagebucheintrag von 1910 folgenden Satz: „Ich ging am Bordell wie am Haus einer Geliebten vorbei.“ Doch nachdem „ein Heiliger nicht ins Bordell gehen darf“, so Kundera, „ließ Brod nicht die Anspielungen auf die Prostituierten weg, sondern alles, was die Sexualität betraf.“ Kafka hatte, auch wenn er tatsächlich ein genialer Künstler war, die gleichen „menschlichen Bedürfnisse“ wie seine „gewöhnlichen Zeitgenossen“. Kundera stellt dies sehr offen fest: „Was Kafka betrifft, wage ich lediglich folgendes zu sagen: das erotische Leben seiner Epoche glich dem unseren: junge Mädchen lehnten körperliche Liebe vor der Eheschließung ab, so dass für ledige Männer nur zwei Alternativen blieben: verheiratete Frauen aus gutem Haus oder leichte Mädchen aus den niedrigeren Schichten – also Verkäuferinnen, Dienstmädchen und natürlich Prostituierte.“

Für unsere Episode aus dem sündigen Stadtteil Vydrica ist Kunderas Feststellung auch deshalb wertvoll, weil sie auf ein starkes Motiv verweist, das junge Männer aus höheren Gesellschaftsschichten (Kafka selbst war Prokurist) dazu führte, Prostituierte aufzusuchen. Und nachdem Prag, wo Kafka lebte, ebenso ein Teil der k.k. Monarchie war wie Preßburg – und eine ähnliche wie im Buch „*Pražské bahno*“ [Der Prager Sumpf] beschriebene Prostitutierten-Szene aufzuweisen hatte -, können wir Kunderas Schlussfolgerung auch auf die Handlungsmotive junger Männer aus der Preßburger Mittelschicht übertragen. Wenn wir uns schließlich das „faustische Motiv“ in Manns Roman wegdenken, das Adrian Leverkühn aus Leipzig bis in das ihm sicher völlig unbekannte ungarische Städtchen Pozsony trieb, so war dies lediglich ein junger Mann, der sich danach sehnte, seine sexuelle Unberührtheit zu verlieren, denn – und ich verweise zum letzten Mal auf Thomas Mann, der zum Ausdruck bringen wollte, dass der Trieb nicht einmal dem geistvollsten Stolz weicht und auch der verächtlichste Hochmut der Natur seinen Tribut zahlen muss. Adrian zahlte ihn auch um den Preis, dass sein „blanker Trieb“ ihn zu einer mit Syphilis infizierten Prostituierten getrieben hatte.

Den Körper einer Frau kennenzulernen, bedeutet für einen Künstler, die Tür zu einem Geheimnis zu öffnen, eine Quelle der Inspiration zu finden, die gerade einem Künstler zu Beginn seiner Laufbahn häufig fehlt. In einer Zeit, als die Körper der Frauen nicht so einfach zugänglich waren wie heute, als es Mädchen aus gutem Haus ablehnten, Geliebte zu sein, sie nur echte Bräute werden wollten, stellten „lockere Bräute“ einen Ersatz dafür dar – bereit und willig zu allem, was ihrer reichen künstlerischen Phantasie entsprang.

Auch die slowakischen Künstler aus dem damaligen Preßburg nutzen diese sich bietende und, wie wir aus den vorherigen Kapiteln dieses Buchs erfuhren, auch finanziell erschwingliche „Urquelle“ der Inspiration von Vydrica sicher reichlich. Leider hinterließen sie davon meist nur sehr spärliche Zeugnisse.

Übersetzt von Renata SakoHoess

Dušan Mitana

THE REVELATION

(extract)

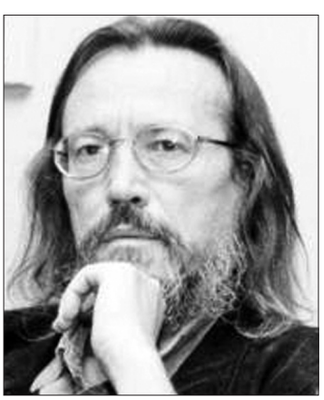


Photo: Peter Procházka

DUŠAN MITANA (1946) is a prose writer, scriptwriter, essayist, and poet and one of the foremost contemporary Slovak writers with a special view of life and philosophy. He made his debut with a collection of short stories, *Dog Days* (Psie dni, 1970), followed by a novella, *Patagonia* (Patagónia, 1972), another collection of short stories, *Night News* (Nočné správy, 1976) and a novel *End of Play* (Koniec hry, 1984). The short stories, novellas and novels of Dušan Mitana are characterised by the contrast between a simple story or experience and the elements of hyperbole, secrecy and dreams used in narration. The protagonists of his texts move between the rational, the sensible and the irrational, transcendental – between what is considered as “normal” and “pathological” by conventional society. Mitana’s interest is focused on a story with a secret or criminal plot, on eroticism, and on metaphysical and religious topics. This was a problem for the communist regime and Mitana was not considered a “suitable” author during those times. After the revolution in 1989 Mitana published two collections of poems, *Cruelhills* (Krutohory, 1991) and *Maranatha* (Maranatha, 1996), where he continues his own unique confrontation of different religious images of the world, human existence, good and evil, life and death, and the distances between cultures. In 1991 Mitana published a book of essays, stories, and reflections, *In Search of a Lost Author* (Hľadanie strateného autora), which represents the author’s statement of his poetic roots and philosophical understanding of the world. Mitana proved his excellence in storytelling in the collection of short stories, *Slovak Poker* (Slovenský poker, 1993), where various stories are unified by a typical Mitana rational-irrational perception of reality. In 1999 Mitana published a literary collage, *The Return of Christ* (Návrat Krista), in which he expresses his inclination toward the Christian religion.
His latest novel, *The Revelation* (Zjavenie, 2005), is reminiscent partly of his “good old days” and partly of his religious escapism. Through the life stories of three protagonists – Dušan Jonáš, Dušan Eliáš and Dušan Mitana – the author tells his account of the historical and social changes and breakthroughs that have influenced the lives of people in Slovakia in the second half of the 20th century. It is a social novel and a literary autobiography at the same time. The literary world of The *Revelation* is a mixture of reality and illusion; Mitana begins and ends in the realm of fiction, yet the central stage is taken by an autobiography. Although he creates the illusion of a novelistic storyline, this only serves as a vehicle, concealing his own story. *The Revelation* is a message about the state of society, and, above all, about the ever-searching man and writer, Dušan Mitana.

Let's call him Dušan. Or Jonáš. His mum used to call him Duško, his father Dušan. Surname: Jonáš. After his father. The son is the bearer of the father's surname, as we all know. His father was Michal, after Archangel Michael. His mother Mária, maiden name Bučková. It didn't matter what they'd called him, after all, at a certain stage in his life he'd been a Buddhist; he'd believed in karma and reincarnation, although apparently he was christened a Lutheran. At least, that's what he'd been told. Of course, he couldn't be expected to remember that; after all, he'd only been eight days old.

The only thing he could remember was his first emotion: FEAR.

Yes, in the beginning was fear.

He spent his time in a cot with a metal frame that was painted white and had bars on either side made of rope, like the net in a football goal. It is a cage, but he is still small, weak and ailing; he can't reach up to pull the side bars down and he can't climb out, even though the cage is open at the top. He can't fly out! He is only little and even if he managed to stand up and climb out of the cage, he couldn't leave the house! From his cot he can see the windows and there are bars on the windows, too; iron bars close together. When he was born this was a pub, but his grandfather got wind of nationalization. At first he wanted to burn it down, but others persuaded him not to. So he sold off the furnishings and converted the pub into a flat. They lived there with Aunt Anna and Uncle Emil.

Jonáš is alone and he knows that he has been locked in and someone is watching him. From time to time he notices an eye looking through the keyhole; a cold, blue eye that doesn't move. Maybe it is made of glass, is artificial or dead, because it never blinks. Mummy is already at work; she's a sales assistant in a nearby shop for miscellaneous goods called BUDÚCNOSŤ– THE FUTURE – and Granddad has gone to mow the meadow. He's all alone here and uncomfortable – he's wet himself again, but he must put up with it till lunchtime; he knows his mum will come and free him then and change his nappy. Yes, he must bear it in silence, because that eye is watching him and if he began to yell, to cry and beg for help, that dead eye would come to life, the door would open and Agitator would begin to make fun of him: "You've wet yourself again! You can't even last out till lunchtime, you load of shit, are you never going to grow up to be a man?"

Their tenant – yes, they had a tenant and he said his name was NERO; they never discovered what his real name was... He was young, about twenty, I suppose, and he'd come with an agitprop group of equally young and enthusiastic benefactors, who had tried to persuade the backward villagers that a happy future awaited them in a cooperative farm, which is why among themselves they called him Agitator, but officially they addressed him as Comrade Nero, because that's how he liked it. All the other agitators had left the village, as most of the stupid villagers were not yet ready for the future and refused to sign the application form, but Nero had stayed on. They had had to take him in as a tenant, even though he didn't pay anything; they'd been ordered to by the Local National Committee, where Comrade Nero had his own office. When they asked him what he actually did, he replied good-naturedly: "I'm helping people on the road to Paradise." And he did help them. Especially Jonáš's uncle, but also his father, in fact. In 1938 his father was on the western border of the Czech Republic and to the day he died he claimed we shouldn't have retreated. He was convinced the Germans wouldn't have broken through the line; he said the bunkers were impenetrable and the vast majority of the soldiers defending them had been willing to die, but the Western Powers had betrayed them, claiming it was the lesser of two evils. Later, many years later, his son explained to him that it had not only been the Western Powers that betrayed them, but Stalin as well, because he'd signed a secret treaty with Hitler; but his father wouldn't believe that. He kept recollecting how they'd vacated the bunkers, left the border and returned home to Slovakia deeply humiliated and in tears. He said he'd served for a while at Bratislava Castle, where there was a stable for horses, but they'd then transferred him to the Signals. Jonáš couldn't imagine horses in stables at the castle - he remembered that later, in the 1960's, there'd been restaurants and wine bars for communists. Once they'd wanted to have a meal there after a preview of an exhibition and a couple of glasses of wine with friends, but the stable keeper had called the police to throw them out. It was in those golden sixties, when the windows to the world had been opened for a while, causing a moderate draught and, naïve as they were and full of hope and daring, even joie de vivre, they'd wanted to show their love for the "stable keepers" and drink a toast with them to "vechnuyu pamyat". They got such a beating up from the police that it took another twenty years for the injuries and wounds to their souls to heal.

On that occasion Jonáš had said to himself, "I won't forget, you'll pay dearly for that." However, he didn't keep it to himself; there were other friends there – good fellows who believed in Dubček's Prague Spring – some of them even believed in the utopia of a communist system that could be reformed from within even after the 21st August 1968. At that time Jonáš had wanted to leave college – he was in his second year of studies at the Academy of Performing Arts, but his tutor, Peter Balna dissuaded him: "Dušan, don't be silly, there's no point. We must fight against them from inside! Peter was forced to abandon the struggle less than a year later, when he was thrown out of the department and a couple of months later he died of a heart attack.

What were we talking about? Aha, about his father.

In 1944 his father, along with two east-Slovakian divisions, were said to have been prepared to participate in the Slovak National Uprising, but by some oversight they were disarmed by the Germans even before it began, and so he found himself in a German concentration camp. To prove he wasn't lying, he showed Jonáš a metal strip with some numbers stamped on it, although his son did not doubt for a minute that his father was telling the truth. He felt sorry, sensing that his father was ashamed of that (of what?) and who knows why he wanted to excuse himself to anyone. His father mentioned that when they were liberated by the Americans, he'd at least managed to participate in the Czech National Uprising in Prague on 5th May. He loved the Czechs, regarding them as his own brothers; before the war he had done an apprenticeship as a tailor somewhere in the south of the Czech Republic and he claimed these were the best years of his life. He'd also been a member of the Sokol gymnastic society and he would proudly show his photos: the horizontal and parallel bars were his favourites. After 1945 he became a member of the Democratic Party, founded a tailoring workshop and began to "do business". He had three assistants and he fared well. Much later he explained to Jonáš: "If the communists hadn't come, you'd now be studying in Paris". Jonáš believed him, although he found it rather hard to understand why his father was now a member of the Communist Party. Apparently, he'd joined so that he, Dušan, could at least study at the Secondary Grammar School in Nové Mesto. Jonáš believed his father's version of the story, but according to Agitator, it was far from the truth. According to Agitator, his father had disobeyed orders and had not returned to his homeland, Slovakia, but had deserted with a number of "heroes", gone over to the other side and during the war had been in the foreign resistance, flying English planes and fighting against the Slovak state on the side of the communists. Agitator was still quite young and inexperienced. Coming from a deeply religious Catholic family, it was no wonder he was slow to find his bearings in the political situation and confused Jonáš's father with his brother-in-law,

Uncle Emil. Dušan couldn't tell communism from fascism – he was only four years old – but he was proud of his uncle, infinitely proud that he had flown in fighter planes and loved playing with miniature copies of them. However, the radio began to broadcast hearings from trials of some kind and kept announcing how many betrayers of the people had been executed, and it was then that Agitator offered to help Jonáš's uncle - he'd get him across the border, but they'd have to travel to the River Morava. He himself was from the nearby village of Devínska Nová Ves; he knew every inch of ground there and had "excellent contacts". He didn't even want any money for it, saying money wasn't worth anything, that's why just some gold and jewels would do. He knew very well that Jonáš's grandfather was of the same mind; he'd exchanged the money he'd saved as a publican during the war, together with what he'd got from the sale of the furnishings, for gold, precious stones and various brooches, rings, necklaces and earrings. Agitator wanted it all, but Granddad was no fool; he gave him only part of it, saying he'd get the rest only after the plan proved a success. Agitator was furious and hurled threats at him, but Granddad only laughed, "I'm an old Russian legionnaire - I've wrung the necks of brats like you with my bare hands!" There was nothing the Agitator could do but agree, and so one day he and Uncle set out for Devínska Nová Ves. The plan seemed to have succeeded, because Uncle did not come back. But neither did Agitator. Maybe they've escaped together, Granddad comforted Aunt Anna, Uncle Emil's wife; he was a crook, that gold of mine would give him a very good start "over the hills and far away". And maybe they've caught both of them – Aunt Anna was much more sceptical. We'll see, we must wait patiently, that's what we must do.

They waited. For Uncle's letter – as agreed. And they didn't have to wait long. Instead of a letter, two different Agitators in long black leather coats arrived and asked Aunt Anna, "Where's your husband?"

"I don't know. He left for work and he didn't come back."

They showed her a photograph and asked, "Is this your husband?" Auntie stared at the photograph and then shook her head, "No, that's not my husband, my husband is alive."

"Only if he's risen from the dead," guffawed the fat goon and showed Jonáš the photo. "Is this your uncle, sonny?" Jonáš took the blurred photo in both hands; there was a man lying on a river bank who looked like all uncles and over him stood a man who looked like all Agitators.

"Is this your uncle, boy?" the second Agitator said, gently stroking his head. "Admit it and we'll have done with it." Dušan used to sit in that barred cot of his and try in vain to fly out of it and speak up, but all he could do was to stammer and no one could understand him, but the moment he caught sight of that photograph, something happened: he stretched out his hand towards the Agitator and uttered his first word: "Gimme."

His mother burst into tears, clearly from happiness.

She hugged him and lifted him out of his cage, kissed his forehead, the back of the neck and eyes, "He's alive. Do you hear? Duško's alive."

"How do you know?"

"He can speak."

"Even monkeys can say "Gimme"."

"Dušanko, my little son, why haven't you said anything before?" his mother asked.

And Jonáš replied clearly, in a whole sentence, "There wasn't anything to say."

The first Agitator smiled, "What a dear little boy." The second Agitator spat: "Idiot". Dušan nodded in agreement, "Idiot. Gimme, give, idiot."

"Who are you calling an idiot, you little brat? D'ye want me to clobber you one?"

"Leave off, you can see he's a harmless idiot," the second Agitator tried to calm him down.

"Idiot or not, he's making a fucking fool of me."

Jonáš clapped his hands in delight, "Fucking fool, fucking fool, gimme fucking fool."

It seemed the Agitators had quite forgotten why they had come.

"What did we come for?" they asked each other, almost simultaneously.

"The photo."

"Aha, fuck it, I'd almost forgotten." He grabbed Dušan by his blond hair and thrust the photograph at him.

"Do you know him?"

"Gimme."

The Agitator was a trifle confused, "What do you fucking want, what do you want, what do you want me to give you?"

"Daddy."

The Agitator breathed a sigh of relief, at last they'd got it over, the brat had confessed.

"So that's your daddy?"

"Gimme."

The first said to the second, "Write that down. He confessed. He recognised his daddy."

Dušan shook his head, "Not daddy. Gimme."

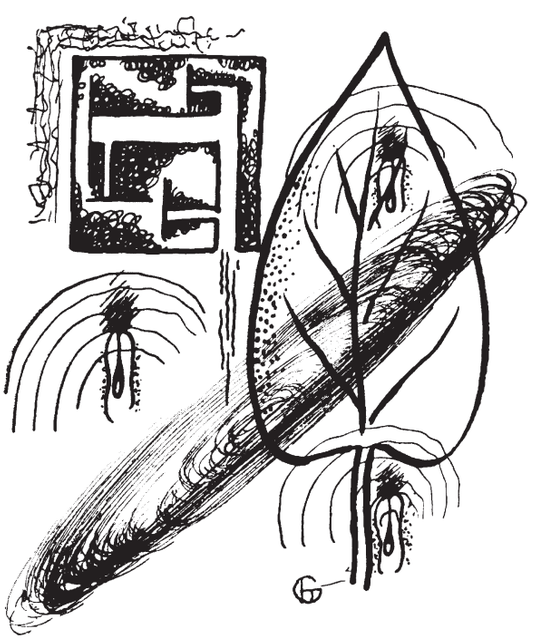
They understood. He wanted to have a closer look at his uncle, in short, he wanted to identify him. It was already late afternoon, they were hungry and they could do with a drink, they didn't want to hang around. So they handed Jonáš the photo – only lent it to him in fact – and they asked, "Is that your uncle?"

Dušan didn't bother with a verbal confession; he stuffed the photo into his mouth and chewed it with relish. Before they could rescue it – poking their stinking filthy fingers into his mouth and pulling out scraps of paper – his mother and aunt had laughed themselves to tears. The Agitators slapped their faces, "Don't laugh, you bitches, we haven't got another copy. Spit it out, you blighter," they begged Jonáš, who was beating his chest with his fist like a young orang-utan, declaring "DADDY HERE!"

"Shit, he's swallowed it. The brat has swallowed his own uncle... Who said he's an idiot?"

"Idiot, idiot," Dušan smiled with satisfaction.

Translated by Heather Trebatická



Mikuláš Galanda

Ján Štrasser

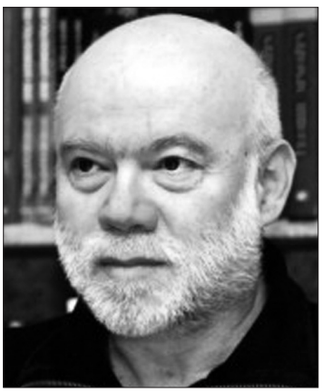


Photo: Peter Procházka

JÁN ŠTRASSER (1946) The poetry of Ján Štrasser goes into its depths and follows them imperceptibly, unobtrusively, fluently and somewhat naturally. The author avoids pathos meticulously and lightly gradates his poems with reason, irony and self-irony. His text always has a point, though it cannot be compared to a cherry on top of a cake – placed or stuck on at the end. On the contrary, it emerges from the entire thought and metaphorical rendering of the poem, its original form uninterrupted by anything. After releasing his debut, *Restraint*, (Odriekanie 1968), Štrasser, more and more, taps into regular, seemingly everyday problems of man and his era. And in his work he always manages to find a piece of true poetic experience – a small wonder. It cannot be said that he is interested in wordplay mainly but he uses it for titles of some of his works such as *The Cap of Good Hope* (Myš dobrej nádeje) and *Retina* (Očné pozadie) making his poems unique and fresh. Štrasser is a city lyricist and though he sometimes uses still lifes in his work, he does so to support the main arch of his texts, to strengthen them. His love stories are little dramas, quite often ending with abandonment of one of the partners. He omits the dominance of tragic feelings, though – his stories are interwoven with hope and the possibility that everything can develop another way – differently, the same, better.

Mikuláš Galanda

EARTHQUAKE IN MEXICO

I read: in the Hotel Romana
500 people died.
Only three were saved:
two lovers and one thief.
No, there's no more news,
love, in vain I look for details
of how that thief survived.

ANSWERING MACHINE

I call you, you're not there,
just your answering machine's there, ping,
after the signal sounds
I may leave a message, pong.
You call me, I'm not here,
just my answering machine's here, pong,
after the signal sounds
you may leave a message, ping.
Ping-pong! Pong-ping!
My answering machine calls you,
you're not there, it leaves a message
on your answering machine,
your answering machine calls me,
I'm not here, it leaves a message
on my answering machine,
my answering machine calls your answering machine,
your answering machine's not there,
you lift the receiver, you say, ach,
this is me, if you're calling my answering machine
you can leave a message, och,
your answering machine is calling my answering machine,
my answering machine's not here,
I lift the receiver, I say, och,
this is me, if you're calling my answering machine,
you can leave a message, ach,
see how we're on call always,
each to each answerable.

FAMOUS BLUE RAINCOAT

In my cup the sugar drowned,
in yours the honey quenched. The tea turned wistful.
You're hushed. I speak.
Hold up and don't worry me.

Your startled knees
huddle together in dusk.
Foreign people reach for us
from the screen. Drizzling
into the room is Cohen, *my brother,*
my killer. I speak.

Hold me and don't worry.
I'm afraid with you.

HEIGHT ABOVE SEA LEVEL

Up there everything's
lighter. You know that
from physics. Until
the descent: only desperate hope
prevents you
calling it fall.

THEY WON'T RESCUE...

They won't rescue me from the sinking ship.
I won't crawl from under the earthquake's rubble.
But I could live with that.
What kills me is, I'll never be
the one to tell the tale ...

I CLOSE...

I close the book, put it away
on the shelf, no longer knowing
what it was all about, yet sensing
what I put into it
reading ...

GAS READING

Like a leper I lie,
down with the flu, coughing
rasps me, suddenly someone
rings. Awash with sweat,
I drag myself from bed,
shuffle to the door,
open. On the threshold
is a man: He says:
Good evening, I'm here
to read the gas.

Choked
with coughing, I retreat
from the door, say:
Come inside.

The man asks for a chair,
stands on it, enquiringly
looks at the unit count,
marks the digits.

I gasp for breath,
the blast of coughing bows me, I flee
to the shower, I hack and whoop, I try
to clear the bronchia
of all that phlegm.

In the hall the man
gets down from the chair,
closes his well-thumbed book.
You'll have a surcharge,
he says, going.
I always have a surcharge, I say
between coughs, the gasman disappears
beyond the door and I inhale
deeply and before the searing pain
grips my chest tight,
I say the rest: No matter,
we're alive, that's the main thing.

77,297

In the Pinkas Synagogue
all the walls are full
of names. Each one
is mine.

I WILL NOT STEP...

will not step twice into that same river,
which doesn't mean that she
won't flow twice into me.
What have I learnt from that first deluge?
Something though. Today I know
the lifeboat's called
Titanic.

DENTAL HAIKU

Where there'd been a tooth
the nerve remained, as if glad
still to be hurting.

SPRING HAIKU

The possessive rain
with arms around your shoulders,
you went off with him.

TIMELESS HAIKU

What's the time of day?
I'll reply and I won't tell
the truth (many now).

THIRD AUTUMN HAIKU

Take that wind away
and turn down the rain. Or else
switch the damn thing off!

(Retina, 1999)

Translated by John Minahane

Boris Filan

S Q U I R R Y *(extract)*

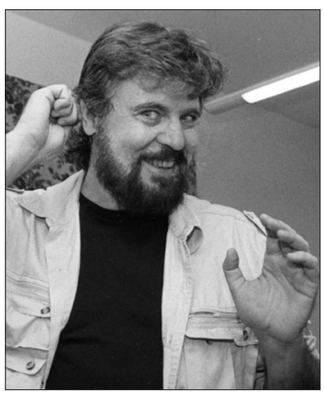


Photo: Peter Procházka

BORIS FILAN (1949), a writer, lyricist, script writer and dramaturge. He studied scriptwriting and dramaturgy at the Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts in Bratislava (graduated in 1972) and worked as a dramaturge in the Czechoslovak Television (1973 – 1987). Filan has written scripts to several TV comedies and feature films, including a very successful music feature film *A Fountain for Zuzana* (Fontána pre Zuzanu, 1985), its sequel *A Fountain for Zuzana II* (Fontána pre Zuzanu II, 1991) and *Rabaka* (Rabaka, 1989). He wrote and hosted a popular TV talk-show *Boris Filan's Gala* (Gala Borisa Filana). Since the age of sixteen Filan has been writing lyrics for some of the most popular Slovak pop singers and groups (e.g. P. Hammel, Prúdy, Elán). He has been traveling extensively throughout the world, especially the exotic countries of Africa and Asia, and based on these experiences, he has written five volumes of a very popular travelogue series titled *Tam-Tam*. Its first part, *Tam-Tam* (1994) was awarded the Egon Erwin Kisch Award for excellence in non-fiction writing in 1994 and in 2000 the sequel *Tam-Tam III* was awarded as the Slovak bestseller of the year.

Filan's first novel *Squirry* (Wewerka, 2006) is a story of a young girl plunging headfirst into life, having conflicts with everyone around her and going through all the negative experiences of drinking, taking drugs, and one-night stands, until she ends up in a psychiatric ward.

Knock, knock...
"Who's there?"
"Me."

CHAPTER I

Fucking squirrel. She bit me right when I was trying to rescue her. I was walking Pincode. That's my dog, a young bull-terrier. I got him from my boyfriend as a make up gift. For nearly killing me. But I deserved it. I just didn't feel like explaining, that I had to go to Bratislava because Pepo went blind. Pipo wouldn't understand anyway. That squirrel tattooed a Morse code message in bloody dots on the outer side of my palm: "Don't help anyone against their will."

When I run into a squirrel once in a blue moon it's like a real dwarf jumping out from behind a tree stump. I don't get all emotional over kitties, bunnies and lambs. I hate that stupid look on people's faces that young ones evoke whether they are real or stuffed. But a squirrel is different. Kitties and lambs stick to you, and have the ability to activate a program in our heads that makes us want to protect them and feed them. They are little prostitutes. I like everything that runs away from me, something I have to chase. And a squirrel is just like that – until some people in the park screw it up by feeding her peanuts. Like swans, for example. I feel like puking when I see swans on Štrkovecke Lake in Bratislava, that don't give a crap about their journey because people give them bread. Pepo was telling me about a lake that used to be at this place where we go for walks. Once, at the end of fall, a flock of swans landed on this lake. At night it got so cold that the entire lake froze. In the morning the swans found out that their feet were stuck in the ice. There were a lot of them, more than a hundred. They spread their wings and flew away along with the lake. Supposedly, the lake is somewhere in southern Czech Republic now.

So anyway, I was walking Pincode that morning. Well – morning... it was almost afternoon. I just finished smoking a cigarette when Pincode started growling in this deep adult manner. About twenty meters ahead of us, sitting under a tree was a squirrel. I knew that if Pincode would go after her, she would run away and make an ass out of him. Pincode is three months old; he is made for something like that. But the squirrel didn't make an ass of him. She didn't run away, she didn't even try to run away. Something happened. She could have been weak, old or blind. Pincode would play with her for a little bit as if she was a rag and then he would choke her to death. So instead I passed Pincode and picked her up. The squirrel was light, as if made of husk. She had a head that looked like a fur covered nut and a back with a protruding spine. I was really tempted to take her home with me. Then she scrunched up as if deflated of all air and all of a sudden she turned and sharply bit my hand. Ferociously and really hard. I dropped her on the ground. At first the bite just stung, I didn't even bleed. I wanted to kick that little cunt, but she hopped away behind a tree. A small bloody crown was forming on my hand. A tiny ruby colored drop came out of each little tear that the squirrel bit into my skin. When I moved my hand, all the drops fused together. With my good hand, I put Pincode on a leash and lit up a cigarette. "It's nothing," I told myself. It didn't sound very convincing, though. I have this antenna that tells me when I am in trouble. The problem is that I don't want to admit I'm in trouble. I was telling myself that it's nothing, but just in case I stopped by Petra's on my way back. Maybe she has something antiseptic to put on it. Some slivovitz, at least. I didn't want to go home, my mom would make a huge tragedy out of it. Or at the very least a sign. My mom sees a sign of something terrible, tragic or mortal in everything. She expects the worst her entire life, and she's rarely disappointed. Maybe even because of her we left Pincode at

Petra's and went to the health center. Our local doctor is an elder man, a former soldier. Doctor Neptal, the perpetual Czech. He speaks his own language – Czechoslovak. From afar he looks like a dried out tree. Up close like a sea sponge. And overall as a pleasant death on vacation. He used to drink like a fish. Even now they find him in a ditch once in a while, but then he acts like it's Ramadan for the next six months. I showed him my hand and told him what the deal was. He nodded his head. I don't know why doctors always nod their heads, are they just swinging their thoughts or just gaining time. He stuck out his lips, pulling all the wrinkles from his face towards his mouth and said: "My dear, we have to vaccinate you. That squirrel certainly had rabies." Wham.

I imagined myself foaming at the mouth, running around Brezno biting people. No, I am going to sit under a tree and when someone picks me up wanting to pet me, then I'll bite them.

Doctor Neptal cleaned out my wound, gave me a shot and put a band aid on my hand and my ass. There are two kinds of band aids, ones that don't stick and ones that are impossible to take off. Luckily, this one was the first kind.

By the next day, the cuts got slightly inflamed and tiny scabs formed on them. The kind of scabs that are a joy to pick on. That's why I was left with white dots after they healed. Whatever.

That night Petra told everyone at the bar how I was rescuing a squirrel. Everything always becomes a legend in the neighborhood. Ever since then they call me Squirrel or just Squirry. I like it the other way. Look at the difference: squirrel and squirry – it's like a stroke of her furry tail. I don't know why but in my head I kept thinking that the squirrel meant well and ever since then she is in my secret army of protectors. Those are luminous creatures that take on the form of a stuffed teddy bear, a marzipan piglet or a dove.

I called him Emil, he would sit on my grandma's roof. He had eyes that were red like beads and a little shiny vest on his chest. He did what he could but nevertheless he was kind of confused anyway. Once, during late fall I was raking leaves in my grandma's backyard. I'm in horrible shape because I smoke so much. I raked half the backyard and I was ready to pass out. That night I prayed to Emil to make the leaves disappear by the morning. And the next day there was snow up to my knees. The dove did what he could. Now I pray to the squirrel. What do I want from her?

CHAPTER II

I need a hundred grand. Better said I need to make enough money so I have a hundred grand left. By Christmas at the latest. Fifty thousand for my mom, fifty thousand for my dad. Ten years ago I borrowed forty thousand from my parents and I promised them I would pay them back double. Plus interest. That's what I promised and I'm going to keep my promise. Mom and dad need it. I could borrow money from Pipo's stash that he set aside for his business, but that wouldn't solve anything because I already owe him thirty thousand. I could make some money on shrooms and weed too, but that would be the last alternative. Or I'll go to Vienna and clean apartments. It doesn't really matter how I make that hundred grand, the main thing is that I'm going to have it. Otherwise I'm screwed. The problem is that at the moment I have zero crowns and I owe Petra three hundred. But that's okay. I'm just freaking out again. My mother thinks I know where dad is and that I'm in touch with him but that I'm keeping it from her. We argued the whole evening. Then I cried so much that I forgot why I was crying in the first place. "Why am I crying? Is it still because of my mother? Am I insane?" But I felt bad anyway that she thinks that about me. And that she doesn't believe me. In touch with my dad, yeah right. Why would I cover for him? My younger sister is his darling, so if he contacted anyone, it would be her. My mother doesn't believe that I'm looking for him. She suspects that I'm covering for him. And when I explain it to her, I can totally see she doesn't believe me. I try to convince her like an idiot, until I start screaming and then everything turns to shit cuz she doesn't believe me at all anymore. Not a word about her not believing me, though. But she doesn't want to let me know that she doesn't believe me. She knows that her distrust drives me crazy. But then I didn't believe her, that she believed me. She's not that good of an actress.

"You seriously think I know where he is? That's what you think?"

"I don't think that. (listen to this) I don't think anything at all."

"I know you think that, I just don't understand why. Why would I cover for him?

"That I don't know."

And all the while she's got this weak, painful, resigned look in her face like she wants to join a convent or die.

"So think it. Think whatever you want. And I'm going to do whatever I want, too.

"You do that anyway." A heavy sigh.

"I'm going out then."

We are quiet for a moment and then she tells me something to drive me over the edge.

"Do you need money?"

"No, thanks. That I really don't need."

I went to the bathroom to calm down. I sat down on the edge of the tub and stared into space.

My hair grows in a special way. It's got a life of its own – I can either just leave it be because it does what it wants or cut it off, which I like better. Most of the time my hair is so short, it looks like I'm bald. When it grows out, it's unbelievably thick, curly and tangled and it just shoots out of my head like a geyser. You want to know something about me? That's how tangled it is in my head. Sometimes I feel like I'm a platypus or a sloth, built from a different construction set. A forgotten fish with legs. Or that some Australian aborigine is dreaming about me. I dream about all kinds of people, too. I only know them from my dreams. I have never seen them in real life, I'm sure of that. They only live in my head, coming back like in a TV show. When I see one of them, I say to myself: "That's the guy form my dream."

I have a few thinking passageways that lead somewhere totally different than they do in other people's heads. But when I am awake and sober I can't even get through the first door. When I get stoned the door opens and I wander through my gardens.

Now I'm sitting at the edge of the tub, fruitlessly meditating. I would even go to college, but that kind of a college hasn't been established yet. They would have to teach me some real, concrete things though, not just shit I'm never going to use. I would also be into getting my driver's license but you waste ninety percent of the time just talking about bullshit in class. Cuz bullshitting is cheap and driving is not. This is how driver's ed should be: "Enroll once you know all the signs and other crap, and we will teach you to drive." But then everything would have to be a little different, and not how it actually is. Everything has to do with everything.

Translated by Viridiana Carleo

Daniela Kapitáňová

IT STAYS IN THE FAMILY *(extract)*

Photo: Author's collection

DANIELA KAPITÁŇOVÁ (1956), a writer, theatre director and a university lecturer. Kapitáňová studied drama direction at the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts (DAMU) in Prague, graduating in 1980. She worked as a director in theatres in Košice and Komárno, often coming as a guest director to theatres in the Czech Republic. Currently she teaches creative writing at the University of Constantine the Philosopher in Nitra.

In 1996 Kapitáňová entered the Short Story '96 competition and received the Jury Award for her short story *1920–1966* and an offer to publish a book. She did it four years later, when she published a novel, *Samko Tále: A Book about the Cemetery* (Samko Tále: Kniha o cintoríne, 2000). Kapitáňová instantly introduced herself as an original, creative literary existence. The book is "written" and told by a dwarfed half-idiot, Samko Tále, whose only aim in life is to be a "normal", regular person. He hates everything out of the ordinary, everything extraordinary, and reports it to his beloved communist party boss, unknowingly causing tragedy in lives of other people. The book was compared to *Forrest Gump*, the character of Samko Tále to Oskar Malzerath in *Little Tin Drum*. It became an instant bestseller in Slovakia and the book was translated into Czech, Swedish, French and Italian.

In 2005 Kapitáňová published her second novel, a suspense story in the tradition of Agatha Christie, *It Stays in the Family* (Nech to zostane v rodine). The story takes place in a private TV station where the preparations for a new reality show are under way, when people suddenly start dying.

"Today's crimes," said private detective Otto Rowan, "can be summed up in one sentence: "I want what he's got! I want to be powerful, admired and loved. I want what he's got!" Otto Rowan paused briefly and, pointing his finger at me, asked in a dramatic tone: "And whose fault is that?"

Before I could even shrug my shoulders, he jabbed at the letter lying in front of him and answered his own question: "Our fearless media – above all, private television. First they turn a nobody into a celebrity, and when they get tired of him, they come up with the bombastic revelation that the celebrity is in fact a nobody. The viewer then turns up his nose in disgust: just another bum taking us for a ride while living it up! Yet they expect me to live honestly and what's more, as a punishment, even modestly?! I want what he's got! Whereupon he takes a gun and robs the first post office he happens to come across. Or he rapes his neighbour's daughter, or son, as the case may be. And do you know, dear Gerda, what's the worst thing about it?"

A rhetorical question, as always. It never occurred to him to wait for an answer.

"The worst thing about it is that no matter who the omnipotent hand of the television company picks out of the herd of viewers, instead of jumping on an ice floe and voluntarily freezing to death, they get all hot and excited at the idea of becoming a celebrity. Which – as we know – will only last a couple of days before it's discovered that he's just another inconsequential nonentity. Surely they can't think I'm some kind of security guard who'll keep an eye on their cables, for God's sake!" He concluded without the slightest change in intonation and poured himself a glass of red wine, which meant that the monologue was over. I sat down at the computer in order to write a reply to TV MAXIMA. Pity we hadn't literally jumped onto that ice floe when the omnipotent hand of the television company chose him. Even that would have been preferable to listening to Otto Rowan's "rhetorical gymnastics", as Professor Pine used to refer to them. I remembered the *Foresters* and suddenly felt sorry I wasn't with them. I sighed. Rowan looked up and said: "You needn't be over-polite. When you're done, please gather as much information as you can for me about the Mongolian script."

Mongolian script, for heaven's sake! And Professor Pine had thought I'd be meeting with *real life* here. But it's Rowan who decides what I do and when, why and how.

Because Otto Rowan *won me in cards*.

It was like this. Several years ago I finished a degree in Latin. I once used to dream of discovering rolls of yellowing documents that would change people's ideas about humankind and history, for which a waving crowd would shower me with confetti. However, when I was looking for work, I discovered that dreams are dreams and reality reality. There was one iron rule to my job changes: every new job meant an increase in the distance from Latin and a decrease in wages. In the end I found myself – almost literally – on the streets. I was the decoy who was to stop passers-by and ask them *discreetly* whether they wanted to have their layers of fat measured and then recommend some illicit preparation for losing weight. That was when I told myself: enough's enough, I'm going to give my fate 24 hours to take care of me at last. As proof that I really meant it, I tore the advertising leaflets into little pieces, crossed to the middle of the Old Bridge and flung them into the Danube. As they fell, they vaguely reminded me of the confetti I once dreamed of.

I don't know how it works, but fate replied even before the last scraps dropped into the water, because at that moment I caught sight of someone waving to me; it was my tutor from university. She mentioned that someone she knew was looking for a Latin scholar with no other commitments. I asked her to wait a moment, then took a marker pen out of my bag and marked the spot on the railing with an M. M for miracle. It's still there. If you walk along the footbridge from the town centre towards the Petržalka district, you'll find it about a hundred metres from the beginning of the bridge.

The very same day we set out together for the Dúbravka suburb, to see my prospective employer. This was the historian Professor Pine, who needed a translator for his "History of Aristocratic Bratislava" and at the same time, someone who would look after his household. I would be paid a salary and also have a whole floor of the house to myself. As I said: M for miracle. When we'd agreed, Professor Pine asked me kindly: "But, my child, won't you miss all the bustle of life outside?" Too true. Especially not being able to ask passers-by *discreetly* whether they wanted to have their fat layers measured.

After all those digs, rented lodgings and leases, the year I spent in Professor Pine's house was The Year of Peace and Quiet. It's true that over hill, over dale, I theoretically had half the house that used to belong to my parents, but it had been occupied for years by my sister and her family – my worn-down sister with her dull-witted husband and sharp-witted children. Her dull-witted husband spent his whole life in front of the television, drinking

beer and cracking dried pumpkin seeds. He'd cracked so many of them that I almost expected my sister to give birth to pumpkins, like the ones you see at Halloween. (When I come to think of it, who knows whether they might not have been better off looking more like pumpkins than their father. But that's just by the way.)

Professor Pine was a widow and he lived a secluded life in his own world, in his own *aristocratic Bratislava*. The only exception to this seclusion was provided by the meetings of the Foresters. On the first Friday in the month a group of card-players would gather at his place and anyone who wanted to become a member had to meet a single, but essential, condition: their surname had to be the name of a tree. The club had been originally established by Professor Pine and its members included Alder, a lawyer, Birch, a police inspector and Rowan, a private detective. These were the founding members of the Foresters, but others came and went. Some ne'er to return.

They allowed me to be present at these Friday events because, as they said, my name and beauty gave me the right to (my name is Woods and my beauty is about as exceptional as my name). I was very fond of old men, although in the case of Otto Rowan "old man" wasn't a suitable description. At most, he could have been my father, and even then he'd have had to conceive me about the time of his first date. He was also the one I actually liked the least, on account of his silly habit of pointing at me with his finger and asking rhetorical questions. The Foresters were passionate card-players. They used to shout at each other and even went as far as to threaten each other physically, but of course it was just an exciting game for little big boys, who were not playing for money, but for *deeds*. Before each game everyone declared what they would demand if they won. For example: to clean out a gutter or arrange the necessary documents for the sale of a car (they often recalled how Rowan chose to see a post mortem and for months after no one was allowed to mention "rib of pork" in his presence.

One Friday Rowan announced that he would "play for our assistant Gerda for six months". Before the Professor had time to say anything, I blurted out - yes, I agreed and a feeling of relief washed over me. Professor Pine had only been keeping me on out of charity; we had completed the work ages ago and as the kind old man hadn't the heart to turn me out, he'd been giving me work to do that was of no use to anyone.

So when I became the object of a bet and ten minutes later the prize, my situation was once again solved for the time being and I didn't have to face measuring fat again for another half year. Professor Pine lamented, as if he had sold me to a South American brothel; he implored me not to take such an absolutely idiotic idea seriously and to stay with him, at which Otto Rowan gave him a frosty look and said: "You lost."

Professor Pine turned to lawyer Alder, but he only confirmed that Otto Rowan was acting in compliance with the Foresters' law of precedence, and because I agreed, he could see no reason for an appeal. Maybe Otto Rowan was really doing the professor a favour. Or maybe he just wanted his meals cooked for him every day.

"Perhaps it's all for the best," said Professor Pine, when I was saying goodbye to him. "Here you were completely cut off from the world. At Rowan's you'll at least be in contact with *real life*. But be very careful, my child, very careful."

So I packed up my things and moved into a three-room flat in the street behind the Old Marketplace. "From Pine to Rowan," I thought to myself. "Next time it will be Hawthorn."

Otto Rowan was a bit older, taller and heavier than the average man. He had a long, narrow nose and sleepy black eyes set in a triangular face. My father used to draw faces like that for me on kites. Rowan's voice was fascinating, exceptionally deep, with a calm intonation that would break all of a sudden, so that his voice dropped (if that is at all possible) an octave lower, staying there for a while before leaping back at breakneck (more exactly, break-throat) speed. It gave whatever he said a truly devilish intensity.

He always wore polo-necked sweaters and for a long time I used to think that so far as clothing was concerned, he had been left behind in the seventies, when he had been young, until I caught sight of the dramatic scar running from his left ear to his collar bone. When he noticed my astonishment, he laughed: "I was playing cowboys and Indians." I couldn't get anything sensible out of him, and, generally speaking, I couldn't get anything sensible out of him on any subject that concerned his personal life. Not that he didn't answer, if what he said could be considered an answer. For instance, on the subject of his background, he told me that on one side of the family he was an illegitimate descendant of the Jaipur maharaja Singh II and a French missionary and on the other the legitimate descendant of the Illésházys, the hereditary heads of the Liptov county. Well, if that's what he likes to think...

After the first few weeks with Rowan, I got the feeling that the main purpose of his work was to put off his clients. He sent a third of the cases straight to the police, another third to a lawyer and with those that remained his tactic was to listen to them carefully, put them a couple of questions and then explain to the client that if he insisted on discovering the truth, he would be wasting a lot of Money, he would come to learn a lot of unpleasant things about those close to him, which would mean a loss of most of his certainties in life, "it may even be," Rowan would point his finger at the confused client, "that your whole world will fall apart. Happiness does not always lie in the bare truth, sometimes there is more in a veiled lie." After informing his clients of the amount of the fee, most of them were willing to agree to give up the bare truth in favour of a veiled lie.

The only "more qualified" work to be done at Rowan's office was writing detailed reports about every case he *turned down*. Apart from that, if something interested him I was obliged to deal with it, because he had a really phenomenal memory and he claimed that if he wanted to find out about a single piece of information, he would have to work his way through dozens of pages that would unnecessarily clutter up his brain. In this way I learned the rules of horse riding, found out about the composition of the House of Lords in London and now it was Mongolian script. But as I always say, it was his money and outside an autumn wind was blowing, while inside it was warm.

I opened the letter I was to write a reply to. It said:

MAXIMA Private Television Company

Dear Mr. Otto Rowan,

I am writing to you on behalf of the MAXIMA Private Television Company with a proposal for cooperation on the preparation of a reality show – Keep it in the family! We are offering you the position of security consultant. This is an exceptional project for our television company and we should therefore be glad to eliminate in advance any security risks.
The programme producers will be contacting you in the next few days, in order that we might agree with you as soon as possible on the exact form of our cooperation.

Yours sincerely,
Ivanka Pradiarová
Programme Director TV MAXIMA

This was followed by e-mail addresses, telephone and Fax numbers, a bank account (I should have like a peep into that) and a signature in turquoise ink covering over a quarter of the page. This letter showed Rowan to be quite right: if the programme director signs herself familiarly Ivanka instead of Ivana , with a signature the size you find on a state award, and what's more in turquoise ink, MAXIMA as a whole probably shouldn't be taken seriously.
So I wrote a reply and I wasn't *over-polite*.

Translated by Heather Trebatická

Uršuľa Kovalyk

Travestieshow

(Leseprobe)

Foto: Archiv der Autorin

URŠUĽA KOVALYK (1969), Dichterin, Schriftstellerin, Publizistin, wechselte mehrere Berufe, lebt in Bratislava, studiert Sozialarbeit und ist in einer Nichtregierungsorganisation für Frauenrechte tätig. Sie widmet sich der Arbeit mit Obdachlosen. Kovalyk publizierte in diversen Zeitschriften, z. B. Kavárna A.F.F.A, Aspekt. Beim Literaturwettbewerb *Erzählung 2001* (Poviedka 2001) gewann sie den Preis *InZine*. Ihr Debüt, ein Erzählband feministischer Prosa mit unheimlicher literarischer Invention, hiess *Untreue Frauen mögen keine Eier* (Neverné ženy neznášajú vajíčka, 2002). Ihr zweiter Erzählband *Travestieshow* (Travesty šou, 2004) zeichnet sich durch Ironie ohne Mitleid, originelle Optik, Sinn für Details und unerwartete Wenden aus. Ihre Texte haben oft freche und unkonventionelle Züge. Feminismus ist für sie ein positives Wort und sie drückt diese klare Lebensauffassung in ihren Texten eindeutig aus. Die Bücher von Uršuľa Kovalyk gab die Fraueninteressenvereinigung Aspekt heraus. Hier erscheint in nächster Zeit auch ihr neuer Roman *Die Frau aus dem Secondhand* (Žena zo secondhandu).

Mikuláš Galanda

Das Läuten der Kirchenglocken zerschnitt die Luft und drang unaufhaltsam durch das geschlossene Fenster. Es trampelte und tanzte auf ihrem Trommelfell herum, bis sie schließlich gezwungen war, ihre Augen zu öffnen. Es war Mittag. Das Zimmer, in dem irrtümlich noch der Morgen herumirrte, war voller getrockneter Blumen, glitzernder Kleider und Photographien, an den Rahmen eines riesigen Spiegels gesteckt. Jelena raffte sich auf, endlich aufzustehen. Der gestrige Auftritt hatte sie erschöpft. Sie hatte das Gefühl, ihr seien zehn Jahre ihres Lebens genommen worden, und im Geiste überlegte sie, welche Maske sie sich heute aufs Gesicht schmieren soll, um sich wieder einigermaßen ansehnlich zu machen.

Jelena Horáčková stand nie vor zwölf Uhr mittags auf. Ihr Lebensstil verlängerte die Nächte und fraß den frühen Morgen weg. Mindestens dreißig Jahre lang hatte sie keinen Sonnenaufgang mehr gesehen, nicht mehr den frühen Gesang der Vögel gehört oder das Lärmen der Müllabfuhr registriert.

Sie schlüpfte in die Hausschuhe mit dern weißen Bommeln, die an ein Hasenschwänzchen erinnerte. Sie machte sich einen Kaffee. Gedankenverloren setzte sie sich in den großen, ein wenig kitschigen Sessel, süßte den Kaffee und starrte ins Leere. Jelena Horáčková war ein Star. Früher waren ihre Vorstellungen völlig ausverkauft, Photos mit ihrem Gesicht schmückten jede Zeitschrift, und Horden von Verehrern schickten ihr schmachtende Briefe. Jelenas ungewöhnliche Stimme war auf jeder Rundfunkstation zu hören, und ihre Schallplatten wurden kiloweise gekauft. Sie trat auf sämtlichen Bühnen und in Silvesterprogrammen auf. Sie war der Mittelpunkt des Musikbusiness, war sein Abgott, umschwirrt, verwöhnt und gehaßt zugleich und war davon überzeugt, daß das auf ewig so weitergehen, daß ihr Stern bis ins Unendliche steigen und steigen und sie schließlich unsterblich machen würde. Doch in den letzten zehn Jahren, diesen verfluchten Jahren, wie sie zu sagen pflegte, wurde ihr bewußt, daß sie immer seltener vom Fernsehen engagiert wurde, daß sie pro Jahr nur noch maximal einen Auftritt hatte und die Briefe ihrer schmachtenden Bewunderer allmählich irgendwie ausblieben. Anfangs dachte sie, das sei nur ein Übergangszustand, daß ihr die Glücksgöttin nicht mehr hold sei, ein Irrtum, dessen sich alle schon bald bewußt werden sollten, und als sie eines Morgens ungeschminkt vor dem Spiegel stand, in ihrem ausgeleierten Morgenrock und mit geschwollenen Augenlidern, mußte sie sich eingestehen, daß sie gealtert war.

Über das Alter hatte sie nie nachgedacht. Wie sollte sie auch. In diesem Business, wo Schönheit, Talent und Leistung feilgeboten wird, ist Alter kein Thema. Jahrelang hatte sie gehört, wie schön sie sehe, wie glänzend und phantastisch sie aussieht, so daß sie schon daran gewöhnt war und alle Lobhudeleien schon seit langem als etwas Selbstverständliches betrachtete. Doch wurden Lob und Angebote immer weniger und weniger, und als ihr Agent ihr eines Tages kundtat, daß er mit ihr Schluß machte, weil ein altes Fossil, das süßliche Songs von Liebe trällert, schon niemanden mehr interessiert, hatte sie das Gefühl, daß ihre Welt zusammenbricht. Es ging nicht nur ums Geld. Jelena wurde schlagartig bewußt, daß sie außer Singen und Tanzen nichts konnte. Sie begriff, daß sie auch nichts anderes mehr erlernen kann und ihr Bankkonto zunehmend schmaler würde. Den größten Schmerz aber bereitete ihr die Vorstellung, daß sie eines Tages allein und gealtert in der Ecke sitzen würde.

Jelena war sentimental. Sie trug die Vorstellung von der großen Liebe ihres Lebens mit sich, einer Liebe, der sie irgendwann einmal in ihrer Garderobe nach einem Auftritt begegnen würde, einer Liebe, die sie in den Arm nehmen und beschützen würde, sie träumte von irgendeinem schönen Prinzen in einem weißen Rolls-Royce, einem humorvollen, zärtlichen und selbstverständlich reichen Prinzen. Sie hing dieser Vorstellung in einer Weise nach und hielt an diesem Trugbild in der Weise fest, daß es ihr nicht im geringsten in den Sinn kam, daß ihr in der Garderobe keine Prinzen begegnen würden, sondern bloß Schmarotzer, die sie nur ausnutzten, für die sie lediglich die Beine breit machen sollte, die sich finanzieren und aushalten ließen, und wenn sie das Gefühl hatten, daß es ernst wird, einfach verschwanden. Jelena torkelte so von einer unglücklichen Liebe zur anderen, glaubte jedes Mal, das sei die wahre, die einzige und wirkliche Liebe. Jedoch, sie war es nie. Deshalb sitzt sie nun allein in dem

riesigen kitschigen Sessel, vor ihr ein süßstoffgezuckerter Kaffee, damit sie nicht zunahm, und starrte in die Leere. Um sie herum Unordnung – wie in ihrem Leben. Da sie nie eine Kämpferin gewesen war, hatte sie sich in die Einsamkeit zurückgezogen, hatte tagelang durchgeweint und nur hin und wieder auf privaten Veranstaltungen gesungen, die irgend ein alternder sentimentaler Pseudounternehmer veranstalten ließ. Man hat sie zwar zu einer Schönheitsoperation und einem völligen Imagewechsel überreden wollen, doch bei der Vorstellung, daß der Chirurg mit dem Skalpell in ihren Körper eindringt, wurde ihr übel. Letztlich war ihr auch klar, daß, wenn der Chirurg etwas verpfuschen würde, sie danach noch schlimmer aussehen würde, womöglich mit den Augenlidern zucken, starre Lippen haben und zu guter Letzt das ganze Gesicht aus den Fugen gehen würde. Ein Leben ohne Ruhm hatte indes auch seine guten Seiten. Sie mußte nicht ständig irgendwohin hasten, mußte sich nicht zurechtschminken und blieb, wenn sie den Müll runterbrachte, endlich von Journalisten verschont und nur manchmal, aber wirklich nur manchmal erkannte sie irgendein früherer Fan auf der Straße. Sie konnte lose, geschmacklose Hänger tragen, was sie mehr und mehr auch tat. Sie mußte ihre Beine nicht mehr in Stöckelschuhe zwängen, konnte Korsetts und einengende Hosen wegschmeißen, und, das war das Wichtigste, keine Diäten mehr machen. Und so erhob sie sich jetzt aus dem Sessel und ging in die Küche, um sich ein reichhaltiges Frühstück zuzubereiten: Speck und Eier, Brot und Marmelade, süßen Kakao und zum Schluß noch ein Eis. Wegen eines solchen Frühstücks hätte sie sich zu Zeiten ihres Ruhmes mindestens einen Monat lang Vorwürfe gemacht und sich einen weiteren Monat im Fitneßzentrum abgequält. Jelena schlang alles gierig in sich hinein und schaute dabei die Post durch, die noch seit letzter Woche auf dem Tisch lag. Sie schmatzte. Die Rechungen für Gas und Elektrizität raubten ihr für einen Moment den Appetit, aber dann pfiff sie darauf und nahm noch eine Portion Eiscreme.

Unter den Briefschaften fand sich kein einziges Angebot, kein einziger Kontaktaufnahmeversuch, der der Rede wert gewesen wäre. Nur Bankauszüge, Reklamen und ein weißer Briefumschlag. Sie las die Adresse des Absenders, die ihr nichts sagte, und so dachte sie, es würde wohl irgendein früherer Fan sein, sicher irgendso ein Schwachsinniger, der nicht mitgekriegt hat, daß ihr Stern längst endgültig erloschen war. Sie öffnete den Brief, und ihre fettigen Finger hinterließen darauf einen unschönen Fleck. Der Brief enthielt eine Einladung auf rosé Papier und in goldener Schrift: eine Einladung zum 40-Jahr-Abiturstreffen. Schon lange war sie von niemandem mehr eingeladen worden. Sie las die goldenen Buchstaben noch einmal und stellte sich in Gedanken ihr ehemaliges Gymnasium vor, ihre Klasse und den Hausmeister, der immer nur alle beschimpft hatte. Ihre Klassenkameraden und Klassenkameradinnen erschienen vor ihren Augen wie ein mattes Trugbild, wie das Milchglas einer Tür. Sie versuchte, sich ihre Gesichter, Namen und Eigenschaften vorzustellen. Sie konnte sich an niemanden mehr erinnern. Das Datum der Einladung gab zu wissen, daß das Treffen heute um sechs Uhr im Löwen stattfinden würdte, in einem ein wenig heruntergekommenen Restaurant, wo billiger Wein und falscher Lungenbraten serviert wird. Sie war unschlüssig. Sie wußte nicht, ob sie den Mut haben sollte, ihrer Jugend zu begegnen, ob sie Lust hat, um vierzig Jahre zurückzukehren und noch einmal Erinnerungen, die ihr heute schön, aber schmerzlich vorkamen, hochkommen zu lassen. Eine Weile lang ging sie in der Wohnung auf und ab und trat gedankenverloren die auf dem Boden herumliegenden Strumpfhosen zur Seite. Sie erwog im Geiste das Für und Gegen, begann es sich sogar aufzuschreiben, wie es ihr ihr Psychologe geraten hatte. In der Rubrik „Gegen“ notierte sie Argumente, die vor allem ihr Aussehen, ihre finanzielle Lage und ihren schmerzlichen Ruhmesverlust betrafen. Die Rubrik „Für“ enthielt Argumente wie Neugier, Einsamkeit und Langeweile, neue gesellschaftliche Kontakte und diesen einen, den lang ersehnten Prinzen. Die Uhr zeigte dreiviertel drei, als sie sich entschied. Sie räumte den Teller, auf dem bereits Fliegen spazierten, vom Tisch. Sie begann sich vorzubereiten.

Das allerdings beherrschte Jelena perfekt. Zu Zeiten ihres größten Ruhmes pflegte es bis zu vier Stunden zu dauern. Sie ließ die Wanne einlaufen, gab einige duftende Kräuter hinein und schmierte sich das Gesicht mit einer Gesichtsmaske ein: grün wie schimmeliger Spinat! Sie tauchte ins Wasser ein. Das Wasser beruhigte sie, ließ ihren dicken Bauch schweben, machte ihn leichter. Sie seufzte voll Wonne und begann eines ihrer alten abgedroschenen Liebeslieder zu singen. Wovon sonst sollte sie singen? Sie sang immer von Liebe. Oder über Trennung und Auseinandergehen. Sie sang und sang, und zwischen dem Tropfen des Wasserhahns und ihrem Gesang entwickelte sich ein gewisser Rhythmus. Ihre Stimmung veränderte sich total, sie hatte das Gefühl, sich richtig entschieden zu haben, ja sich zu freuen. In ihrer Erinnerung begannen schemenhaft Gesichter aufzutauchen, Bruchstücke von Namen ihrer Klassenkameraden und -kameradinnen, an die sie sich jahrelang nicht mehr erinnert hatte. „Zdeno“ kam ihr plötzlich von den Lippen. Na klar, Zdeno, der Klassenkamerad, der von der Klassenlehrerin dabei erwischt wurde, wie er versucht hatte, eine Klassenkameradin in der Garderobe während der Turnstunde zu verführen. Die Erinnerung an Zdeno hob ihre Stimmung zunehmend.

(...)

Sie waren schon alle da. In langweiligen grauen Anzügen, die Frauen in unförmigen Kleidern von undefinierbarer Farbe. Sie sahen aus wie eine graue Masse kahlköpfiger, gealterter, dickbäuchiger, nach billigem Parfüm riechender Klassenkameraden und Klassenkameradinnen. Jelena! rief irgendein alter Opa und lief ihr entgegen. Wir haben nicht geglaubt, daß du kommst, schrie eine Frau mit frischer Dauerwelle. Jelena erinnerte sich schwach, daß sie damals eine Zahnspange getragen hat. Aber selbstverständlich, sagte sie affektiert, ein so seltenes Ereignis lasse ich mir doch nicht entgehen! Der alte Opa küßte sie sabbernd. Erinnerst du dich an mich? schrie er, und sein Gesicht strahlte vor Begeisterung. Jelena stand da und überlegte, wer das sein könnte, aber sein Gesicht erschien ihr wie ein leerer Spiegel. Ohne Vergangenheit. Ivan, ich bin Ivan ... ič, ich habe ganz vorne gleich neben der Tür gesessen. Jelena tat so, als könne sie sich erinnern, als wisse sie, wer er sei und wo er gesessen hatte, und lächelte freundlich. Ach ja, Ivan, klar ... fügte sie anstandshalber hinzu und setzte sich an den Tisch.

Alle musterten sie unauffällig. Zwei Frauen, deren Namen und Gesichter Jelena nichts sagten, flüsterten sich hämisch etwas zu.

Unangenehm. Sie fühlte sich wie auf Kohlen, aber die Stille und diese Blicke nagelten sie an ihrem Stuhl fest. Ivan rettete die Situation. Zum Wohl, ihr Lieben, er hob sein Glas: Auf unser Treffen nach so vielen Jahren! Der Geruch billigen Wermuts stieg ihr in die Nase. Ivan brachte einen Trinkspruch aus, irgendetwas in der Art, daß man sich noch oftmals bei guter Gesundheit und in großer Zahl wiedersehen möge, sie sich alle gut unterhalten mögen, und wie froh er sei, alle wiederzusehen, und daß er einen besonderen Gast zu begrüßen hatte, einen Star und populäre Sängerin, die trotz ihrer großen Inanspruchnahme zum Treffen gekommen sei: die berühmte Jelena Horáčková. Irgendwer begann spöttisch zu lachen. Alle leerten ihr Glas. Man begann, Essen und Wein zu servieren. Jelena bereute bereits, gekommen zu sein. Der dicke Mann, der ihr gegenüber saß, betrachtete sie mit forschenden Blicken. Sie hatte das Gefühl, daß er ihre Brüste mit den Augen verschlingen wollte, ihr Gesicht abtastete, urteilt eund verglicht, bis ihr der Schweiß auf die Stirn trat. Sie wischte sich die Stirn. Auf der Serviette blieb ein brauner Make-upstreifen zurück. Ich kann mich nicht an deinen Namen erinnern, ließ sie verlauten, und eine Suppennudel fiel ihr von den Lippen. Der Dicke bewegte sich unruhig auf seinem Stuhl hin und her und

kläffte: „Zdeno“. Jelena blickte ihm genauer in die Augen und in der Tat, sie begann, Zdenos Blick wiederzuerkennen, diesen provokativen Blick voller Lachen. Zdeno! lächelte sie, aber nun schon nicht mehr bloß anstandshalber. Ich hätte dich beinahe nicht erkannt! Das ist wegen des Bauches, bemerkte er, ab dreißig habe ich ständig zugenommen und kriege den Bauch seitdem nicht mehr weg. Er nahm ein Stück seines Bauchspecks zwischen die Finger und schwabbelte unappetitlich damit hin und her. Jelena verspürte Ekel, löffelte aber ihre Suppe auf. Sie aß auch den nächsten Gang, so daß sie fürs Dessert keinen Platz mehr hatte. Ich kann nicht mehr, sagte sie, als ihr die Klassenkameradinnen Selbstgebackenes anboten. Eine Sängerin muß auf ihre Linie achten, oder? stichelte eine von ihnen, worauf sich Jelena das größte Stück vom Teller nahm und wütend in den Mund schob. Dumme Kuh, dachte sie, während sie daran kaute. Sie überlegte, wer diese Frau in dem fürchterlichen Blümchenkleid sein könnte. Sie schaute ihr ins Gesicht und studierte jeden Zentimeter ihres Gesichtsausdrucks. Erst bei dem Muttermal gleich neben dem Ohr kam es ihr in den Sinn: Olina! Ihre beste Schulfreundin! Sie hatten sich immer einen Spaß daraus gemacht, daß sie am Ohr einen Druckknopf hatte. Olina! rief sie über den Tisch. Olina begann zu lachen: Na endlich hast du geschaltet!

Jelena setzte sich zu ihr. Olina, zum Teufel, wie sehen wir aus, he? Gut, daß du noch diesen Druckknopf am Ohr hast! Hätte dich sonst nicht wiedererkannt. Olina umarmte sie, und sie roch wieder diesen vertrauten Duft, den sie immer wahrgenommen hatte, damals, wenn sie sich nach dem Turnunterricht umgezogen haben, diesen Geruch einer leicht verschwitzten Haut. Wie Nußschokolade, ging es Jelena durch den Kopf.

Was ist nur los mit dir, Mädchen, begann Olina, zu unseren Treffen bist du nie gekommen, ich dachte schon, ein großer Star, pfeift auf den Plebs, aber in den letzten Jahren bist du dann von der Mattscheibe verschwunden. Oli, das ist inzwischen nichts mehr für mich, du weißt, wie das im Showbusiness läuft, heute hoch oben, morgen tief unten, und Jelena zeigte mit dem Daumen auf den Boden.

Die Unterhaltung wurde auf einmal lebhaft. Fotos von Kindern und Enkeln wurden hervorgeholt, Fotos von Häusern und Ferien, von Hunden und Katzen, von Landhäusern, teuren Ledersesseln und wertvollen Kunstsammlungen. Jelena hörte sich Geschichten an und mußte feststellen, daß es ihr eigentlich gar nicht so schlecht ging. Vor allem aber war sie eigentlich nie allein gewesen. Die Fotos von ihren Auftritten und mit berühmten Leuten ließ sie aber lieber in der Handtasche stecken. Die Fragen nach Kindern und Ehemann waren ihr peinlich, und dann auch noch zu erklären, daß alle ihre „Prinzen“ eigentlich Schmarotzer waren, dazu hatte sie erst recht keine Lust. Sie wollte auch nicht von ihren langen, einsamen, durchzechten Nächten erzählen. Auch nicht über die Einsamkeit in den Garderoben und das trügerische Glücksgefühl beim letzten Applaus nach dem Auftritt. Sie hörte zu. Hörte zu bis Mitternacht, als die Klassenkameraden und- kameradinnen zu verschwinden begannen. Nur Zdeno wollte noch weiterziehen. Jelena, sei nicht blöd, was, wenn wir demnächst den Löffel abgeben müssen? scherzte er. Jelena trank ihren Wein aus, der ihr inzwischen schon nicht mehr so scheußlich vorkam, und willigte ein.

Das Etablissement, in das Zdeno sie schleppte, war voller bizarr gekleideter Damen mit langen Beinen in silbernen Strumpfhosen und glitzernden Höschen. Sie zahlten ihren Eintritt. Die männlichen Stimmen, mit denen die Frauen sprachen, verwirrten sie. Auf der schwach erleuchteten Bühne verkündete der Conférencier die Fortsetzung des Wettbewerbs. Sie setzten sich an einen kleinen Tisch. Die Tischlampe gab blaues Licht. Wo sind wir, Zdenko, wollte Jelena wissen. Wirst schon sehen, tat er geheimnisvoll, es wird bestimmt das reinste Vergnügen, auch wenn die Getränke ein bißchen teuer sind.

Und jetzt, werte Damen und Herren, kündige ich einen Wettbewerb um die beste Jelena Horáčková an, und bitte die Jury, ihre Plätze einzunehmen, vermeldete der Conférencier. Die Jury nahm ihre Plätze ein. Fanfaren begannen zu kreischen, und die funkelnden Diskokugeln an der Decke versprühten ihr silbernes Geglitzer über das Publikum. Der Kellner kam und fragte, was sie trinken möchten. Jelena bestellte Wein und Mineralwasser. Sie wollte sich nicht betrinken. Die Bühne betraten sechs glitzernde Jelena Horáčkovás. Alle in wunderschönen Kleidern, haargenau wie die, die sie im Kleiderschrank hatte. Mit Armbändern, Perlen im Haar und einem perfekten Make-up wackelten sie aufreizend mit ihren Popos. Jelena fiel der Kiefer runter. Sie dachte, sie träumt. Das ist doch nicht möglich, stammelte sie. Aus dem Playback ertönte ihre Stimme. Die erste Jelena Horráčková im roten Kleid, genau dem, in das sie nicht mehr reinpaßte, nahm das Mikrophon in die Hand und begann zu singen. Das Lied „Deine ach so blauen Augen“, den Hit der Saison des Jahres 1965, ergoß sich wie klebriger Honig in den Saal. Die Sängerin in dem roten Kleid ahmte sie perfekt nach, bewegte sich genau wie sie, tanzte wie sie, spitzte die Lippen wie sie und munterte mit den Armen die Zuschauer auf zu klatschen. Das reinste Vergnügen. Zdeno schrie begeistert, und sein Schreien löste den ersten stürmischen Applaus aus. Wo sind wir, Zdeno, versuchte Jelena die Musik zu überschreien. Liebe Jelena, willkommen in der Travestieshow, schrie er ihr ins Ohr.

Jelena saß da und trank ihren Wein. Auf der Bühne wechselte eine Horáčková die andere ab, alle sahen aus wie sie vor dreißig Jahren, sangen Hits wie „Leidenschaftlicher Herbst“ oder „Ich liebe dich immer noch“. Sie wanden sich und ahmten sie aufs perfekteste nach, kurz: Sie sah sich selbst. Bisweilen kam ihr das ganze lächerlich vor. Dann wieder war ihr zum Heulen zumute. Ich wußte, daß ich dich überraschen werde, sagte Zdeno, als er ihren sonderbaren Gesichtsausdruck bemerkte. Sie seufzte. Du mußt zugeben, daß ich damals phantastisch war, sagte die echte Horáčková nach einer Weile. Ein wenig beneidete sie die da auf der Bühne. Die Zuschauer unterhielten sich bestens und applaudierten, einige ältere Semester sangen mit den falschen Jelenas mit. Die echte Jelena beneidete bei den anderen Jelenas ihre Anspannung und Konzentration, die spürbare Erfolgsatmosphäre, die Reflektoren und die Kleider, in denen sie so schön schlank aussahen. Sie hatte das Gefühl, eine Theateraufführung ihrer Jugend zu erleben, die sie niemals hatte sehen können, da sie ja selbst auf der Bühne stand. Fernsehen – das war nicht das! Und wenn diese Horáčková da in ihrem schwarzen Lieblingskleid mit dem tiefen Dekolleté sang, in dem zwei wundervoll pralle Brüste prangten, wurde es der Horáčková an ihrem Tisch hier unten traurig zumute. Das Lied „Niemals wirst du mein“ brachte sie dazu, sich an einen dieser Prinzen und Schmarotzer zu erinnern, den sie damals wohl tatsächlich geliebt hat.

Sie begann zu schluchzen. Zdeno hatte es bereits geahnt. Er sprang vom Stuhl auf und lief zum Conférencier und flüsterte ihm etwas zu. Die Horáčková in Schwarz sang ihr Lied zuende und der Conférencier in seinem schimmernden blauen Anzug begann sich lauthals zu Wort zu melden: Verehrte Zuschauer, wir haben heute die Ehre, den Star und die Sängerin Jelena Horáčková persönlich unter uns zu haben. Und wieder ertönten Fanfaren. Jelena geriet in Verlegenheit. Sie blickte Zdeno finster an und war bemüht, sich unauffällig zu geben. Doch die Zuschauer schauten sich suchend um, und Zdeno wies mit dem Fingern auf sie. Ein Lichtstrahl stach ihr direkt in die Augen. Geh hin, geh, schubste sie Zdeno nervös an der Schulter. Jetzt hast du aber übertrieben, zischte sie zwischen den Zähnen. Sie stand auf und schritt durch den schmalen Gang zwischen den Stühlen, dachte noch, was für ein unpassendes Kleid sie doch anhat, daß sie nicht ordentlich geschminkt ist, und ob sie das eigentlich alles nötig hat.

Übersetzt von Gerlinde Tesche

Márius Kopcsay

ZUHAUSE

(Leseprobe)

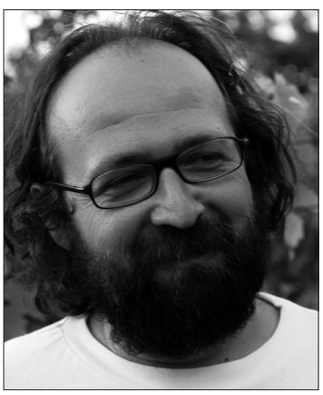


Foto: Archiv des Autors

MÁRIUS KOPCSAY (1968), Schriftsteller, Publizist. Er arbeitete im Wochenblatt für kommunale Politik Obecné noviny (1992 – 1994), war slowakischer Mitarbeiter des tschechischen Tageblattes ZN-Zeitung (1994 – 1998) und in den Jahren 1997 – 2004 war er als Redakteur für Innenpolitik und Kommentator im meistgelesenen Tageblatt Nový čas tätig. Zur Zeit ist er Chefredakteur der kulturgesellschaftlichen Zeitschrift MOSTY. Im Wettbewerb ERZÄHLUNG 1996 wurde er mit einer Prämie ausgezeichnet. Seine Erzählungen zählten zu den besten auch in demselben Wettbewerb in den Jahren 1997 und 2000. 1998 ist sein Erzählband *Der kritische Tag* (Kritický deň) erschienen, für den Kopcsay den Ivan-Krasko-Preis für das beste Debut des Jahres erhielt. Im Jahr 2004 folgte der zweite Erzählungsband Verlorene Jahre (Stratené roky). Hier stellte er sich als Autor mit famosem Stil und großem Sinn für Humor vor. In neun Geschichten werden neun Zeitabschnitte des Lebens des Hauptheldens beschrieben – von den ersten Lieben in der Schule und Tanzstunden, bis zu Streitigkeiten in der Ehe und unsinnigen Dienstreisen. 2005 ist sein Roman *Zuhause* (Domov) erschienen. Heute ist für uns die Welt ohne Handys und Supermarkets kaum vorstellbar. Aber gerade in einer solchen Welt spielt der Roman ab, in den vergessenenen neunziger Jahren des 20. Jahrhunderts. Die Geschichte des Helden, der nicht fähig ist, seine Schulden zu zahlen, fängt mit dem Umzug in eine neue Wohnung an. Und zugleich gerät er immer in neue, meist nur schlimmere und deprimierende, Lebenssituationen... Zur Zeit arbeitet Kopcsay am dritten Erzählband, der unter dem Titel *Überflüssiges Leben* (Zbytočný život) bald erscheint en wird.

Mucha ist auf jeden Fall dort, wo er vor zwei Jahren schon einmal war, aber zumindest betrachtet ihn das gehässige und gehasste Kollektiv als einen von ihnen, davon zeugt ein Stück Papier, das ihm Gulášik gerade in die Hände drückt, es ist ein Rundschreiben der Gremiálka[1], eigentlich eine Beilage zum Rundschreiben der Gremiálka, auf dem steht:

„Sehr geehrter Herr Mucha, als einen unverbesserlichen Mitarbeiter unserer Firma laden wir sie ein zur Sitzung am 11. November, genau um 11.11 Uhr in Furmanský dvor, wo nach dem offiziellen Programm Gänsebraten und Feuerflecken serviert werden, verpflichtend ist auch die Konsumation der alkoholischen Getränke in angemessenen Dosen und in unangemessenen Mengen, der Transport zu und von der Veranstaltung ist gesichert, die Nichtanwesenheit wird bestraft."

„Magst du mit mir in der Mensa zu Mittag essen? Heute gibt es Risotto..." fragt Kollege Vojto Mucha.

Der Herbst wälzte sich in die zweite Hälfte, in die Winterhälfte, fast in die vorweihnachtliche Phase, das Land ist in nebelige und düstere Schattierungen eingehüllt, aufgerissene Straßen zwischen niedrigen Zinshäusern glänzen durch gähnende Leere, neue und hässliche Lampen sind bisher in die Dunkelheit eingehüllt, man setzte sie nicht in Betrieb, aus einer der Lampen hängen funkelnde Kabeln, Mucha hält Janko an der Hand, damit er sie nicht berühren kann. Das ist Strom, nein, nein! Auch Paťkos[2] und Nikolkas[3] hängen nicht mehr an Klettergerüsten, in den Fenstern ist Licht, in den Küchen wird abendgegessen und in den Wohnzimmern leuchten Fernsehbildschirme, es beginnt eine Ära der Telenovellas, Dallas werden sie erst nach Mitternacht wie einen wertvollen Kunstfilm für den anspruchvollen Zuschauer ausstrahlen.

Muchas Steißbein tut zwar nicht mehr weh, aber er spielt mit Janko nicht mehr Nachlaufen, es ist kalt und dunkel geworden, sie gehen in eine Konditorei, die traditionell sozialistisch eingerichtet ist, das heißt, mit eckigen, mit rotem Kunstleder überzogenen Stühlen; auf dem Tresen, neben Cremeschnitten und Laskonkas[4], steht ein Gefäß, in dem Orangensaft blubbert. Orangensaft und ein schwarzer Kaffee, ja, das passiert manchmal, Janko hat auf dem Teller seinen heiß geliebten Punsch vor sich, Mucha liebt alle Süßigkeiten, er sollte nicht, aber wenn er schon sündigt, bestellt er sich einen ordentlichen Brandteigkrapfen. Als sie ins Freie treten, spielen sie mit Janko ein neues Spiel - „Erschrecken" – sie gehen hinter das Haus, wo es dunkel ist, weil hier die Stadt zu Ende ist und weiter nur Weinberge folgen und dann nur Wälder und Hügeln. Mucha zieht Janko an der Hand, als ob er ihn in den dunklen Wald führen möchte und Janko erschrickt wie immer authentisch, er beginnt zu schreien und gleichzeitig auch lachen, das Erschrecken kann von Neuem beginnen. Dann gehen sie zu der Lieblingsstelle ihres Spaziergangs, ein Geisterhaus, ein Plattenbau, der der Zeit nicht standhielt und bis in die Höhe des 13. Stockwerks ragt, nur eine Konstruktion, ausgefüllt mit leerer Dunkelheit. Zum Schluss gehen sie hinter die Dörfer, sie haben Zeit, weil die Mama für zwei Stunden beschäftigt ist und danach mit ihren Kolleginnen aus dem Deutschkurs beim Tee tratschen wird. Wie immer, wenn Mucha sich zwischen den Einfamilienhäusern wieder findet, überfällt ihn eine Art Nostalgie und Trauer, dass er auch nicht so lebt oder zumindest nicht dort, wo er möchte und er kann nichts dafür tun, seine Sehnsüchte so durchzusetzen, wie es seiner Gattin gelungen ist. In die Auslage der Geschäfte begannen sich Weihnachtsdekorationen einzuschleichen, färbige, glänzende Kugeln und Silberketten. Sie betreten ein Spielzeuggeschäft und Mucha kauft Janko ein kleines Auto – einen glänzenden Zisternenwagen, scheinbar einen Milchwagen – dafür, dass er so heldenhaft den Kindergarten erträgt, nicht nur, dass er nicht mehr weint, er freut sich sogar auf seine Freunde. Janko verkündet stolz der Mama, dass er ein Zisternenauto bekam. Die Kolleginnen aus dem Deutschkurs fragen, wie sich das Projekt entwickelt und ob er ein Journalist werden wird und

Mucha antwortet, dass er an seinem alten Arbeitsplatz bleiben wird, er ist konservativ, ungern wechselt er die Arbeitsstelle, Sie wissen, ich habe dort eine solide Stellung, wir sind ein gutes Kollektiv, sie haben mich auf einen Gänsebraten eingeladen. Als Muchas ihr Haus betreten, treffen sie im Stiegenhaus die Nachbarin Pišťanková.

„Sie haben mir versprochen, dass sie sich einen Teppich kaufen werden“, überfällt sie sie diesmal weniger diplomatisch.

„Ich habe gerade davon gesprochen, dass...“ sagt Mucha, aber Pišťanková lässt ihn nicht den Gedanken zu Ende führen, er wäre sowieso nicht sehr brillant.

„Das ist mir egal, was sie gesagt haben, aber von Ihnen hört man ununterbrochen ein Pumpern und Stampfen, meine Zimmerdecke vibriert und ich habe Kopfweh davon“, fährt die Nachbarin fort, Mucha und seine Gattin sind nicht fähig sich zu wehren, völlig verdutzt fahren sie hoch mit dem Lift, dann dreht Mucha den Angriff gegen seine Frau: „Siehst du, im Plattenbau konnten wir die ganzen Nächte Karten spielen, Musik hören und hier – angeblich sind es Ziegelwände...“

„Im Plattenbau wohnten unter uns Mongolen“, wehrt sich die Gattin.

„Vielleicht haben sie Slowakisch nicht verstanden, aber mit Sicherheit waren sie nicht taub“, brüllt Mucha. Nach dem wiederholten Angriff der Nachbarin auf ihr Privatleben geht Mucha in seiner Wohnung nur auf den Zehenspitzen herum, im Fernsehen schaut er lieber nur ein Bild, das in ein grobkörniges wildes Durcheinander einkodiert ist und Janko, obwohl er ein ziemlich ruhiges Kind ist, auf jedem Schritt ermahnt – hör auf zu spielen, dein Zisternenauto wird schon schlafen gehen, laufe lieber nicht mehr weg, schreie nicht, Janko, sag lieber nichts mehr, zeichne etwas für mich.

Mucha macht einen kräftigen Schluck, schlürft den gut gekühlten Vermut aus dem Kühlschrank (vor allem leise) und geht zum Psychologen Doktor Urban, er wird mit ihm das Erlebnis mit dem Steißbein analysieren, das offensichtlich etwas symbolisiert, genauso wie der Böses ahnende Traum mit dem Turm. Biegt er viel zu oft sein Rückgrat? Soll ihm ein Schwanz wachsen, wie dem Teufel für alles Schlechte, was er getan hatte? Haben sich in seinem Körper und in seiner Seele giftige Stoffe angehäuft, die in der Form des Geschwürs ausgeschieden werden? Sollte ihm der Ort des Geschehens andeuten, nicht zu sitzen, nicht ewig zu sitzen, damit er nicht zu bequem wird? Fehlt ihm der Sex? Oder hat er sich nur einfach verkühlt?

Mucha schreitet durch die dunkle Gasse, er hat das Gefühl, entzwei zu sein, als ob ihm nur der Teil vom Steißbein aufwärts geblieben wäre und er schwebt, wandert ganz ruhig ohne der Verbindung zur Erde zum Psychologen, so wird er nicht mehr die Nachbarin stören, er wird nicht mehr stampfen über ihrem neurotischen Kopf. Mucha geht an einer dunklen Kirche vorbei und durch seinen Kopf schießt ein Gedanke für die Erbarmung seiner Seele, er bleibt beim Schaukasten des Pfarramtes stehen und studiert, wann der Parteienverkehr ist?, letztendlich geht er nicht hinein, andere tun es für ihn.

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Man muss allerdings sagen, dass ein solches Wetter in Mucha keine Depressionen verursachte, im Gegenteil, in seiner Jugend hatte er es für wunderschön gehalten, mystisch und poetisch, freudig hatte er die Ankunft der dunklen und kurzen Tage erwartet, beinah das ganze Jahr.

Weil gerade das Wochenende beginnt, schlägt Mucha seiner Familie vor, zur Oma zu fahren, um zu entspannen. Die Flucht aufs Land bewährte sich schon beim Wohnortswechsel, vielleicht wird es auch beim Arbeitsplatzwechsel so sein. Mucha wird an der guten Dorfluft, in seinem Lieblingsnebelwetter spazieren gehen. Sie kommen nach Hause mit roten Wangen vom Frost, sie werden Glühwein trinken, die Oma wird froh sein, dass sie mit Janko zusammen sein kann, zumindest so stellt es sich Mucha vor. Selbstverständlich werden sie den oben erwähnten Dialog ein paar Mal durchgehen, der Mucha zu der unten erwähnten Entscheidung führen sollte.

Das Programm verläuft tatsächlich so, wie Mucha es sich vorgenommen hatte, nur er ahnt noch nicht, wie der Abend beginnen wird, in Hochslowakisch genau gesagt, etwas tritt ein, in seinem Leben wird es zu einer unerwarteten Wendung kommen. Sie treffen bei der Oma ein, legen ihre Sachen ab, sie essen, dann gehen sie spazieren, die Oma packt ihnen in die Zeitung einen Strauß gelber Chrysanthemen ein, die sie den Großeltern aufs Grab bringen sollen – sie waren hier nicht einmal zu Allerseelen. Auf dem Friedhof brennen auch jetzt Kerzen und Laternen, ihr flackerndes, düstergelbes Licht widerspiegelt sich in den Kronen der riesigen Linden, auf den Ästen gibt es immer noch Blätter, wenn auch die meisten auf den Wegen liegen, und Janko raschelt darin vergnügt mit seinen kleinen Füßchen.

„Leise, wir sind auf dem Friedhof“, sagt Mucha.

„Auf dem Friedhof? Was ist das?“ fragt Janko.

„Gräber. Gräber“, antwortet Mucha.

„Gräber, Gräber... Und was ist drinnen?“ fragt Janko wieder.

„Hier liegen Menschen, die gestorben sind. Sie waren schon alt und leben nicht mehr“, erklärt Mucha. „Auch meine Oma und mein Opa.“

„Meine Oma und mein Opa?“ fragt Janko.

„Aber nein, deine Oma ist zu Hause und kocht für uns das Abendessen“, sagt Mucha. „Ich hatte auch eine Oma, das war die Mama von deiner Oma.“

So ist es, sie erlebte ihren Urenkel nicht, Janko würde ihr sicher gefallen, denkt er in einer melancholischen Laune, die ihn üblicherweise auf dem Friedhof überfällt, aber nur für einen Moment, für eine Sekunde oder zwei. Andererseits dachte Oma immer, dass aus Mucha ein erfolgreicher Mensch werden würde, schon als ein Kleinkind konnte er schreiben und lesen, alle Nachbarinnen und Verkäuferinnen bewunderten ihn.

„Du wirst direkt in die dritte Klasse kommen oder in die vierte“, sagten sie, während sie ihre verrunzelten Gesichter mit schiefem Lächeln über ihn geneigt hatten, aber damals hatte er sie nicht ganz verstanden. Schließlich wurde er ganz normal in die erste Klasse eingeschult und besuchte vorher noch einen Kindergarten, wo man ihm die Hosen auszog und wo seine besonderen Fähigkeiten keinen interessierten und keineswegs beim Aufbau seiner Autorität geholfen hatten. Eher im Gegenteil. Er kannte die Buchstaben früher als andere Kinder, heute ernährt er sich von ihnen – aber genauso wenig erfolgreich. Und vielleicht wird er erfolgreicher sein, wenn er Staskos Angebot annimmt. Mucha trägt verwelkte Blumensträuße vom Grab in einen großen Eisencontainer, dann geht er Wasser holen für die Vase. Er dreht den nassen, kalten Wasserhahn auf, eisige Wassertropfen spritzen rund herum, Janko steckt seine kleine Hand unter den Strahl, Muchas Frau streckt ihm die Anorakärmel hoch, damit sie nicht nass werden.

Am Ende der Lindenallee sieht man ein Tor, hinter dem der Friedhof aus ist, von dort führt eine breite Asphaltstrasse, die sie erst unlängst gebaut hatten, am Ende der sozialistischen Ära und scheinbar ein bisschen umsonst, weil dort sehr wenige Autos

fahren. Die orangefarbenen Lampen, die die Straße umsäumen, als ob sie nur so, ohne einen besonderen Zweck leuchten würden, mir nichts, dir nichts, bilden in der Dunkelheit und Nebel eine Art Heiligenschein, der heutzutage über jeder Stadt und über jedem Dorf schwebt. Hinter der Straße befinden sich ein Feld und ein Wald, eine dunkle, gewellte Ebene, die in der Ferne eine Eisenbahnstrecke durchschneidet. Von dort, vor allem beim Niederdruck, hört man das Geräusch der fahrenden Züge. Nicht so intensiv, wie in der Binderstrasse, sondern nur ein entferntes Rascheln, wie ein Zischen einer schlingenden, leuchtenden Schlange. An diesem besonderen Ort weht zu Mucha ein Hauch des unguten Gefühls, aber er widmet ihm keine Aufmerksamkeit. Sie verlassen den Friedhof, trinken beim Freund Fero, der allein lebt, weil ihn seine Frau verließ, einen Kaffee. Sie trinken je zwei Gläser vom Karpaten-Brandy und gehen dann heim. In dem Moment, als sich alle, das heißt auch Mucha, seine Gattin und Janko, zusammen im Schlafzimmer zufrieden niederlegen und als sie das Licht abdrehen, gerade dann verlässt der Zug von Muchas Schicksal seine Schienen und beginnt unbeherrschbar durch den ahnungslosen Raum der Verderbnis zu rasen.

Mucha wälzt sich genüsslich von Seite zur Seite im großen quietschenden Ehebett, in dem er seine Kindheit verbrachte, in dem er von einer älteren Nachbarin Ingrid träumte und später wahrscheinlich auch von anderen Mädchen und Frauen, in dem er malte und in die Hefte schrieb. Mucha, wie immer schlaftrunken, bereit alle Sorgen, Troubles, Schwierigkeiten zu verschlafen, beginnt in dem weichen Daunenbettzeug bald einzuschlafen. Plötzlich wird er in seinem Einschlafprozess unterbrochen, was er überhaupt nicht versteht. Er wacht auf, obwohl er gerade bereit zum Einschlafen war – wobei das Aufwachen durch ein wildes, rhythmisches Pulsieren in seinem Körper begleitet wird, das bald darauf aufhört und dessen Ursache Mucha nicht bestimmen kann. Beim Sprung in das Reich der Träume wirft ihn irgendeine unsichtbare Kraft in die Realität zurück und dann erzittert in ihm etwas wie eine Saite oder eine Sulz, als ob seine Nerven ein elektrischer Strom durchziehen würde, als ob sein Herz davon lief, fing es im prämortalen, wilden Puls an davon zu rennen, und gerade diese Erklärung leuchtet ihm ein – im Schlaf, irgendwo im Hinterhalt, lauert ein Herzinfarkt auf ihn, eine Herzattacke, der Tod. Schließlich nach langen Minuten, vielleicht Stunden der Qualen schläft er wieder ein, aber es ist nicht mehr das, was es einmal war. Das wird niemals das sein, was es einmal war. Nichts mehr wird so, wie es einmal war. Und Mucha wird nie wieder der Gleiche sein. Jede Nacht wird er im Sterben liegen. Jede Nacht wird wie ein Begräbnis sein, das er trotzdem überlebt, damit er pro Forma den nächsten Tag leben kann. Und dann, am Abend wird man sehen.

Mucha weiß es in der Früh, er lebt weiter, „gehen Sie weiter, gehen Sie weiter“, sagen zum Beispiel gern die Polizisten zu den Menschen, die bei einem Unfall neugierig schauen und bei den Ermittlungen im Weg stehen, man soll weiter gehen, weiter leben, auch Mucha bekommt von einem unsichtbaren Globalpolizisten, der über seinem Schicksal wacht, den Befehl, zum weiter leben, so gehorcht er und lebt, nur irgendwie zerknirscht, als ob ein Teil einer Baukonstruktion auf ihn gefallen wäre oder eher ein Steinturm aus seinem symbolischen Traum. Sie stehen auf, schauen fern, machen die Betten, essen zu Mittag, sie gehen spazieren, dann gehen sie wieder den Freund Fero besuchen und die ganze Zeit, als ob Mucha einen Knödel im Hals hätte, der ihn zum Weinen zwingt und vielleicht nicht einmal mehr weinen, sondern jaulen, schreien, aber am ehesten brüllen. Obwohl er etwas Lustiges erzählt, sind seine Mundwinkeln von Gewichten nach unten gezogen, er fühlt sich ungeheuerlich müde und schläfrig, seine Augen brennen, aber wenn er sich nach dem Essen zu Hause auf der Couch ausstreckt, schläft er nicht wie früher ein. Im Gegenteil, in seinem Körper pulsiert eine motorische Unruhe, als ob seine Beine losrennen möchten und gehen, immer nur gehen, weiter gehen, fortfahren, gerade und direkt, auf Wegen – Umwegen, aber es hat nichts mit seinem üblichen romantischen Drang zu verschwinden zu tun, es ist eine physische Notwendigkeit sich zu bewegen und vor Erschöpfung umzufallen, die zwar nie geschieht, respektive nur beim letzten Mal passieren wird.

Die Muchas fahren nach Hause mit dem Bus, die Welt ist die ganze Zeit in eine permanente Dämmerung eingetaucht, Mucha ist auch im geheizten Autobus schläfrig, aber gleichzeitig trennt ihn vom Versinken ins süße „Nichtwissenwoichbin“ eine scharfe Grenze, die er nicht fähig ist zu überschreiten, eine Grenze, die hier am Abend aus dem Nichts entstand und die hier für immer bleiben wird, eine Grenze wie ein Stacheldrahtzaun, wie damals der Eiserne Vorhang bei Devín.

Mucha muss noch kurz ins Büro, das langsam und Schritt für Schritt der Vergangenheit angehören wird, am Samstagabend ist keiner da, nur der Portier mit der bellenden Hündin Zuza und noch Vojto, der alleinstehend ist und für den am Wochenende zu arbeiten, keine Tragödie darstellt.

„Jetzt gehe ich wirklich“, teilt Mucha Vojto bei den Aschenbechern mit, „sie brauchen nicht zu flüstern, sie sind allein, die Allgemeinheit kommt an freien Tagen nicht in die Arbeit.“

„Wo wirst du arbeiten?“ fragt Vojto. „Hast du die Zeitschrift doch noch herausgebracht?“

„Nein, ich habe ein Angebot vom Gastrotext“, sagt Mucha, die Zunge ist schwer und die Stimme matt, auch wenn er lauter gute Nachrichten sagt.

„Gastrotext? Der gibt doch die Buchstaben in jedes Essen...“ wundert sich Vojto und Mucha gibt ihm stolz recht, ja, ja, so ist es.

„Aber ich bitte dich, sag noch keinem etwas davon, damit es nicht so wie damals endet...“ ergänzt noch Mucha, während des Gespräches mit der Zigarette, er spürt wieder, dass seine Beine irgendwohin loslaufen möchten und dass ihm etwas befiehlt, rechtzeitig zu laufen, er weiß nicht wohin und vor wem.

„Siehst du, du bist eigentlich ein glücklicher Mensch“, sagt Vojto zu ihm und Mucha nickt kraftlos.

„Ich wollte dir schon raten, im Internet nach der Arbeit zu suchen“, ergänzt Vojto noch einmal.

„Na ja... Noch bevor ich weggehe, könntest du mir zeigen, wie das funktioniert“, sagt Mucha, er kommt sich dabei ein bisschen wie ein Vogel vor, der bisher noch nie die drei magischen Buchstaben „www“ zu klopfen versuchte.

Übersetzt von Zdenka Becker

[1] Ausschusssitzung
[2] Verkleinerungen der Lieblingsnamen Patrik und
[3] “ Nicole
[4] Eine süße Spezialität aus Eiern und Haselnüssen (ein bisschen wie türkischer Honig)

Fiction Is My Cake

Interview with the translator and lecturer Heather Trebatická, by Inka Martinová

Photo: Author's collection

HEATHER TREBATICKÁ (née KING, 1942) was born in London and studied English language and literature at Manchester University. Since her marriage in 1967, she has lived in Slovakia and worked as a lecturer in the Department of English at Comenius University (Bratislava). The majority of her translation work published in Slovakia has been in the fields of Slovak literature, culture, history and tourism. Translations published abroad (Canada, UK, USA) have included books on early Slovak history (Ján Dekan: *Morava Magna*), medicinal plants (Jaroslav Kresánek: *Healing Plants*), contemporary Slovak short stories (*In Search of Homo Sapiens*) and traditional fairy tales (*25 Classic Fairy Tales; 25 Fairy Tales and Fables;* Mária Ďuríčková: *The White Princess*).

INKA MARTINOVÁ: Wasn't it a rather strange decision – to come to live in Czechoslovakia at a time when many people wanted to leave? Was it easy to get used to life in a different country with a different political system?

HEATHER TREBATICKÁ: Most people can't understand why we settled here and not in Britain, but it's really quite simple. My husband is one of those Slovaks who loves travelling, but wouldn't feel at home anywhere else. With me, it's home is where your heart is. I was young, politically ignorant and in love – it wasn't a difficult decision. Of course I experienced culture shock and there were difficult times – but not only for me. However, the people I met or worked with always made me feel so welcome, that I can honestly say I never regretted staying. I've also had an interesting career. I love teaching at the university and I've had a variety of work opportunities I'd never have had in Britain, such as correcting or contributing to textbooks, reviewing British and American best sellers, writing epilogues to translated novels or articles for magazines, recording texts (a song once! – not solo, I'm glad to say) and I even spent seven months as a translator and interpreter in the Czechoslovak pavilion at EXPO '70 in Japan.

INKA MARTINOVÁ: When and how did you get in touch with Slovak literature? Was there a special moment, event or person that led you to a decision to start translating Slovak authors into English?

HEATHER TREBATICKÁ: From the beginning I had requests for help with translations. At first I just corrected others' work, but I wanted to learn the language as soon as possible to understand what was going on around me. You never feel so lonely as when you're with a group of people laughing and enjoying themselves, but you don't know what it's all about. My first translations were anything that happened to come along and were hard work. The largest translation dictionary available was just pocket size and my husband spent frustrating evenings trying to get the meaning across to me before I could put it into English. I can't remember what my first encounter with Slovak literature was, but an early translation I'll never forget was Milan Rúfus' short contribution of poetic prose to the first issue of the magazine "Slovakia", intended for EXPO '70. It was that piece that made me realise how beautiful Slovak prose could be.

INKA MARTINOVÁ: You have translated fiction, non-fiction and children's books. What kind of books do you prefer to translate?

HEATHER TREBATICKÁ: I usually say that non-fiction (mostly magazines about the attractions of Slovakia) is my bread and butter, while fiction is my cake. So the answer is fiction, but I'm glad I've learned so much about Slovakia through translation and I really have enjoyed working on some books and films by Slovak explorers (Ladislav Gulik, Pavol Barabáš, František Kele). The children's books have been fun.

INKA MARTINOVÁ: Which is your favourite translation? Was this book written by your favourite author as well? Who is your favourite author?

HEATHER TREBATICKÁ: I don't have a favourite translation or a favourite author. My favourite translation is often the translation I happen to be working on at that moment. It's true some of the texts have a special appeal for me, but they are by a variety of authors.

INKA MARTINOVÁ: Which was your most challenging translation? What are the real difficulties you encounter when translating from Slovak into English?

HEATHER TREBATICKÁ: Translations can be difficult or challenging for a variety of reasons. Anything legal or financial bores me stiff, so I never do these, though I admire those who can. Very abstract texts are particularly difficult to translate into English, which seems to prefer a more down-to-earth approach. What I find pleasantly challenging is prose written by someone with an obvious feeling for words. The little poetic prose introduction by Milan Rúfus to a book on Koloman Sokol took me quite some time, but gave me considerable satisfaction. The same is true of other translations that have forced me to be creative, either because of the play on words in Slovak (Ľubomír Feldek: *The Blue Book of Tales*; Pavol Janík: *Dangerous Comedies*; Daniel Hevier: *Gurd Land*) or for other reasons, such as the poetry in the TV serial "*Štúrovci*", or the dialogue in modern plays, where you can't just translate what the speaker says, but have to think how an English speaker would respond in that particular situation.

INKA MARTINOVÁ: Do you have a secret wish regarding translating?

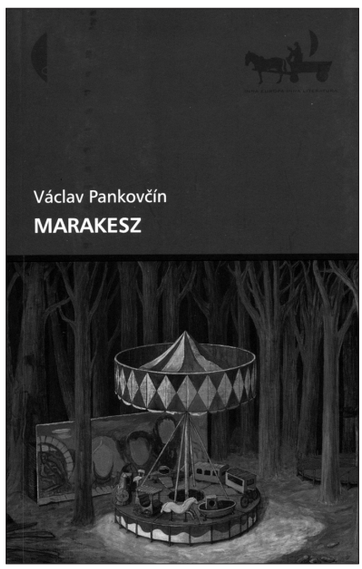
HEATHER TREBATICKÁ: Although I've had the opportunity to translate some really beautiful non-fiction books (e.g. Karol Kállay: *Slovak Castles* or František Kele-Milan Lučanský: *The Tatras*), I do wish so many of my literary translations had not "vanished into thin air". For financial reasons Slovak authors have few opportunities to get their works published abroad and as a translator I share their frustration. It is the reason why most of my literary translations have been no more than extracts, though in the 80s many of them were published in "Meridians" and now in the Slovak Literary Review. In the case of documentary or TV films and radio plays the translations are usually just for a festival jury's information and although I am always very glad when such entries win prizes, I have nothing lasting to show for my efforts.

A WORLD WHERE TIME AND SPACE ARE FROZEN

Joanna Goszczyńska, Warsaw University, Poland

Václav Pankovčín
Marakesz
Wydawnictwo Czarne, Wołowiec 2006
Translated by Jacek Bukowski

Contemporary Slovak prose, even the newest publications, is starting to interest people outside of Slovakia more and more. It is so also in Poland. This year, the Polish publishing house Czarne, which quickly reacts to the release of valuable works among world literature, published a book by Václav Pankovčín titled *Marakesz* (Marakesh). Pankovčín, a Slovak writer, who died at a young age (1968–1999) published seven books during his life.
Marakesh is the author's third book (earlier works are a collection of children's stories *A Mammoth in the Refrigerator* (Mamut v chladničke, 1992) and *I suppose I did Not Appear from Thin Air* (Asi som neprišiel len tak, 1992). It loosely connects to his first two books, but it also shows the author's permanent focus on the Eastern Slovak country.
This is demonstrated in his later works: *Three Women under the Walnut Tree* (Tri ženy pod orechom, 1996) and *It Will Be a Nice Funeral* (Bude to pekný pohreb, 1997). The collection of short stories Marakesh, which can be perceived as a complete composition unit, consists of three parts: the first two are dedicated to different village characters, who quite often are very curious and bizarre; the third part is an extensive novel which depicts the life of a young villager, a village dummy, who loses even in the confrontation with the Big City.
In his texts, Václav Pankovčín creates a microcosm, which has a real as well as an imaginary environment. Through short episodes, constructed characters, who are often childlike, the reader is taken to a world where time and space are frozen. It is the world of the village *Marakesh,* located in the east of Slovakia but with its exotic name refers to the city in the African Morocco. It seems that the author, however, continually shatters this microcosm: on one hand there are the elements of a global civilization, on the other the elements that are magical. The author relativizes, and thus raises doubt about the traditional mentality, traditional values and cultural model, as well as the modern sociopolitical reality. Oscillation between the real and the imaginary worlds, the clash of these two environments, often brings about comic, even grotesque results. The seemingly simple language of Pankovčín's writing as well as the use of elements of dialect is a challenge for its translator. The Polish translator Jacek Bukowki was not always successful tackling this task. As we already know, the similarity of the two languages is treacherous and it is not always easy to capture the true stylistic nature.
Marakesh was released in Poland 12 years after its Slovak release but the Czarne publishing house is already preparing another book by Václav Pankovčín titled Bude to pekný pohreb */It Will Be a Nice Funeral/*. This Slovak author will also be presented in the Literatura na świecie magazine. Currently, Literature na świecie is preparing a monographic issue dedicated to Slovak literature.



Translated by Saskia Hudecová

URŠUĽA KOVALYK'S POETICS OF THE ROUGH

Miroslava Novotná, Masaryk University, Brno

Uršuľa Kovalyk
Obyčejný mrtvý otec
Nakladatelství MAŤA, Praha 2006
Translated by Tomáš Weiss

The third short story book by the Slovak author Uršuľa Kovalyk (born 1969) entitled *Common Dead Father* (the previous two volumes were published in Slovakia in 2002 – *Unfaithful Women Lay No Eggs* – and in 2004 – *Travesty Show*), appearing in the Prague publishing house MAŤA in 2006, is a surprisingly well-informed and deeply human probe into the life of women burdened by the numbing stereotypes and mechanical activities of everyday, highlighting the Hrabal-like „tiny pearl found on the bottom of it", which is hidden in every person and surfacing in both quotidian and most unexpected moment alike.
Including eleven stories and the author's interview expounding her views on men and women, her artistic alias inspired by her grandmother's name, her work with homeless people and short accounts on her own life, the book provides a gentle and deeply felt account of the life of several women, from their childhood on through adult years, motherhood, ripe age and ultimately death. Girls whose lives had been since birth shadowed by the heavy drinking of their fathers *(Betrix and I, Fish Salad, Common Dead Father)* find refuge in escaping from their harsh reality, which they find no longer surprising: "Grandma was great. A great bitch. (...) Really, she was quite disgusting, but not even remotely like the father. With his socks on and what were once his teeth." *(Betrix and I)* They can take care of themselves and still be playful and daydreaming while fully facing reality. Their world is rough, full of violent men, yet, at the same time abundant with lovely humanity, gentleness and dreams. A genuine, childishly naive way of seeing, awakening and a harshly sobering experience of a young woman who, in an odd twist of fate, became a mother *(Betrix and I)*; again genuine, sincere, harsh and yet so human is the rendition of dying *(Three Women, Common Dead Father)*.
Uršuľa Kovalyk's short stories resurrect, with breathtaking precision, the half-forgotten atmosphere of the 1970s and 1980s: people queuing up for bananas, the deadening grey of new Socialist housing developments, uniformity of schools, restaurants and people. This world, though, is occupied by plenty of helpless and strained people, portrayed here as beautiful and unusual souls, innocent and unvarnished like children: madwomen *(Betrix and I, Bathroom)*, blind young man *(Růžena)*, aged female singer *(Travesty Show)*.
Uršuľa Kovalyk's women, in their day-to-day existence of mechanical repetitiveness of movements, processes and actions seemingly representing a well-organized life, sooner or later see this surface of "civilized" daily existence crack to open up dreams, crying into the darkness so hard until their emancipatory drive overpowers everything they have known and learned. The dreamy poetic quality of the short stories *Lunary,* with its heroine finding herself alone with the night, the moon, a picture of a boy and fish on seashore, *Bathroom,* whose protagonist, a woman, cannot resist the all-encompassing world of the jungle, and *Circus* with is peculiar, cruel atmosphere of the night.
uršuľa Kovalyk's men are portrayed on a rich scale of emotionality: blind Jonáš seeing through his fine fingers *(Růžena),* ugly old

Zdeněk, who, during a single evening, shows more empathy, understanding and humanity than all the dreamt-about princes of the former singer *(Travesty Show)*, childishly charming and comprehending cousin *(Betrix a já)*, „the flapping sweating buttocks of satisfied, selfish men“ (Julie, Betrix und I), violent drunk fathers *(Betrix and I, Common Dead Father, Three Women)*
The author's style is austere, yet speaks volumes. The longest introductory piece *Betrix and I* of twenty-four pages covers its protagonist's life since childhood, on through adolescence marked with a beautiful friendship, motherhood, ending in accomplished age sharing her musings over her current life among guinea pigs, small and lovely and vulnerable and awaiting their death. Shortly-clipped sentences that materialize things inanimate and their images are intertwined with perceptions of their heroines, making up dramatic, yet dreamy atmosphere: "I love the town's outskirts. The concrete pavement gives way to a graveled road. It is snow-white. It leads into a vast park. Everything is dark. The color black is sight-killing like the band over a jabbed-out eye. Not a single light around. Only Eleonora's watch is shining blue when its hand passes half-hour. The night swelling

like a big bubble, and she is now entering the suddenly silent forest. Her shoes dip into humid gravel. Eleonora knows that the road is grinding its teeth. Angry, it is out to bite her soles. As a punishment for this nuisance. At half past two in the morning. She smiles, and dips her soles even more deeply into the gravel ..." *(Circus)*
The perhaps only weaker point is the story entitled *Fish Salad*, where the book's main idea, i.e. women's right to make free choices in their life, sounds almost cliché-like and unconvincing. As a whole, the book will surely have its readers touched by its peculiar and gentle poetics.
Rather paradoxically, the Czech translator is a man, Tomáš Weiss; he does a very good job in finding Czech equivalents for all the fine nuances of its author's soul imprinted in the text. Weiss' Czech is flawless; considering that uršuľa Kovalyk is writing in the Košice dialect, an informed reader might wonder what this hasn't found its way into the Czech translation. As one reader of Weiss' translation of Uršuľa Kovalyk's short stories I find the translator's job very skillful, and the book will surely be welcomed by young Czech readers who, unfortunately, have no longer such command of Slovak as their previous generation.

Translated by Ľuben Urbánek

NOT ONLY WITH ARTISTIC CREATION BUT WITH DESTINY

Robert Murray Davis, University of Oklahoma

Milan Rúfus
And That's the Truth
Edited by Milan Richter and David L. Cooper
Translated by Ewald Osers, Viera and James Sutherland-Smith
Illustrations by Koloman Sokol
Bolchazy-Carducci, Wauconda, Illinois, USA, 2006

The translators' preface notes recurring images of bread and water, with sacramental overtones, in Rúfus's poetry, but perhaps more striking, in part because of Koloman Sokol's drawings of sculptors and their work, is the emphasis on stone. In *Rodin's Lovers*, love is the chisel, and in *What is a poem* the answer is that "the poem is greater than the word" because it is "Not a stone. A statue. Lot's wife. / that's a poem." In *Carpenters*, the task is "to hack through into beauty." Throughout the collection, selected from twenty volumes of the *oeuvre*, Rúfus emphasizes the struggle not only with artistic creation but with destiny. Like some English modernists, he feels that, in literature as in life, "all roads lead to silence." A path that once seemed to lead to God now "leads to the unknown".
Suffering, as inexplicable as that in the poetry of Thomas Hardy (whose short lines and simple language offer some basis of comparison for the Anglophone reader), is somehow, unlike Hardy's, redemptive. In *Lines*, where the extended figure is employed most successfully, markings on the face become grooves in a record for the wearer to "listen to / his master's voice...." "Thus" echoes Gerard Manley Hopkins' "generations have trod / have trod / have trod," and although Rúfus cannot praise the glory of God, he concludes that hunger, neither too great nor too little, offers a space in which humanity can eat and love. Less effective is *Visitors*, in which hunger, death, poverty, and worry find consolation in the fact that "The earth came to us and brought flowers."
The next line, "And that's the truth," serves better as title to this volume than as conclusion to the poem. Perhaps too much aware of his position as "a kind of national conscience for Slovakia and its people" – Milan Richter's words –Rúfus too often flattens his endings with didactic generalizations.
English-speaking readers may be missing something in translation, for many of the poems seem not to generate effective internal rhythms. Perhaps his poems in English are best read singly, as meditations rather than lyrics. Seen this way, they bring a valuable new note into poetry in English.

TO BEAR A BURDEN AND TO SING

John Minahane

Milan Rúfus
And That's the Truth
Edited by Milan Richter and David L. Cooper
Translated by Ewald Osers,
Viera and James Sutherland-Smith
Illustrations by Koloman Sokol

This is the first substantial English selection of the poetry of Milan Rúfus, Slovakia's outstanding living poet and in recent years a candidate for the Nobel Prize. 62 poems, taken from a range of published work spanning half a century, are given here in English translation with the Slovak originals facing. An introduction sets Rúfus's poetry in the context of Central European poetry generally, and a brief section on 'Life and Works' gives essential facts. This book breaks ground, and as such it is to be welcomed.
The choice was made by Milan Richter, who is publishing the complete works of Rúfus in 16 volumes, and his selection lets the

poet's distinctive voice come through. The emphasis here is on Rúfus of the 'middle period', beginning with *Bells* (Zvony), published in 1968. No less than 17 poems are included from this collection, and in these mainly unrhymed poems, brief, urgent, concentrated thoughts on demanding themes, the translation is at its best. For example, why you cannot enter a childhood landscape:

It's as if you, a stowaway
tried to step out of your time
as though from a plane, straight onto a cloud.
Swearing that it will carry off
the heaviness that's you,
your winglessness forever.
(Childhood Landscape)

Or looking at that landscape:

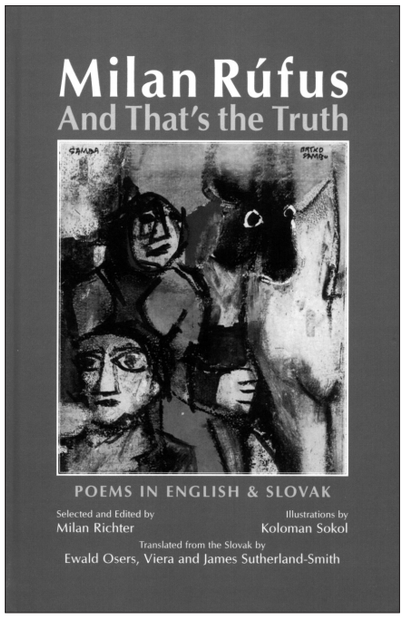
Through the small window, narrow as
an obol
under a dead man's tongue, you saw
your childhood landscape. On dusty panes
as on a dog-skin parchment you read
your family tree.
(The Window)

Or a very modern thought,
set in the Rúfus frame:

Oh, our answers
age more quickly than our questions.
And heavy, Lord, too heavy for us is
the parachute of sky in which You hang.
(*A Wayside Crucifix*)

Or the superb *Michaelangelo*:

To bear a burden and to sing.
You knew
who carries beauty to its baptism.
We don't any more.
.....
And the poet,
a thrown rider, tries from the horseshoe's
imprint
to create a horse.



Anguish and weariness...
Like babes in a wood, in much we've gone
astray.

And beauty, once the intimate of God,
now relates to itself alone
confused and strange things.
(Michaelangelo)

Readers will surely appreciate these poems. But would they not appreciate them even better if they could see more of how Rúfus got there, if they could follow more of his poetic journey? I have in mind especially his first collection *Až dozrieme* (Till We Ripen), published in 1956, which is a marvel. It is something like a geological event in Slovak culture, with a new mountain appearing out of the immense tensions of the earth.

A young poet with a volcanic force of utterance, an unbearably intense need to speak, was confronted by nothing less than a revolution, which limited, questioned, challenged, for some years even silenced him.
In *Till We Ripen* the tensions are contained in highly-structured, fully-rhymed poems; two of them, *Meeting on the Ringstrasse* and *Parting*, are included in this book, and they stand out. The magnificent *Parting* (Rozlúčenie) would stand out anywhere. While it can be read simply as a poem on the parting of lovers, the echoes of the second verse and the atmosphere of the whole poem tell us there is another parting also, one of wider scope and implications and even greater pain. There are other wonderful poems in that same collection, and I dare say some might argue that Rúfus's first collection is his best.
The introduction is fluently written and puts Rúfus comfortably among the best Central European poets of the late twentieth century. The authors rightly stress his 'immensely individual and original voice', but here and there one may question whether their guidance helps this voice to be heard. „Rúfus struggles with the near impossibility of conveying a sense of faith that does not allow a private experience into the public domain. It is a faith beset by philosophical absurdity where faith becomes an individual's cross." I cannot see what this has to do with *Michaelangelo*, or *Thanksgiving for the Harvest*, or the dozens of poems in this selection that would testify equally. On the contrary, Rúfus is a prophet: his faith is always and invariably in the public domain, at least potentially. To read him is not just to eavesdrop upon a soul. But the prophet has, so to speak, been driven into the mountains. Those poems in *Bells* especially, and all his later poems, have a mountain air.
These criticisms aside, this collection will give readers a sense of an outstandingly gifted poet and his fate 'to bear a burden and to sing'.

Zuzana Profantová (ed.)
Malé dejiny veľkých udalostí v Česko(a)Slovensku po roku 1948, 1968, 1989
(Small History of Great Events in Czecho(and)Slovakia After the Years 1948, 1968, 1989)

Ústav etnológie SAV a Ústav pamäti národa, Bratislava, 2005

"Small History has a green light", comments the compiler and editor of this book, the ethnologist Zuzana Profantová. The two-part publication on this topic with its 500 pages is the proof of that. "Small pictures of great events" (which is the title of the article written by sociologist Vladimír Krivý) are presented by Slovak as well as foreign authors from different fields – ethnology, history, folk and literary studies – who met at an international conference of the same title. Besides research presentations it contains more theoretically charged passages about collective historical memory, about the interpretation of different types of narratives and about working with sources. It is very interesting reading. Individual microcosms, family environments, personal memories and period documents are revealed before our eyes. They are not about the years after 1948 only. Even older, long forgotten history emerges: for instance, the relationships between the Jewish minority and the majority population of Zlaté Moravce from 1918 to 1945; the life of a well-known wine entrepreneur from Dolné Orešany; the lives of Germans imprisoned in the Nováky work camp after 1945; or how the people's propagandist machine used the message left by Milan Rastislav Štefánik to legitimize its authoritarian regime. These are painful topics and it is so also in the case of the later years and events, whether it is the persecutions after 1948 or 1968. Even though oral history does not strive to replace historiography, it can contribute to the forming of collective memory. That is something that in our country had been, for decades, fabricated to support one direction only. Today, with the objectivity rendered by time and change, the collective memory and its layers are molded using different resources: the truth gained from the historiographical exploring of the past which is more of a truth derived from reason, is joined by the emotion-saturated truth of the heart. "Great History" is being populated. Unwittingly, we remind ourselves how colorful (socially, religiously and ethnically) Slovak society had been, until it was weeded out by dictatorships. We are overwhelmed by the traumatic nature of

critical events, entire decades and the difficult choices of the persecuted individuals and their families. A book like this serves as a tool for educating and breeding of character instead of raising bookworms who only accumulate information. It contains ways how to catch one's attention through personal testimonies, how to communicate the experience of a different generation, how to search for one's own, individual, family or national narration, and how to paraphrase the "Slovak story". There are books, thanks to which we know more. Thanks to the authors of this publication we also have a chance to understand more.

Martin Bútora

Milan Zelinka

Príbehy z Karpát (Stories from the Carpathian Mountains)

Slovenský spisovateľ, Bratislava, 2005

After a 13-year pause, Milan Zelinka (1942) is coming out with his tenth book. One has to admit that a reader used to action-filled incursions and inciting situationalism of contemporary Slovak prose, must adjust his view and use a different set of sensors in order to take in everything this book offers. There is a lot of it and it is unusually subtle.
Zelinka's jubilee publication contains fourteen short proses spanning from humoresque to humorist feature. The story bases of these little proses are realistic, but it is not certain, whether they do not have more of a modern existentialist feeling than traditional or classic realism. It requires not only talent but also a specific view spanning from serious to funny, in order to write like Zelinka – to write the first sentence, develop the entire story and gradate its absurdity and point out its message. Zelinka's stories are far from realistic events because they are constructed and twisted around in a way as to present humor and multivalent content. The village heroes are not usually confronted with something non-village-like, they act mostly as themselves and the drama is more of a consequence of their character (and inner philosophy) rather than conflicts with the village life. The author never focuses his narrative on extensive plots. One of the best short stories titled *Belief* (Presvedčenie) is about two brothers who part solely because they cannot agree whether wood is pronounced 'wud or 'wüd. In another great story a polite young man is saying good-bye to his family one-by-one as he is leaving for a sugar beet harvest and all they want to know is whether he will be sending them stolen sugar. This modern paradox is enhanced by very subtle humor which is emitted from everything and every direction. The story *The Collector* (Zberateľ) is funny and bizarre just the same way. All the subtlety is really a well-aimed social criticism, which nowadays is quite rare.
It is clear that Zelinka still has something to say. His prose is empathic, very human and courteous but also ostentatious and acrimonious. It is brought to our attention again – and that is a good thing.

Alexander Halvoník

Jana Bodnárová

Insomnia (Insomnia)

Aspekt, Bratislava, 2005

The new book by Jana Bodnárová consists of three parts: a screenplay titled *Mandolin* (Mandolína), a text titled *A Nightly Soliloquy (*Nočná samovrava) and *Afterstories (*Popríbehy) – a unit of small pieces of writing. The central character of the first part is a little girl who is taught how to play the mandolin by a music-obsessed priest's wife. The girl has short seizures during which she sees ghosts. The story climaxes with the little girl's rape and murder, and ends with an unsuccessful search for the killer and the collapse of her grief-stricken parents. Justice is served after all, though in the context of the darkness of the entire plot, the punishment seems like a senseless accident. In the second part of the book the narrator's voice is intersected by an objective viewpoint from the outside. Here, an elderly woman wanders through the town in the middle of the night. In a delirium springing from her insoluble loneliness she tells a story of her younger brother's childhood, which, at the same time is the story of her mother's aging. The story ends with the brother's definite and unexplained disappearance. The third part is a collection of fragments, notes, journal entries and excerpts from personal correspondence that are not tied together in any way. The world of Jana Bodnárová is infinitely sad, though it has very believable poetics. The title *Insomnia*, which connotes the darkening of the mind at night and the skewed perception of (normally harmless) facts, seems to justify the selection of some motifs, which, at other times we intuitively avoid. The use of some of them may seem autotelic but the title explains them sufficiently. Bodnárová's concept reminds us of the last play by Sarah Kane *4:48 Psychosis*, where the title too, refers to the hour at which the depression-ailed author wakes up and lives through the hardest part of the day. Insomnia can be perceived similarly. After all, each sleepless night ends in dawn: the heroine of *A Nightly Soliloquy* (Nočná samovrava), with relief, finally lies down next to her old mother at dawn and the killer of the little girl dies in the end in a shoot-out. In *Afterstories (*Popríbehy) here and there a triviality pops up, and it is its trivialness that in the context brings relief. It is as if the author herself is not sure whether the world truly is as seen in this delusion caused by sleeplessness or if she just has to wait till the night is over to see a harmless reality not deformed by the lack of sleep. Jana Bodnárová's view is a mixture of dream poetics and surprising brutality such as the images of dancing angels in the shoot-out scene or bits of women's conversations at the gym bluntly describing the spread of cancer. I suppose it is these bits of a very real reality (fragments of conversations and e-mail excerpts) in the last part of *Insomnia* which are unnecessary. Without them the nightly delusion that makes this book so fascinating would remain untarnished.

Svetlana Žuchová

Silvester Lavrík

Zlodeji (Thieves)

K. K. Bagala – L.C.A., Publishers group, Levice, 2005

*Thieves (*Zlodeji) is the fourth book of this acclaimed playwright, scriptwriter and writer. In this latest collection of short stories, using his own language and irreplaceable poetics, he unwinds seven stories before us. Again, they are characteristic with their pure style and strong imagery. The collection also includes the short story, */Sholet/* Šólet, which was awarded third prize in the literary competition Short Story 2003.
Silvester Lavrík is a playwright, director and prose writer. Although his prose is listed as third in this order, I think that in time it can move to the first place. Time will tell (as we like to say). Regarding time: Lavrík's short stories (there are seven in the book) remind me of an image from long ago. I saw a church clock, once, completely stripped: time became visible in front of my eyes there, literally. The two jagged wheels matched into each other and seemed unstoppable. Minutes, hours, days, months, years – words, sentences, paragraphs, entire texts: a book. With each written word and sentence, Lavrík moves time (life) forward unstoppably, the story moves fluently – jerkily to its conclusion. It is like the movement of the jagged wheels.
The life of Martin Chleban is condensed into its climaxes and turns of events. His life – from birth to old age – is presented on less than ten pages. Martin is like a tin cube held together by its edges, he is the man, who, in every kind of weather dives into a stream from a rock wall 30 meters high – a tourist attraction, though he does it for his own pleasure. Martin is born in 1913, to his father, an ice-cream maker and mother who raises him by herself. He becomes a teacher and starts teaching in Ruský potok (where there are four more villages with peculiar names: Runina, Nová Sedlica, Zboj and Uličˇ-Krivé – one would probably have to look for them on a military map, that is if they exist, but it would be nice if they did). There he marries a post office clerk: "Martin saw the small round fingers and it was decided". That is a fatally accurate sentence and this book has many more like it. At the base of good prose lie the observance of details and a strong story. The couple have a son Martin, who, in 1973, emigrates to the US. Then Maria – the wife – dies. That same year Martin retires. His son and his family come back for three days in 1993. He has changed his name there, which his father does not accept – he throws the piece of paper with his son's new name out. His son sets him up with a telephone line so they can call each other, even leaves him an American telephone book. The old man finds a random telephone numbers and calls it...
I have really come to like the story *Solar Eclipse (*Zatmenie slnka). I, too, was fascinated by this unique phenomenon in 1999. This, exactly, happened on that day: "Everything got quiet. Birds, insects, everything. Even the cyclists. A frightening light stayed suspended over the town. Suddenly, the sky seemed to be very close, like it had never been before. No one would be surprised if the world ended right then." The only surprised ones are the protagonists of the story, the Jeleneks, who at that moment, experience something resembling

an end of a certain world after 30 years of their marriage. Because (maybe as a result of the eclipse) something in their long relationship changes.
Short stories... and lock your door for the night. The night and *Thieves (*Zlodeji) sometimes put into play almost bizarre possibilities of how the relationship of two, three or like in the story *Zlodeji* more people can intertwine. Despite strength everything is so fragile and unpredictable, like what can happen as a result of a collision of two children while ice-skating, or tragic death. Or who you can meet in your life again... or how women and men can walk the thieving pathways of emotions.
The best is saved for last. It is undoubtedly an excellent story: beginning with its theme up to the treatment. At the same time it is almost like a movie (flashing before your mind's eye) or an album of photographs. A retrospective projection of several lives. Accurate and fated arrivals to a place to which you simply must arrive. Exact timing. A tragicomedy where tragedy sets off the beginning of a relationship: of two old people Quido Kocúr (Kocúr = tomcat, how funny) and Mrs. Jolana, who both at the beginning as well as at the end cooks *sholet*. They meet at the funeral of their children. One of the children is the victim, the other responsible for the fatal accident. Newlyweds on their bicycle honeymoon, the beautiful high school graduate Ester Kocúrová and Adam Vlk, set off on their last fatal meeting, which takes place in a narrow section of the E50: "there is a beat up section of the road between Vrútky and Kraľovany". That meeting is with Tibi Agóč, Mrs. Jolana's son, driving a black BMW 007. The tragedy is complete with the death of the three. Just before this moment, though, the author presents us with the lives of all the protagonists using specific style in sentences saturated with meaning. He presents what is important: details and thoughts. All this is words, and they flow in Lavrík's sentences in a Lavrík-*esque* manner. They are meant for reading out loud because they have a high quality of sound.
I must not omit the precisely woven net of time: they are all inevitably nearing THAT place. An imperative question comes to mind: Why them at THAT moment at THAT place?
Sholet. That is the name of the story. If Silvester Lavrík wrote a novel like this short story, it would be a breakthrough in Slovak prose. This story belongs to the best creations among short stories in Slovakia.
I knew some of Silvester Lavrik's texts before. These seven short stories, however, are truly a very powerful literary discovery for me. Now I am just waiting for his novel or more short stories.

Mila Haugová

Etela Farkašová
Stalo sa (It Happened)

Aspekt, Bratislava, 2005

These two short words – the title of this new book – could be the guide to reading it. One will have to read through the category of memory and walk down the memory lane with his gaze anchored to the past. Memories of photographs and records – everything in short, fleeting bits, covered over by new memories, or memories of memories. The author weaves these bits into a stronger plot which offers more reading possibilities. The motto of Farkašová's text, which records a daughter's last days and months of being with her mother, are the words of the French writer Annie Ernaux from the book *Un Femme* /Woman/: "...if I want to get to my mother's life and the truth about it as close as possible, I have to try it through literature..." Literature, which both the authors chose to come to terms with the death of a loved one is the way of the "homo scribens". For a writer, writing is a natural and legitimate touch with reality. The search for the truth about her mother's life is not the sole remedy as it can be seen from further efforts to understand her mother's death. The book's title, *It Happened (*Stalo sa) evokes the notion that something has been concluded, that someone's past, someone's life has ceased to exist. Farkašová's text is really open though, the thread of life, in which the beginnings and ends blend together and move from one form to another, is present. The text talks of death as a threshold which can be crossed, or not feared, at least, with the help of faith in a higher power. In the past few years, Etela Farkašová has inclined more persistently towards more extensive and more compact works. It is as if she had the need to share her experience as a human being. Her humanistic message strengthening the notion of the continuity of the female line in our society has been met with a congenially tuned editorial team at the Aspekt edition. This is a human and sensitively written book and I definitely recommend it.

Eva Maliti-Fraňová

Dominik Dán
Beštia (The Beast)

Vydavateľstvo Slovart, Bratislava, 2006

As a fan of detective stories I was always very skeptic when it came to Slovak and Czech authors of this genre. I simply liked the atmosphere of dusky old English mansions, hectic American cities or the secret world of the mafia rather than the atmosphere of the domestic criminal setting. This is also why, for me, Dominik Dán is one of the nicest surprises of the past months.
Chronologically, *The Beast (*Beštia) is set in time before the two books Dán had published earlier – *Ashes even everything out (*Popol všetko zarovná) and *A Shameful Innocent (*Nehanebné neviniatko) – the story takes place right after the Velvet revolution. In times when street names and people in high posts change like socks, Verejná bezpečnosť is an institution whose name change to the Police is only the tip of the iceberg of changes to come.
The crime rate, during the years of communism is exceptionally low, thanks to the regime's iron fist and the virtually unlimited authority of the police. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, amidst reorganization and chaos in the police force Slovak mafia realizes its big chance to strengthen its position. The work of the police, though, becomes complicated mainly due to the uselessly benevolent amnesty of president Václav Havel, which, besides political prisoners, frees murderers and all kinds of offenders.
One of them is the main protagonist of *The Beast* (Beštia). The author's inspiration was the serial killer Ondrej Rigo, who, in Czechoslovakia, Germany and Holland became known for his brutal murders of several women.
The story begins in June of 1990. The bloody journey of the serial killer starts in a Munich suburb, fueled by the desire for blood and a secret Voice in his head. After his second murder, he is arrested by the German police, but is subsequently released. He relocates to Holland, where he continues killing. Rigo focuses on lone women, whom he robs and kills in their sleep. At last he returns to Slovakia. As the story progresses, the reader has a chance to acquaint himself with the team of detectives, who are also known from Dán's previous books: the veteran Burger, the ambitious rookie Krauz, the former secret police officer Canis and Jozef "José" Fischer, who enters the police ranks at the end of the book.
Unlike today with the current investigative methods available, in the time the story takes place, the homicide department has to rely on its own abilities, intuition and foresight. The computer is a dream not likely to come true, cellular phones are the size of a brick and DNA identification is a mystery. But it is DNA, in the end, which plays a major role in the conclusion. The author reveals the investigation as well as the regular lives of the detectives, authentically and solidly. They slightly resemble Ed McBain's 87th Precinct, his imaginary Imola, however, is not Bratislava. Instead of lunching at an Italian restaurant, these cops decide between codfish and mayonnaise salads, they drive old beat-up cars and they smell like sweat and fatigue. They all have a common goal – to catch the killer beast. Dán lightens up the dark story with his sense of humor – the detectives' jokes are rough, but friendly. The interrogation of the jeweler's apprentice Karol will make the reader burst out laughing.
Slovak readers can read *The Beast (*Beštia) without fearing the author's shallow effort to gain their attention. This book is comparable with works of renowned foreign authors of this genre. On top of that, the well-known post-revolution Czechoslovakia setting and facts present a pleasant yet dark excursion into the near past.

Vladimír Radosa

Paul Guterman & Joe Colohnatt
Vražda ako spoločenská udalosť (Základy spoločenského správania pri vražde) / Murder as a Social Event (The Basics of Murder Social Etiquette)/

Slovak version by Dušan Taragel

K. K. Bagala – L.C.A. Publishers group, Levice, 2006

Taragel's latest book can be categorized as a type of dictionary-monographic novel which is well known to the Slovak readers from the works of the Serbian writer Milorad Pavić. But unlike Pavić, Taragel uses irony, parody and persiflage and so his text cannot be absorbed any other way than through a prism of jest. This is underlined also by hyperbolized, comic-like drawings of Jozef Danglár Gertli. Through the fictitious characters of two American hitmen,

Guterman and Colohnatt, incarcerated for life, the book instructs beginners how to commit the perfect murder which will be remembered for a long time and it will not resemble a socially unacceptable farce or a third-rate scene from an Argentinean soap opera. The text is divided into several chapters depending on where we want to execute our murder: in a theater, at a concert, at the opening of an exhibition, in a restaurant, on board of a train, or ship. The most interesting part of the book are its extensive notes. They give the text all the ingredients necessary for a perfect parody. Without the notes, the book is a mere collection of boring social etiquettes and calculations of possible murder approaches. This section, however, features specific examples, history and celebrities of different types of murder, as well as all kinds of *faux pas* and undesirable effects caused by murder committed improperly. The book ends with a bibliography and the translator's afterword (that would be Dušan Taragel). Taragel not only parodies scientific monographs and the language of social etiquette guides but also the murderer's personality and the way he is looked upon by others – whether he is an English gentleman or an American butcher – and he beautifies murder in accordance with the criteria set by the entertainment industry to the level of a social event with an archaic (but by that far more comic) patina of popular retro style. Taragel's language is smooth as it is custom with a gentleman of proper up-bringing who writes in a clearly defined genre. Taragel focuses on his theme and does not spend time on excessive ornateness. His way of marking the notes is a little confusing but the author probably did that for a reason, or perhaps the limited possibilities of the Slovak printing industry may be at fault.
It is certain that Taragel's book will be one of the best Slovak works in 2006. Let's hope that this project, which was started in regards to the resocialization of Slovak writers serving their sentences in American prisons, will bear its fruit: the first murder of a Slovak writer.

Patrik Oriešek

Pavel Vilikovský
Silberputzen
(Leštenie starého striebra)
(Silverpolishing)

Albert Marenčin PT, Bratislava, 2006

Ilustrácie Katarína Marenčinová

This time around, Pavel Vilikovský arranges a handful of old photographs before him and finds a coherent, detailed story in them. His imagination is like a fine radar catching the inaudible signals of this antiquarian kitsch. The atmosphere of the naive drawings and staged photographs make up a dramatically gradated tragicomedy about the coming of age in a jovial monarchy. Vilikovský 's protagonist Andreas Pohl, a child of Vienna, openly confesses his teenage confusion and problems; he explores the old Pressburg, comments on its everyday life and festivities, but primamrily characters of the people around him. The story of this well-brought-up grammar school senior spans from September 9th to November 3rd. Due to his mother's illenss (later we find that the reason is more delicate) Pohl, the son of a Viennese secret advisor, has to transfer from his school in Vienna to one in Pressburg. The spoiled teenager arrives to this coronation town with a head full of confused dreams about a housemaid. His schooling definitely does not leave as much impression on him as the desire-filled girl apprentices from Stollwerck, easy ladies from Vydrica or the promenading couples in Engerau. Vilikovský is a guide well acquainted with the atmosphere of a small town which is not as pretty as Vienna but naughtier and harder partying. The author takes Andreas Pohl in the company of friends from place to place with Cupid waiting around every corner. A teacher catches them, though, having a drink and a cigarette and they are expelled from the school. Andreas returns to Vienna, but in his mother's absence, he catches his father with the subject of his teenage dreams – the housemaid – and so he returns to the school in Pressburg. This gentle story is, indeed, written very gently. Kitsch definitely makes Vilikovský grow tender. It pushes witty irony back, somewhere beyond the plot and offers something more unified. It was so in the book *The Magical Parrot and Other Kitsch (*Čarovný papagáj a iné gýče) and it is so in this one too. But if you think that this is a return to true kitsch, you are wrong. There are authors, who could not write kitsch even if they wanted to and Vilikovský is one of them.

Alexander Halvoník

Viera Prokešová
Ihla
(Needle)

MilaniuM, Bratislava, 2006

Four small collections of poems, many more translations and besides that a great deal of diligent editorial work. With these words it is possible to summarize thirty years of work of Prokešová in Slovak literature, in her afterword to the book *Needle* (Ihla) – a complete poetic review**.** The book is supplemented by lyrics of songs from the Mary Stuart musical and unpublished poems.
Viera Prokešová is empathic and perceptive when it comes to herself and her surroundings. Her approach towards reality is specific in her acceptance of the flow of things. She is open to change, arrivals and departures, while subconsciously always searching for the answers of what life changes bring, in the context. Her poetry is a reflection of relationships and mood snapshots. It springs from reality, from the fleetingness of the moment. Even a minor detail of reality is an inspiration for her. Feeling, atmosphere, mood, emotional state, memory, and observance of things natural and unobtrusive are her grounds. Thanks to this her poems have a character of mood-filled thoughts about love, partner relationships, and her own life. Quite often, tender feelings clash with the bad weather outside (she frequently uses rain and snow), and melancholy is also typical. Subtle impressions which uncover the author are essentially a search for the much needed emotional assurance. Sometimes they resonate with decorative styling of the setting or situation. Here one can sense the influence of Chinese poetry translations. That is when Viera Prokešová stages the setting and it becomes a backdrop for her subtle manipulations and the proximity of type and poetical symbolism is in accord with nature and emotional state or mood.
After the release of her debut in 1984, Prokešová's poetry was labeled "masterfully feminine". The femininity was justified by her poetry's subtlety and fragility and dwelling on life and detail. Her poetry is characterized by this even today. The author remains "turned to her inner self" with a broadened view connected to increasing life experiences but without a substantial change of poetics. Her refined poetical expression makes her one of the foremost contemporary Slovak women poets.

Dana Kršáková

Ľubomír Feldek
V otcovej Prahe / Poznámky na pamäti
(In My Father's Prague / Notes on Memoirs)

Slovenský literárny klub v ČR a Spolok priateľov slovenského divadla v ČR, Praha, 2006

Feldek would not be Feldek if he did not think of a present for his 70th birthday which passed not too long ago. What else could that present be but a book titled V otcovej Prahe /In My Father's Prague/ — a publication paying homage to the town Feldek's grandparents came from and where also his family along with his grandchildren have relocated? Most importantly, though, it is a tribute to his father.
A family saga, then? Partly so, as the curious poet has found out that one of his ancestors was a Dutch 12th century minnesinger by the name of van Veldeken, whose verses were translated by a later descendant, a Captain Feldek, and is referred to also in the memoirs of Štefan Marko Daxner, who, from his mother's side was a descendant of Jan Žižka.
This is not some kind of genealogical self-conceit, though. Feldek rather suggests the strength of historical roots that bind him to his father, who, in 1959 fell victim to a political process which resulted in negative consequences for him as well as his son. The book documents each phase of this family misfortune but it does not concentrate solely on that.
In a not very accurate chronological order, Feldek gradually tells of the foundation of the so-called Trnava poets' group, the beginnings of the Mladá tvorba magazine, and his many bohemian episodes. He reminisces back to his post as an editor, to censorship and his literary friends.
He presents his stories, events, episodes and anecdotes both from his literary and regular life with a typical Feldek-*esque* humor. Here, true testimony dominates the fabulistic, even though this poet, essayist, prose writer, author of children's books, playwright and translator posseses great imagination. But reality, even political reality provides him with enough themes.
This latest book is a direct challenge for the author not to surrender to the horrors the memory offers from time to time, but to recapitulate everything connected to his life as a superb*ist*. All this stack of photographs and complete bibliography need is more text and they will be a complete autobiography.

Jozef Bžoch

Mikuláš Galanda
Outlaws
(1932)