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THE DOOMED GROUP OF TRNAVA

Ľubomír Feldek

The *Doomed Group of Trnava* – this is the title I gave to my book on the Trnava group to be published this year, borrowing, to some extent, from Verlaine. *The Doomed Poets* – as Paul Verlaine called the book on the poets of his generation who gave rise to modern French poetry. The Trnava Group accomplished something no less significant in another time and another country. Lacking the universal French glamour and appeal, a few words should then introduce the Trnava Group story to the world.

A SHORT INTRODUCTION

1945 saw the end of the Second World War, and, as a result of the postwar division of the world, Czechoslovakia found itself within the Soviet sphere of influence. In 1948, a Russian-orchestrated political coup took place in Czechoslovakia, “The Victorious February”, and the Communist party rushed to install its totalitarian regime that was to last the next 42 years.

What proceeded was prearranged under the age old Stalinist recipe – the first years of dictatorship were particularly brutal. Hundreds of innocent people executed, thousands imprisoned. People were normally incarcerated in groups; with each group came a certain label: there were the trials of the Bourgeois Nationalists, Capitalists, Major Landowners, Priests, Zionists; obviously, all the trials were kangaroo courts. The rest of society did not fare much better either: whatever you possessed was taken away from you – property, jobs, education, travel, religious life... In brief, society as a whole was deprived of freedom.

Culture and the arts, too, were deprived of their freedom of expression. A new – and the only allowed – artistic “current” arrived from Russia: Socialist Realism. In reality, there was nothing “artistic” about it: instead, it only meant a total brainwash – to dutifully give up any original ideas and to memorize the phrases and resolutions of the Communist Party, which you were supposed to identify with.

Some artists did not yield to the pressure to write articles in promotion of judicial murders and insist on the most severe punishment for the innocently convicted (including their former colleagues). But some even assisted in drawing up the scenarios for those monstrous trials, writing propaganda brochures – and some poets found it appropriate to glorify these monstrosities in verse.

Before Central Europe could recover from the horrors of war and fascism, a new era of darkness had settled in.

Still, history did not end, and fresh historical events gave a glimmer of moderate improvement. In 1953 Stalin died, and in March of 1956, the 20th Assembly of the Soviet Communist Party took place in Moscow, where Stalin’s successor, Khrushchev, unmasked his predecessor’s crimes. A radical political change seemed to be on the way – the Russian writer

Ilya Erenburg called this, poetically, the “thaw” (*óttepelj* in Russian). Sadly, even this “thaw” did not last long – in fact, it only survived from March to September before it gave way to a new freeze. As early as September 1956 an uprising arose in Budapest, and Khrushchev resumed the old practice: crushed the uprising with tanks – and the thaw was over.

Yet, the few months of thaw did manage to bring about a little miracle. As if on nature’s whim, when a spell of several warm days arrives suddenly in winter giving blossom to a few apple trees amid the snow-covered garden. So, in Slovak culture, a new generation sprang to a sudden blossom that would ignore the rules of Socialist Realism. With unbelievable speed, new trends and talents were springing up: the music of Ilya Zeljenka, Uher’s film *Sun in the Net* (*Slnko v sieti*), the visual arts of the Galanda’ Group – and the “belated debutants” (Rúfus, Válek) and the Trnava Group in literature.

Even though the thaw was over before it really began to settle in, those apple trees did not surrender, and blossomed on.

1957 – THE RISE OF THE TRNAVA GROUP

Back in those days, the very word “group” used in the name of an artistic association signaled the arrival of a change for the society-at-large.

As indicated above, since February 1948, the word group was used primarily with the adjective “treasonous”. Once included in any “group” by the State Security, you would usually end up in prison.

To be correct, however, it should be noted that the use of “group” in a less dangerous semantic setting was actually propelled by the top ranks. In the spring of 1956, the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party – apparently encouraged by Khrushchev’s revelations – made a surprising declaration that there was nothing wrong with “artists whose views are akin to one another associating in groups”. Yet another surprise arriving from “above” was the green light for journals of the young generation. In Bohemia, the journal *Květen* began to appear (around a group that defined itself as “the art of the common day”), and the journal *Mladá tvorba* would be published in Slovakia.

Appearing since September 1956, the editor-in-chief of *Mladá tvorba* was Milan Ferko, and its staff of editors included, since 1957, Miroslav Válek.

Miroslav Válek (1927) was the son of a Democratic Party official – a party that was banned following February 1948. A son of a “mukl”, which was prison slang for the innocent victims of dictatorship (short for muž určený k likvidácii – Male-to-be-extermiated) – as those Democratic Party officials who hadn’t emigrated were mostly imprisoned. Due to his family background, Miroslav Válek was a “cadre case”, expelled from university and much of an odd-jobber – working an editor of the Farmer’s Daily newspaper. Though he showed his poetic talents

prior to February 1948 (as a Catholic modernist), he was banned from publishing after that.

That, however, proved to be his poetic luck. As one of those who managed to pass by the era of ultimate darkness, escape the brainwashing and breaking of characters, he could – as a belated debutant – enter the Slovak literary scene by publishing, as late as 1959, his *Touching* (Dotyky) – a volume of pristine, ideologically-free lyrical poetry.

Moreover, Miroslav Válek – an escapist from the era of “darkness” – was on better terms with the younger generation of poets beginning to publish their first works.

This young generation appeared, individually, in *Mladá tvorba* as early as 1956. It included the poets that were to make up the Trnava Group – Ján Ondruš (1932), Jozef Mihalkovič (1935), Ján Stacho (1936) and Ľubomír Feldek (1936).

Interestingly, these poets rose to an earlier opportunity to make a name in children literature. Namely, in 1957, the *Mladé letá* publishing house organized a competition for the best book for the youngest readers. The winner was Stacho's *Chocolate Tale* (Čokoládová rozprávka); the third place was shared, *ex aequo*, by Válek's *Magic under the Table* (Kúzla pod stolom) and Feldek's *Play For Your Eyes of Blue* (Hra pre tvoje modré oči). Even today – with 50 years of hindsight – this competition is still considered a milestone of Slovak children's literature, which then, too, broke loose off the dictates of socialist realism.

(And, another milestone of Slovak book illustration – it is no coincidence that both Stacho's and Válek's books were illustrated by Albín Brunovský and Feldek's by Miroslav Cipár, then still students at the Academy of Fine Arts – and today seen as top representatives of 20th century Slovak book illustration and co-founders of a major international exhibition of illustration – BIB.)

It was the “older brother” of this generation, Miroslav Válek, who – having managed to quit his outsider job in *Farmer's Daily* in 1957 and to become an editor of *Mladá tvorba* – suggested to his junior poets to create a literary group.

This idea was encouraged also by *Mladá tvorba's* editor-in-chief Milan Ferko; *Mladá tvorba* gave them one entire issue (April 1958) to fill out with their contributions – manifestos, articles, poems, short stories and translations.

Four young poets eagerly rose to the occasion. As three of them – Ondruš, Stacho and Mihalkovič – came (like Válek) from Trnava, they called themselves the Trnava Group.

The *Mladá tvorba* editorial board was very benevolent, and gave the Group just one condition to observe in their issue: several standard rubrics such as “New Voices” were to remain. The Trnava Group complied, and found one more “new voice” – the fiction writer Rudolf Sloboda (1938) joined in for that issue.

This whole preparatory stage took place in 1957 – exactly half a century ago. The Group was established in the Autumn of 1957. The Group issue was prepared in December 1957. Additionally that year, Válek wrote his historical essay *The Roads of Poetry* (Cesty poézie) that appeared in the March 1958 issue of *Mladá tvorba*, to pave the way for new poetry whose authors were to present their program in the April issue. In his essay, Válek wrote: “Where will that poetry be coming from? It will come from and use the language of the street. It will come from the factories, fields, cafés, from contemporary life, and will speak the language of this life. It will have its bewildered and somewhat child-like, yet seeing eyes. It will discover things unknown and new, and will insist on speaking them. Thus, it will find insufficient both what has been and what is... The old

walls will be torn down, yet its new house will not be built on air.”

Válek's essay is, until today, not only a remarkable forecast of the development of poetry, but an intriguing testimony of its time long gone by, when the Communist dictatorship, although then already on a moderate path, had to hear that the new poetry will come from “the factories and the fields” – the formula of nation-building of its time, to be appeased. Yet, Válek adds “from cafés”, a new, cryptic signal of conspiracy that things are a-changing. “Bewildered child-like eyes” foretell the broad range of the upcoming poetry, and, at the same time, its reaching back to modernism – every time when modern poetry was about to release new energies, it did so in close association with alternative poetical values (naveté, child's fancy and the like). And by saying that what has been does no longer suffice, Válek signals, inconspicuously, the political aspect what the Group was preparing to present as its manifesto: rejection of Socialist Realism.

1958 – THE TRNAVA GROUPS SURFACES

So, the apple trees were in blossom, although the thaw had been over.

The thaw had gone – yet, we were young, and paid little attention.

After the Budapest Uprising had been suppressed in September 1956, it did not take much for the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party to figure out that the indulgence had been a little too quick. It rushed to quash its willingness to tolerate artistic groups, and resumed to view groups with suspicion, as something treasonous that must be monitored and eradicated when the time is ripe.

As a result, the Trnava Group had been preparing to make its public appearance already in adversity, and the timing of its actual public appearance was even worse.

It was heading towards a catastrophe – and was bound not to miss.

The Group's issue of MT 4/58 contained three program-like manifestos:

A Word on Poetry, A Word on Children Literature, A Word on Translation.

It further included programmatic poems – Ondruš' *Memory* (Pamäť), Stacho's *Early Morning's Recollection Between Two Cigarettes* (Ranná rozpomienka medzi dvoma cigaretami) Mihalkovič' *I'll Put Another One* (Priložím) and Feldek's *Play For Your Eyes of Blue* (Hra pre tvoje modré oči).

The New Voices rubric was bringing Sloboda's short story *That House Was Entered by a Wide Gate* (Do toho domu sa vchádzalo širokou bránou).

And a number of other texts, articles, translations, leaflets – the substantial ones have been named.

The key issue on the agenda of that poetical manifesto was its refusal of ideologically-biased poetry, which a very slight and transparent euphemism for the refusal of Socialist Realism the Trnava Group wanted to replace with a sensual and concrete vision of the world. (Hence, critics later called the Group *Konkretisti*.)

We considered this concreteness of senses a more reliable guarantee of truth than any idea that is all too easily spoiled by ideology. In addition to truth, we proclaimed the freedom of imagination, poetic devices and experiment. And when specifying our refusals, we did not hesitate to refer to some respectable names.

Those respectable names were instrumental to the power that suppressed our efforts before they saw the light of day.

The April issue of MT was never published. The Central Committee had its manuscript proofread by around 20 experts (most of them negative) – and, as a result, had the entire publication shut down. What did appear, was only a shell.

Other kinds of discrimination ensued. Including the loss of my job and forced acceptance of a new job as a manual worker.

The already forthcoming edition of my *Play For Your Eyes of Blue* was stopped – its 10,000 copies left the printing house and ended up in the dustbin in 1959.

Overall, the political climate got worse. The late 1950s in Slovakia saw another series of monstrous trials, including that of the treasonous Kauzál group and co., which involved the imprisonment of my father.

In the arts, however, the bad always has its good side, too.

The blow that was to strike the Trnava Group in its inception proved, in fact, to be reinforcing. The short time given to its birth became the time of its Big Bang, from which its universe developed.

WHAT, THEN, IS THE MEANING OF THE TRNAVA GROUP IN SLOVAK LITERARY HISTORY?

Where does the universe that developed from the Big Bang of April 1958 lie?

Later, The Trnava Group gave up publishing further group manifestos or journals – even if that were possible.

It did something else instead: it lived on as a free and friendly grouping, relying on the individual stories of its members.

Those individual stories would make up novels.

Miroslav Válek became a government minister.

After an almost fatal car accident, Ján Stacho spent twenty years bed-ridden.

Rudolf Sloboda committed suicide.

Maybe sometime those novels *will* be written.

Yet, the life events were still dominated by the events of literature. Whatever the time was, good or bad, the Trnava Group never surrendered its creative freedom that it was able to enjoy at its onset. Thus, it was principally by its literary practice, not by theoretical postulates that the Trnava Group made a deep impact on Slovak culture.

Needless to say, particularly impacted were the three areas originally targeted in the Group's programming – poetry, children's literature and the translation of poetry.

Just to list what all the Group's poets have accomplished would fill several pages.

Yet, the essence of their influence has a still deeper foundation.

To capture that, we would need to go all the way back to the roots of Slovak culture, the times of the Great Moravian Empire.

That empire blossomed culturally in the 9th century A.D – the same century of its ultimate demise.

What followed was – or rather appears to be – a half-millennium-long silence in Slovak cultural history – especially its language-related cultural history. But this silence is only apparent – indeed, the silence only involves written documents. Orally, our ancestors had kept and cultivated huge cultural capital in the form of tales, songs and sayings that is in every aspect comparable with the cultural heritage of other, much more sizable nations. The problem occurred during the revival of national literature. Those who carried on written culture were

mostly priests or people with other kinds of limitations, which prevented the revived Slovak literature – practically until the twentieth century – to be on the par with its own roots.

To oversimplify the case – it took centuries before someone could write a poem whose contents and expressive means would be as free as those of the folk song.

The case is well illustrated on amatory poetry. In the 19th century a Slovak poem would scarcely feature eroticism, if at all. Sládkovič would ascetically embrace his homeland here and *Marína* there, and the only truly erotic poem by a poet of Slovak blood is *The Lady Inn-Keeper of Hortobágy* – written by Petöfi in Hungarian.

Well into the 20th century the Slovak poet is still at a loss when addressing the man-woman relationship; taking a closer at those parts of the womanly body, whereon already Rimbaud, in his pink little wagon, was cheerily driving his spider of a kiss, is still an anathema to the Slovak poet – although one hundred year's the former's junior.

And suddenly enters the Trnava Group, and, with it, Stacho's verse:

*Just keep on falling, wounded girl, and let the metals ignite.
Eh, closer to the moon, little curve of flexible legs.
That ridge in the apricot's bound to give birth to a child
one day,
You Queen of dust, you god of common day.*

Paradoxically, it was during the era of utmost deprivation of freedom – the totalitarian Socialist Realism – that we finally broke free of our belatedness.

The accomplishment of the Trnava Group in Slovak literary history can be summarized in a single sentence: it ultimately brought Slovak literature to a world-level.

Although the world has no idea yet.

But read, as you should do, Stacho's *Reading from the Dust* (Čítanie z prachu) or *From the Day As Lived* (Z prežitého dňa), Sloboda's *Narcissus* (Narcis) or *Reason* (Rozum), Ondruš' *Crazy Moon* (Šialený mesiac) or *Genuflection* (Kľak)...

And the rest will be told by bibliographies.

Translated by Euben Urbánek



From the left: Ján Stacho, Jozef Mihalkovič, Ľubomír Feldek.



Photo: Daniel Hevier

JÁN ONDRUŠ (1932 – 2000)

The poetry of this most distinctive member of the Trnava poets' group underwent various changes, just as changes occurred in his personal life, yet retained its sense of urgency and a high esthetic level. The natural world of the everyday grew troubled with states of anxiety, ecstatic clairvoyance, dreams and the phantastic – particularly in his first published book *Insane Moon* (Šialený mesiac, 1965). His generation's utopia of autonomous poetry underwent another test of solitude and pain in the second book *Gesture with Flower* (Posunok s kvetom, 1968). The obverse side of Ondruš's existentially tense vision of the human condition and poetry was his gravitation toward the situational, linguistically grotesque, blasphemous, and aesthetically ugly – chiefly in the major poems *Genuflection* (Kľak, 1968) and *In a State of Gall* (V stave žľče, 1970). With several re-editions authorized and reworked poetry selections, *Swallowing a Hair* (Prehĺtanie vlasu, 1996), and new collections – e. g. word formative decomposition grotesques *Sheep in*

Ján Ondruš

P O E M S

Wolf's Clothing (Ovca vo vlčej koži, 1997) – Ondruš definitively established himself with a wide readership as a key poet of recent decades. Ondruš's work is different from the work of his peers; it seems as if, from the beginning, he knew everything about life and its counterpart, death. It is as if, even in various fragments and pauses, he was able to indicate these states. Anxiety in his poems draws us into its pure, immaculate depths like a well. Ondruš's high degree of sensitivity, clear symbolic sight, and metaphorically effective and evocative, precise word arrangements make him an exceptional poet. His work has significantly influenced many of his peers and also influenced the poetic appearances which came after him. Ondruš revolts against the lack of substance in deeds, life, and language. He wants his every word to be filled with live, bulletproof content so that it breathes and speaks for itself. The publication of his collections of poems was always an important event in the poetry community, even though there were some he had not authorized during his life. In poetry often sharp as a razor, the author is a master of situations that put us on the edge or at least on the border of two planes. This raises the need to react and take a stand. In his work, Ondruš does not avoid the edge which he perceives very sensitively. On the contrary, something inside him seeks and identifies it. He is an utter concretist, rebelling against conventionalism and

shallowness, against indifference and ordinariness. More and more, he turns away from capturing beauty and inclines towards destruction and disintegration which he captures with the precision of a surgeon. An important feat of Ondruš's was the translation of poetry by the Serbian poet Vasko Pop. His poetics apparently appealed greatly to him. Ondruš is not a poet of harmony, he does not even attempt to achieve it. Instead, he breaks it up, his philosophy being a broken shell rather than a whole egg. The feeling of anxiety springs from his poetry and finds it in a state of exact memory, where the author records what happened or could have happened in the circumference of his own being or spaces more remote.

Ondruš's compositions are proof that he was able to grasp motifs, masterfully, on a smaller as well as a greater plane. More often, he begins to find the sense for meaning and absurdity of playing with language. He was able to turn a collocation inside-out like a glove and find meaning in it. In his entire work he fights against the meaningless abstract logic of words and things, later parodying it light-heartedly. Ondruš had a unique talent and sense for words, syllables, and sound. He arranged them in a way to achieve their attunement with the environment and with themselves so that they would express all situations possible and impossible.

WELL

The well is heavy, you won't pull up the well,
it has roots, it's like the oak.

Water green and stagnant,
water self-evident, all by itself.

They let down a ladder, they flung a leg over,
anxiety gripped them,
from below they called,

they looked upwards, they saw the stars.

Three times they cast deep,
they found a chainlet,
they found a blue pot,
they found a needle.

They brought out a floating apple.

They drew out a ball, soaked in water
and squirting like an orange.

They drew out a clock stopped by mud,
not the one from the conjuror's hat.

Quietly they emerged, the well
was unmoving, powerful and of high age.

Later they drew out
the frog at the source,
a helmet,
they stuck it with pitchforks, tossed it aside,
carried it forth like a trophy.

The water went behind them, it rose up
and was self-evident, all by itself.

ASH

1
Blow on the ash,

blowing you shrink, you vanish
with it, quickly you wane,
you're one blow less,

blowing gathers in you,
'twill burst out when you open
at your blowing end,

by blowing the world is enlarged, stretched
thereby, widens and hardens,

suddenly you'll look round:
the lesser part of you's left
and the part you exhaled sprouting through you,



it's perused you, it's better outside you,
it's a mouth quicker and it knows you right through,

the exhaled part speaks through you
from sleep and in sleep knows the answer,

the rest's for the corner, the handkerchief,
it did not shine from darkness and did not blow,

the exhaled part turns and lip-smacks,
stamps, the rest flees and has a dog's head
fitted for barking.

2

– Sigh into the ash, excite
yourself with it through tears or a hymn.

– To the ash make an exit
from dreams or from pulpit and church.

– Grow old unto ash, sadden to it
and pine into ash.

MARTHA

You'll place a mirror before a mirror,
they'll turn their backs to each other.

You'll put out the light
between the mirrors.

Your mouth laid across my mouth.
Your word stopped by my word.
Your caress rubbed out by my caress.

Whispered love. Dreams of forgiveness.
So grow set by each other. Weep.
Till I count to three, smile at me,
tender and snuggled,
over the grid of straps and collar-bone
a translucent potato sprout.

I'm going (don't go!),
I'll be back.

We'll be together. Like two mirrors
that have turned their backs on each other.

The shore of your eyes,
delirious, soft,
behind both their backs.

STONE

Alone

in the clash of our faces,

splintering, a hatchet
hung on a kiss,

I mark you with love,
with a thought cancelled-out, a yawn,

I'm going,
I'll swing off on the house door,

I'll be gone on a growing branch,

I'll fly by the wringing of hands,
because, look,

wine is of you,
gall is of me,
comb's about you,
hatchet's of me,

fire's about you,
ash is of me,

about you is every
evening with the lunar
levitation of magic in our heads,

about me is midnight, or dawn and return
when I twist my head under my armpit,
I sleep and shut eyes about you,

about you is the nightingale,
about me is the dog

who barks all of that,
barks that about me,
barks the reverse,

when in wringing of hands
I gather breath, anguish, scream,
I leave between us the distance of mouths

and thus from afar
I mark you with love,
with a thought cancelled-out, a yawn,

to the verge even of stone, which
is about me, in which yes is and no
and where the head can be banged.

BLACK WHITE

1

Black world, radiant
footprint in water
and in the footprint a shard of glass.

2

You will stoop
and break earth below the horizon, round
as the arc of a hand on the steering-wheel.

3

You'll straighten, you'll hang on by the trouser-leg
to the shadow that'll hold you, repeating
gesture after gesture
and keeping in step.

4

Who of us is black,
who white,
who weak,
who strong,
who broke earth below the horizon, round
as the arc of a hand on the steering-wheel.

Translated by John Minahane



Albin Brunovský



Photo: Peter Procházka

LÝDIA VADKERTI-GAVORNÍKOVÁ (1932–1999)

Her poetry fluctuates between the eternal restlessness of the soul and the tranquility of the Earth and its materials such as soil and wood. She finds likeness in the permanent search for peace and harmony, and the forming of shapes from soil and wood. Her first collection, *Candlemas tide* (Pohromnice, 1965), linked her to the *Concretists* group, mainly Jozef Mihalkovič. The allegorical work *Wine* (Vino, 1982) can be considered an attempt at a poetic testament by Vadkerti-Gavorníková. Her last collection, *A Game of Odds and Evens* (Hra na pár-nepár, 1992), emerges from the situation of a woman after the loss of her partner which recapitulates her fate and life's afflictions. Intently, she watches the growth of a young grapevine until the harvest and winemaking in terms of human life – with its turns of events, coincidences, and

pleasures. Vadkerti does not savor the moment. On the contrary, she sorts thoughts, mercilessly selecting and arranging them into images which, alive and unbound, twine through her poetry. Her view of life can be dubbed harsh and unsentimental. Her emotions spring from her own memories and experiences as well as the reminiscence of the wine region she comes from. She, usually, wrote in free verse which as if on purpose often became interrupted, though in some books she also wrote in set form. Her work does not reflect solitude or alienation – people in her lyrics meet, their glances connect. She is not a typical feminist poet writing about love either, if we mean a simplified presentation of an emotional flare.

Vadkerti's poetry surely reflects the passionate relationship towards nature and the things that it consists of. She is not a landscape poet. Even in nature, before anything else, she strives to grasp the soul and its internal wholeness, richness, and depth which get carried over into human life. Her dialog with the reader is straightforward; without hiding anything she lays everything out before him, while for the entire time he remains her partner and teammate. The author had experienced many situations, especially the painful ones, which she needed to write herself free of, and relive them in a different reality – on paper, where

things are more finely tuned, more illuminated. Her verses do not explain or clarify anything, yet she delivers things with inevitable and subtle, distinctively selected details which are so close to the reader that he takes them to be his own. After Maša Haľamová, who approached the poetic form and testimony in a different manner, Vadkerti is an author with rough, yet sensitive insight. She never expresses fear in her poetry, and it was probably so in her life. Her verses pierce through fear like rays of light through darkness. Perhaps, that is the reason nothing in her texts is simplified or embellished. Her poetry reveals what winemaking (and writing poetry) is like, that it is always a matter of the season when things ripen and fill up with juices which can be racked. Just like grapes, she pressed her verses to get material for good, strong wine. Vadkerti perceived work in nature as a part of its eternal cycle rather than something extraordinary. But the images and metaphors in her poems are always extraordinarily powerful in their imaginativeness, her life experiences, and focused straightforward style. There are no glittery knickknacks – every word is important. Just like a lump on a tree trunk, every word is natural, filled with content, and belonging only to itself. Vadkerti is a poetess of artistic integrity, uncommon colorfulness, and strong spirit into poetry.

WIND

*At the start cautious
like someone sightless
fumbling the home
and searching for the door
It bangs the window with its head
Walls will wail
window glass clink
chimneys begin to howl with melancholy
and drums crack in the ears of jugs*

*Then on the door the latch rattles
like noon in a pocket watch
and corners start to cuckoo midnight*

*Meanwhile the wind has dragged itself inside
the violin's little cavity through the bass key
and is already whistling in church
in verses full of windlessness*

And you mutely put up with them

DESIRE

*To get into the poem
like the pit in a cherry*

*To tuck yourself up in it
as in a lap*

*To sweat in it
as in your own skin*

*To preserve yourself in it
as in the grave*

Words Words Words

*Go poem go
take yourself off to an old willow
Whisper to the hollow trunk
So no-one can hear*

*that the poet is
naked*

*Words Words Words
All we have on
Nothing more
Nothing less*

FALLING ASLEEP

*Father,
who fashioned this bed
from punctilious planks
for a whole life long
now help me seek out
lost children.*

*Or better a new berth
fixed together from the unpunctual
bark of conifers
at least for one night
let me lie as in pine needles
let a forest grow over me*

*Hasten
Already the moment is passing
Already somewhere it has caught fire*

*And a squirrel
through the burnt-out ground*

*Behind her the dog
Amen*

WHITE NIGHTS WITH A ROOSTER

*There'll be, my daughter,
white nights
with a rooster on the roof
Shadow split by lightning
A double loneliness*

*And beyond the blaze of the slates
you'll ignite a field of poppies
Wolf-dark will come*

*You'll go in a red
circle
One leg
will catch up the other*

*There'll be, my daughter,
red nights
with a rooster in the well
A multiple picture of the moon
sparkling beneath the surface
And how ever much you scoop up
then so much the less*

*You'll drop the tiny key
of a child's treasure chest
into the well*

*You'll hear upside-down buckets
rattle above the water
Behind the blind window the goatsucker
will hoot at billy goat corner:*

*(The maiden dreamed in a white heat
her little bed caught fire beneath her)*

*She sleeps
Her pretty head streams out
over the bedside*

as if she already knew

DESIRE

*To get into the poem
like the pit in a cherry*

*To tuck yourself up in it
as in a lap*

*To sweat in it
as in your own skin*

*To preserve yourself in it
as in the grave*

Words Words Words

*Go poem go
take yourself off to an old willow
Whisper to the hollow trunk
So no-one can hear*

*that the poet is
naked*

*Words Words Words
All we have on
Nothing more
Nothing less*

*Translated by Viera and
James Sutherland-Smith*



Albín Brunovsky

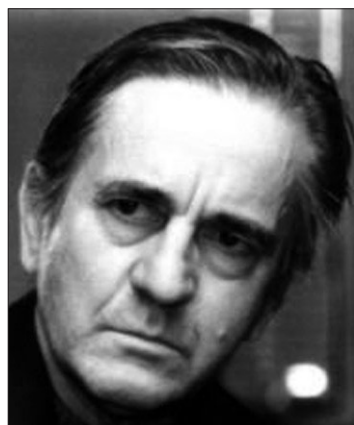


Photo: Peter Procházka

JOZEF MIHALKOVIČ (1935) is a poet who mends what has been broken and searches for what has been lost. He is a poet who finds his inspiration in simple human situations. He has a deep connection to his hometown of Modra, which determines a lot in his work; the undulating landscape around it and its uniqueness are present in his verses. In his writing, Mihalkovič seeks harmony to overcome a tragic feeling of life. The search is very intense in his first two collections *Sorrow* (Lútosť, 1962) and *Wintering Places* (Zimoviská, 1965). The oscillation between discovery and perpetual loss of the sense of human existence is the main characteristic of Mihalkovič also in his later collections – *Where Are You Rushing* (Kam

Jozef Mihalkovič P O E M S

sa náhlite, 1974), *Approximate Location* (Približné položenie, 1978), and *Occasional Poems* (Príležitostné básne, 1988). Mihalkovič likes to go back to his younger days and his childhood where he finds his themes. His poetry often has a reflective character, yet still keeping its imagery, which has been, during different periods of his life, naturally influenced by his translation of French poetry. He is a master of the free verse with a precise structure, as well as poetry of a songlike form, present mostly in his later work and in translation. Mihalkovič is open to the so-called occasional poetry. He is convinced that a theme can be found anywhere and at any time if only one has his eyes open and his soul is ready. Although he carries the things around him over into his work, the most important for him is the human element – people and relatives whose names he mentions, thus adding a stamp of concreteness and truth. Nature does not constitute a mere backdrop in his poems either, it is a part of the author, thus his work also reflects on long walks around the hills and vineyards near Modra,

which radiate peace, assurance, and beauty. Mihalkovič is a moderately productive author. It seems as if he needed to gain experiences for a poem so that it chimes with his own existence. He often reacts to how fast we live our lives, to the rush which pushes us further away from harmonious people and things, and protests against it, creating a model of a peaceful, mindful living of humanity among its contemporaries. The theme of death and the fleetingness of human life, or actually the futility of living, makes its way back into his poems but later makes way for the everyday little pleasures in the family, in the country. Above all, Mihalkovič remains a meditative poet, commenting on basic existential problems, often forming them into questions or unfinished sentences... His poetic nature is open to anything new, pure, and untarnished. In his later work, there are similarities to children's poetry – the poems are simple, songlike. He is always truthful and his poetry is perfectly roofed by the way he lives. Perhaps that is where his focused freshness, eagerness, and peaceful contemplation come from.

REGRET

World, you flatter me so,
but what good is it, at the price of how many
forcible heaves in silence
from heart, pulse, consciousness,
occupied with relating
to being and nothing.

World, you menace me so, you hold back,
as so often before
you are giving me signs from afar.
You command me, correct me,
spoil me
and leave me so.

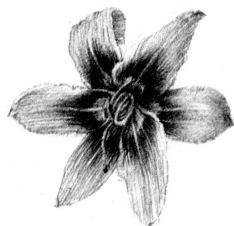
I dream almost tangibly.
And outwardly I bleed.

WHERE ARE YOU RUSHING

Where are you rushing, pedestrians.
The world is so very quiet
circling, going round. Time to throw
a few gravel-scoops on the asphalt.

CRUMPLED PAPER

Crumpled paper in the dark,
without scraping,
is unsqueezing on the floor
from some memorial fistful.
Steps outside, unavowed
by any obvious chirping
in the calloused snow,
might be presupposed.
But my childhood snow
melts
elsewhere.

**RAIN**

Million-beaked rain pecking the day;
we cannot rage at him, he is most loyal
when he cares
nothing for us.

Again his care is what kind he shall be,
that is why children flee from him
before grown-ups;
the look of the land spontaneously changes,
it does not cling to its own. Or yes, precisely by
that indiscreet, love-struck wink
aside, and likewise face to face.

SO MANY PEOPLE

So many people pass under our windows
and the asphalt pavement heats like a good fur coat.
I don't want to go out, so at least I breathe
and through my sun's-heart in the corridor
I look
at books scattered about the land.
In a while there won't be a lamb to be seen.
Too bad, but I hold out, already smiling
as I join the other pedestrians
and this is my lot
for life.

RAKING ABOUT IN OLD NOTES...

Forgive me,
I wanted to go with you –
or rather,
instead of you,
that would be
more accurate;
alas, I didn't manage to get equipped
and I too travelled –
it matters, does not matter
– I don't know (a flimsy patch);

on these days
I attended
at the place of my
dwelling
and I did not find anyone,
even myself.



If the next man does not matter to me,
even the world seems irrelevant.

YOU DID A SWEEPOUT

There was a sweepout and things should be clean
in self and surroundings.
You stripped off and that is not
the same. Make up the weight with salt.

Now the thing is not to jump,
not pour out both, not spoil
that fragile ice
which holds and does its work.

I fear children,
a snake bit me.
Here is a table.
It could not be quieter.
I sit,
back to the door,
like a hunchback.

Translated by John Minahane



Photo: Peter Procházka

JÁN BUZÁSSY (1935) is a philosophical and meditative poet who analyzes the most difficult questions humanity has been dealing with since antiquity. He is familiar with antique motifs, which he often used in his early work, and even in the most recent of his poetry we find traces of antique literature. In the 1960s, his writing searched for a route among the sensuous urgencies of poetic image with words or paradoxes of life and philosophic aspirations of poetry – *A Game with Knives* (Hra s nožmi, 1965), *The School of Cynics* (Škola kynická, 1966), *Nausicaa* (1970). The clear essence of this period was captured by the fragmented propositional lyrics of the collection *Beauty Leads Stone* (Krása vedie kameň, 1972). During the changed political situation in the 1970s, Buzássy found an alternative in the harmonious creativity of the classical themes of nature, love, work and art – *Fairy Tale* (Rozprávka, 1975), *A Year* (Rok, 1976), *Phonolite* (Znelec, 1976), *Spirit of the Elder Tree* (Bazová duša, 1978). The ambitious *Plain, Mountains* (Pláň, hory, 1982) was composed over a long period as a summation of his major themes which overflowed into the hardly less valuable lyrics from life's matters of fact and perceptions, *Saint John's Wort* (Lubovník, 1979). After his collection *The Golden Cut* (Zlatý rez, 1988) his poetry became surprisingly full of well-being, a poetic *Autumn – Remedy with Wine* (Náprava vínom, 1993), *Days* (Dni, 1995), *Light of the Waters* (Svetlo vôd, 1997) and *A Walk in Autumn* (Prechádzka jeseňou, 1999). Thanks to his years of experience in translating, Buzássy perfectly uses various verse and stanza forms. He draws his inspiration from literature, nature, and, in the past years, from the moments of current social life. Buzássy raises questions patiently, persistently, demandingly and he often finds answers, or rather their alternatives, because just as any free-thinking individual, he admits that there may be as many answers as there are people. Despite often setting high moral criteria, he does not judge people and their deeds. Instead, he bitterly and skeptically comments on them, like a person who gets involved having nothing to lose. Buzássy's work is also about the search for beauty – classic beauty which does not fade out and can bring an important moral message. The poet is very diligent in this search, just as he is in his search for moderateness for

Ján Buzássy

POEMS

the people and the world of today, which he understands but declines to take its standards of beauty and success for his own. He reduces his voluminous verses to stanzas of four verses, still showing his mastership. Buzássy's work is characterized by thematic, image and formal harmony, which soothe the mind and the soul. There is an important relationship between Buzássy's work and music, from which he draws its chords and harmony. His verses are great for reciting or a quiet meditation. The reader enters a world which may not be his own, perhaps more difficult to perceive, but the thematic content makes up for everything. Irony and self-irony in the verses come hand-in-hand with information about

one's becoming old and nearing the end. This brings about a certain need for self-evaluation as well as the feeling of not being indebted to anyone, and the feeling that we might leave something behind after all. This is what the author is like now, in his mature age, though these tendencies appear in his early works, too. He demonstrates a serious relationship towards life as a momentary value, which can be so easily lost. But a careful reader will also find humor in Buzássy's ever-serious verses, and he will get a glance of the author's other face. Buzássy's poetry chastely uplifts and touches the most human parts inside of us.

NIGHT SOFT AS AN ARGENTINEAN TANGO

Guessing from the flight of birds death has said
that nobody has yet turned our dead over in their grave

And whenever we come to the spring
we find the damp tongue of the earth
at the tip of sleep sensing the bitter taste of death
under an armpit a touch of inspiration – come

Come let us fetch meat dried by the moon
fruit tumbled at midnight
before morning cracking the embryo of stones

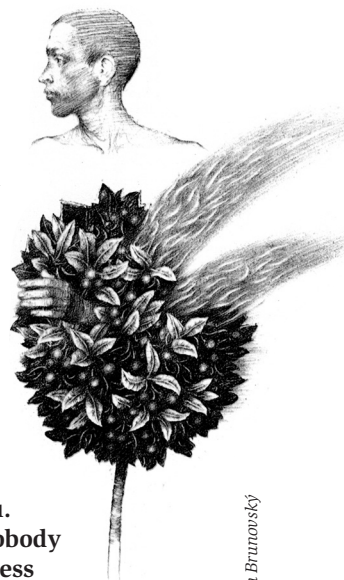
I'm afraid to look further thought the hole left by the moon
I'm afraid to show my splayed muscles
and old men say – let's go it's not so far

Fire – a flower knocking on a shell of stone
the dead are so passionately silent listening to
whether the earth is still moving

THE CONNECTION

In this melancholy city where in the place of the synagogue
there's a post office and Hebrew telephone calls wait for you.
You look up the numbers in the Old Testament, you ring, nobody
lifts the phone. Have they gone to tend flocks in the wilderness
or flown off in smoke?

Again a gesture into emptiness, again the impossibility of connection.
The angel,
who connects you tries through Chaldean, Aramaic
but a dialling code does not exist in these dings. Impossible
to leave a message, your own number
for a call back. No calls from there. We are
without connection to the Old Testament and to the New
we have a long cable. It's as if the subscribers – the altered numbers –
have deliberately confused us. John the Evangelist
speaks as if with the voice of a woman. Don't hang up on him,
miss, please, perhaps he's writing another revelation,
but I have to break in on him with a few details.
It's laid down. It's given.



Albin Brunovsky

As when he says: I am that who is.
Your additions to the fate of the world are late by two
thousand years.

You won't bribe anybody, they only take drachmas, that
dusty remuneration.
Perhaps the cows of Hebron will give milk
and festival twirls a message could be made from cheese.
Festival twirls
we don't take, the angel behind the counter shakes his head
especially not with a message for the addressee.
It's given. In a melancholy city, sentenced to beget money,
without a direct connection, only with literary contacts ,
dependent only on gossip grandmas, through them –
Lord – how many moddlemen do you have, but such fain
news –

at last you've got the signals.
It is given.

SPIDER, MELANCHOLY HUNTER,
keeper and victim,
spitting on his fingers he spins out of himself.

From matter the source of parables.
He spins from spittle until dry
as long as the source does not dry up.

But before that he will burn his web.

THIRD KNIFE

You who live at the edge of the world
at night despairingly drink water so that you might be pure
only statues are certain of their content.

Stars are the tracks left by birds heaped by the wind
when wood conducts fire according to your will
then wait if women weep hip against hip
and listen how it sounds
from bird to bird a hair teased out by the wind.

Love is the helmet we wear down to our ears
and nothing is excepted, Oh dog, wolf, bird, bull
but in the hearths in the lenses let us add more
so it cannot pluck out our eyes.

Of what I say nothing will be fulfilled
but drinking from a bank stay on the surface of the water
because water will wash the body to its bones
Only as long as the blue strings of blood are tensed
and feel the pulse's touch
and sound out

I tell the truth, because nothing better occurs to me
I try to touch the night on its most sensitive spot
and I say
go on tiptoe so as not to wake the earth,
it is not yet spring
and only children and dogs can make out the earth.

Sharpen your knives on the steps
at night despairingly drink water so that you might be pure
don't be afraid, evil is in good hands
place the coin under the tongue

fingers on your eyelids
go.

And if the moon has gone
the better we will fight in the shadows.

Regard the tip of the knife deep within up
buried in the earth.

THE PALM OF A HAND WILL COVER A CANDLE'S WICK

and love is stripped away in the flame
In the lee (right under your nose), in angelic hair
which flows like tears.

A sigh will blow out a candle, night closes itself.

Angel feathers darken, mature,
become overgrown with a pelt,
not merely one that stamps its hoof.

And desire rakes out the hearth.

• • •

The spirit moved from a Christian
to a Buddhist temple.
It softened because touched by another.
It rattled as if overturned on the other side
and on it, where it lay
is something written in strange letters.

Only the body which is always Christian
reads it in Hebrew.

• • •

God, when they had knocked out all his teeth
and pulled out his fingernails and when
in exhaustion he had signed at last that he
did not exist, that he had never existed,
just sat
as if in the dock.

You whisper to him in this dream: "Others can, you must.
You exist

because I need you. Without your existence
mine would not be. How could my lesser
affliction remain either?"

"I know, I retreat,
but I do not surrender."

• • •

From whom – if not from mankind
does the devil learn cruelty. He adds to his learning.
The devil who knew no mother and then does not know
what an old people's home can mean.
He himself devised it, but mankind organises
a trip for virgins to a foreign land.

Eventually no-one can tell
on which side of death hell is.

• • •

Tatiana writes:

"I'm writing you a letter and what..."
in the midst of a long ponder into which
destiny soaks – like a stain on wall paper.
Life is a shout and silence death.

Thus Pushkin today dictates: "Tania, write:
A letter for Onegin. And two copies!
Don't forget. Two carbons!"

Death wouldn't know how to be so cruel.

• • • •

"Also a sinful priest is a priest," you found in Holan.
He's talking about himself although perhaps it's a quotation
set in italics. Yet doesn't it address you
even though from a book, you won't be permitted to read?

He was a bad priest though of good faith. Night after night
he conducted disputes with evil, so close... already he had
made out
on his face features of the devil. Thus in the morning he'd
shave himself urgently
so as to strip them off – down to the blood, down to
the last outline.

• • •

Hole, pit, chasm, grave
are between what is said and written,
and reading is following the tracks
left by yourself from time to time.

The eyes are quicker, mind delays,
in this advance of meaning, too; in reading
two processes of thought and just a single head.
Truth is a great tale. Brightening, darkening?
Singing, dreaming?

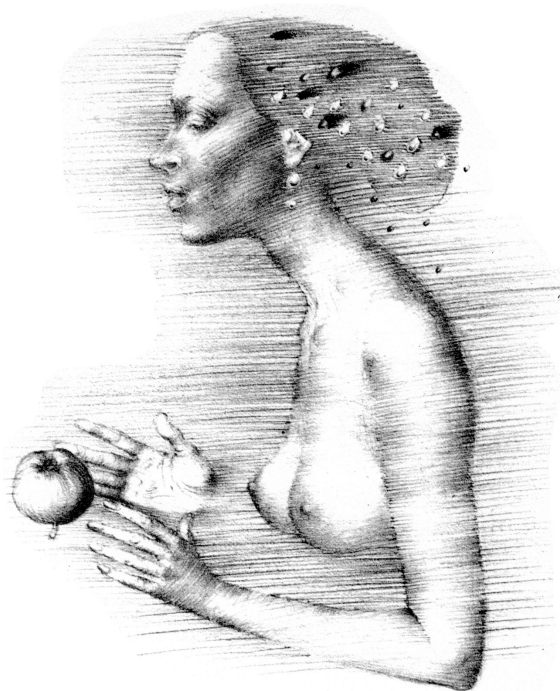
IN DISTRESS,

in time's distress which every being has
a tear of blood trickles down,
twofold,
undiscerned by the self
what is still tear and what is blood.

For blood, more of the body than a tear
which is blood of the spirit,
stifles the heart and replaces vision:
with a view from a godly distance.

And in the grey pebble of each tear
a small spark circles.

Translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith



Albín Brunovsky



Photo: Archive

JÁN STACHO (1936 – 1995) is a poet, translator and author of books for children and youth. After graduating from the Medical Faculty in Bratislava, he worked as a doctor in Rožňavské Bystré and Šenkvice. For a short time, in 1969, he acted as the Czechoslovak

Ján Stacho

P O E M S

cultural attaché in India. A tragic accident caused him to be bed-ridden and cared for by his mother for 22 years. He died in 1995 in Bratislava. Stacho debuted with a collection of poems *Honeymoon* (Svadobná cesta, 1961), followed by collections of poems *Double-Armed Clean Body* (Dvojamenné čisté telo, 1964), *Flare-Ups* (Zážehy, 1967), *Apocrypha* (Apokryfy, 1969), and *From the Passed Day* (Z prežitého dňa, 1978). He translated the works of Pierre-Jean de Beranger, Saint-John Perse, Pablo Neruda, Arthur Rimbaud, Dylan Thomas, and others. Stacho glorifies

the object of love which he empathically immerses himself into and changes it into a subject described by light and shadow, the focal point of the depicted image.

If at the beginning image was the source of awe for him, then his interest gradually moved to language and word became his god. Reality is still magical for him, heading both inside and out. He understands every movement of word in his poems in connection with universal law and its actions. Magical poetic imagery penetrates the reader like the water of life, flowing into

a stream bed in his spiritual land, fertilizing it by word. Images created in this way are rare originals in Slovak poetry. He is one of a few men, who describe pregnancy and birth through their own eyes. He is fascinated by the double role of the female body, which he observes from the outside and at the same time participates in the unique love connection. The

Madonna with Child is a Madonna even with the child yet unborn in her belly, a child safe from the attacks of death outside. It is one of the deifications of calling on the god of fertility – the counterpart of war and death. Red and blue often appear in his poems symbolizing fire and water, blood and heaven, passion and harmony, as two opposites drawing the pure state of

things towards them, as they were at the moment of conception, in the state of all energetic virtualities of creation. For the poet, word and humanity are synonymous. Stacho was a magical vitalist and intuitivist integrated into universal order not only thanks to love but also thanks to failure.

BEING AND FIRE

To live life the way the birds do,
fumble the cornfields with fire.
(Rose, with roots in the under water
sound the bell.)

To whisper oneself to surfeit
on starchy scraps of breeze.
(Flame unfound in the roses,
shyly blow.)

To betray what light is
by the uncovered crumb of bread.
(Love, with two-shouldered pure body
leap and flare.)

ONE LOVE

I've had great loves in lavish plenty
and numerous filthy flings of youth.
One love I've still, which can content me:
that's telling you the honest truth.

WORD

Time in fire and the word. And flame, free
in space, that pure one. It is therefore spirit
in the celibacy of raucous fire.

Thus naked as the birds of heaven and in garments
of lily perfumes –
it is as it was in the beginning, thus the word
grew heavy in us.

Tracks too heavy for such young snow.

Look there, dust through chalice-forms
and before it the flower, harried
before the grave and pale and resonant even unto salt. But
mutely
strides man, himself of the harried breed, returns
with hands in front
and gropes. There is no peace, though, in his tracks, no end
to the trailing and dodging of fires,
there are actually no more ways out.

And his own received him not.

It hobbled blind and thoroughly
alive from the breederries of fiery young and suddenly
retreating... There is no form
and no face that would be alien to the spirit.

And man saw that the word was
good.

So dust returns,
yes, through bell-forms taken
from the heavy sea salts, to the lap
of earth. But spirit
through lime retreating and blood
to the shell of the egg that roamed
from eternity as far as us.

Late incubation sets in and withdrawal of wings
from the pious water, wished
to the form of snow – into the egg
song, full of birds of prayer, locks itself
with the bride of the word, O soul! But you, man,
and mute one, till above the stars
the wind that moves is yours, oh, thither you proudly crane,
tower
of the bleached bones of Adam! And from the blowing breeze
on the rope
to the dust hangs the smoky bell. And so night
full of the heart and in the belltower
a spasm.

Oh, the harried one, with fires in his tracks, before the gates
of the ground
seeks refuge in the motionless urn.

Man was; over the ash he is,
spirit, he is therefore word, which was at the beginning
and lasts.

NIGHT WHEN I WATCH WITH MARY

A prayer of black velvet, maiden.

I want you to listen to the bridal rustling
of the bed linen
at the moment
when the swallow falls asleep on the moon.

This morning I saw a living woman.
She was coming from the cemetery
with rain aslant her face
with foaming hair
and deliberate touch of the whole palm.

But to you I am coming on the scaffolding, my love,
so that we may speak of earthly bliss,
so that you may unlock my poem,
because the lamp shines only for you, Marion.

At night, when the sleeping fishes divide the waters
in two halves,
stars will tremble and the clocks strike midnight
and the frightened birds will circle above their nests,
then,
precisely then
we will go out on the balcony together and with hand
just so
flung in the dark
we will greet the moon.

And because your breasts will be startled until dawn,
I will allow you dip
your hands to the elbows
in well-water.

Be strong as laundry blue
and for parting flail-armed as a windmill.

And afterwards in the hands
that scent of our adventure,
you unimpaired among women,
I shall carry a sombrero
and till dawn
I will catch falling stars
like butterflies.

*There was no harmony,
only the silence was deep on both sides at that time,
The shell cracked (the dead opened the palm):
Innumerable bats to the moon did fly.
A black bull shone with the silence of moving wings.
„Oh, ye yearner, soaked with the purity of tears full of pain.“
Under the magnifying glass all that remained was a pinch of salt...*

Ján Stacho
Albín's Hands Opening a Make-Up Box
(Viewing a Graphic Sheet)

APPEAL

Return to me from the star-strewn wind
(with shimmering light your home in air),
in flame me, plunge the dawn's spread hand
in my conscience, seize from over there

everything, only the funeral-pyre
of suffering lasts (I love you so
under the roots, I sip the pure
deep dark, and what earth is, I know.)

TRACKS

I wake alone today to the bright morning
where the blue frost has made its bed of snow.
I'm waiting for you – and the proof is, darling,
see how the traces of the bird-feet go.

FIRST SPRING STORM

The frightened puppies howl all night,
the birds to treetops are withdrawn.
From darkness endless bolts of light.
Everything finishes at dawn.

Translated by John Minahane



Albín Brunovsky

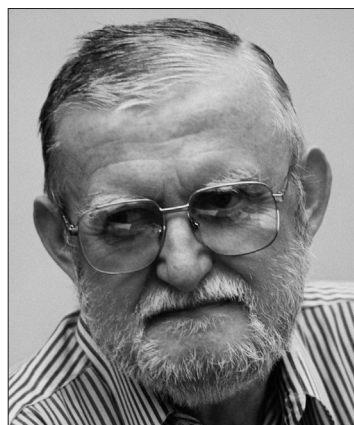


Photo: Peter Procházka

ĽUBOMÍR FELDEK (1936), is a poet, prose and essayist, playwright, translator, and author of literature for children and youth. He is a popular personality of Czecho-Slovak culture. In 1989 he participated in the founding of the People Against Violence (VPN) movement, protested against the arrest of Václav Havel and signed the manifesto *Niekoľko viet*. As a playwright he also worked for the Nová scéna theater in Bratislava and he is the author of the screenplay for the internationally known film *Perinbaba*. Being a distinctive member of the Trnava poets' group, he published a book of essays about this era of Slovak literature titled *Homo Scribens*, 1982. After the split of Czechoslovakia he lived and worked in Prague.

Ľubomír Feldek

P O E M S

Presently he lives in Bratislava with his wife Oľga Feldeková. As a poet, he debuted with a collection of poems *The Only Salty Home* (Jediný slaný domov, 1961), then continued on with collections of poems *A Chalk Circle* (Kriedový kruh, 1970), *Paracelsus* (1973), *Two People Around the Table* (Dvaja okolo stola, 1976), *Notes on the Epic* (Poznámky na epos, 1980), *A Slovak on the Moon* (Slovák na Mesiaci, 1986), *Crying is Beautiful* (Plakať je krásne, 1990), *A Good-Bye Dance and 19 Fair Songs* (Odzemok na rozlúčku a 19 jarmočných piesní), *Love-Making at an Older Age* (Milovanie v pokročilom veku, 1999) and *Lovers' First-Aid Kit* (Lekárnička zamilovaných, 2004). His most recent prose includes a memoir *In My Father's Prague*, *Notes on Memoirs* (V otcovej Prahe, Poznámky na pamäti, 2006).

The written word, for Feldek, is a tool for continual play and change. The play being an allegorical image of the time period, whether in playful or strictly dramatic form, in which Feldek sows the costumes to his own measurements. He is the master of scenic composition, enriching it with neuralgic points of

current events. Thanks to this perception of literature we can understand Feldek's changes of works of Slovak authors: Kollár's *Glory's Daughter* (Slávy dcéra) changed into *Daughter of Glory* (Dcéra slávy) and Hviezdoslav's *Gamekeeper's Wife* (Hájnikova žena) into *Horror in the Gamekeeper's Lodge* (Horor v horárni), as well as the changes of Shakespeare's verses, which he rendered in a Feldek-esque manner, abundant in a variety of poetic and period innovations. Feldek bases his poetic skill on real, rupturing events of personal as well as social changes. The shifting of the burden of responsibility from father to son shifts, like a generational banner, from book to book. Feldek's father, a notary, who had been a political prisoner in the 1950s, is his shadow, present in all of his work; a shadow-guide, a shadow-protector. Feldek's optics focus on the public, he considers himself to be the spokesman of its truths, some genuinely personal, but also the truths which should alert the community to its movement. In Feldek's diction, word is movement. It can activate anyone who, in a comfortable situation, realizes his own nonconformity.

SMILING FATHER

He seemed alive.

*But my father was alive assuredly
when in Sasinkova Street mortuary
they brought him from the freezer on a trolley
to show to me and my wife.*

*In life he'd merely clouded,
like he'd left death far behind.
And he had too –
since his brief life
slipped from his hands when scarcely he'd reached fifty;
history's course changed almost all in him,
then illness cancelled out the rest.*

*The dissident brain, linked
to the pain-killing diversionists,
steadily camouflaged his goal –
he wanted what he didn't,
he didn't want what he did.*

*After death the surgeon took it out –
and my father came to life.
It was him again,*

*court president, with great bald head,
calling his family jovially, "Let's go!",
as if the trolley before the freezer
was an old Tatra, model '57.*

*And because he'd come in a rush, it seemed,
and in the euphoria the razor slipped –*

*here was his smile again!
(If such a name can be given
to the jagged and masterful scar
the autopsy left on his crown.)*

CHILDREN'S REVOLUTION

*"A child's face too is a weapon?"
the beaten batons wondered.
Bloodily they flamed
with longing for revenge.*

*Thus began that gentle
revolution of our children.*

*Years and years we lived
spellbound in silence, meekness, fear,
so that we could bring to the world those children*

*who today advanced
with faces against batons
to free us from that curse.*

*And freed,
instantly we advanced with them!*

*And the batons shamed blood-red
took to flight.*



DIFFERENCE

*The man tries to spit out the lie
but it sticks to his palate
and grows in his mouth,
and when he finally spits it out,
as if on invisible chewing-gum –
the farther that spittle flies
the more vehemently the lie returns to his mouth
and the man does not get rid of the lie,
and he knows that what he is not rid of
is a lie.*

*The woman lets go the lie with ease
as if blowing a bubble to the wind,
and without it she could cross to the other side,
but she goes after it
and tries to catch it in her mouth again,
for the lie escapes her
and the woman thinks that what flees from her
is truth.*

*And all the while truth goes
on beautiful long legs.*

MAKING LOVE BEFORE SLEEP

*Somewhere smoke issued from a bachelor's house
and twilight fell.
We are making love, and the thoughts
run round in our heads
as if they had places to go.
We make goodbye love, we make slumberous love.
The first smile flies from you – the butterfly
that mated this evening
with the butterfly of your lips – those are winging
behind him.
Your scent too is going off to sleep among the roses.*

*And your eyelashes slowly go on little legs
to the anthills of night.
I hear your nails grow southwards.
A streamlet leaks from the corners of your mouth:
today's last*

*voice.
The two waves of your breasts have risen
and become swans,
they have spread their snow-white wings
and are dragging the bed to Denmark, so 'tis said,
along with us, who are making love before sleep,
to hear the golden coach.*

*But your eyes, restless twins,
those are not yet sleeping,
and while the story's happening
they change places under the eyelids
like sun and moon.
We wake – and you're a virgin once again.*

TWO AT A TABLE

*We two at a table are silent and I say:
– How quiet you are, except that you're crying.
How hurried your legs are, under the peaceful
muscles.*

*How blue are your nails, as they grow
in time to the music.
How beautiful is your blood, as it moves
round the house.*

*How slender your eyes are while gazing
(each of them shines late into the night).
How long is your loosened voice.
And yet it's the only one of us
ready to leave its own tracks behind.*

Translated by John Minahane



Photo: Archive

JÁN ŠIMONOVÍČ (1939 – 1994) is a poet with an unusually distinctive and rich imagery, being one of the few poets who are able to

Ján Šimonovič

POEMS

capture the beauty of the moment and present it in perfect verse. His esthetic dominant feature was the surrounding beauty. His verses had been published by the *Mladá tvorba* magazine since 1957. His debut *Pyramid* (Pyramída, 1965) is full of youthful captivation by love. In his collection of poems *Whitish from the Hellenic World* (Belavá z helénskeho sveta, 1967) he gives the themes of home, parents and tense plastic corporeity a transparent form of girl characters – the allegories of growth. In a book of essays *Prose on a Poem* (Próza o básni, 1972) he expresses a detailed

theory of the poetic image and modern translation. The collection of poems *With a Silent Scream* (Tichým krikom, 1974) elaborates on family and civil themes, and advocates family continuity and the world of children. The poem *Children* (Deti, 1973) is the first part of a trilogy of civically engaged compositions. In the second composition *City* (Mesto, 1976), he returns to Apollinairian inspirations and in the same line he describes the life of Bratislava families. The third composition *Quiver* (Chvenie, 1980) is oriented towards ecology and peace. His cycle *Countrymen* (Rodáci,

1986) joins polished form with social sentiment. Šimonovič's last collection of poems *Scepsis* (Skepsa, 1995) is an allegory of the end of the millennium and at the same time it expresses the poet's disillusionment with the post-1989 era. Šimonovič was a master of verse, he created his verses with an exceptional refinement. Šimonovič chose themes which have always been and will always be universal. Within the

group of his fellow poets, he stood out with his high degree of imagery, plastic imaginativeness, which he was able to connect to the stream of everyday motifs. His verses give the impression of esthetically eager professions and confessions, even though he did not always enter his poems directly as a lyrical subject because he strove for an objective attunement. Šimonovič also made a significant breakthrough as

a translator. He chose authors, in whose translations he could utilize all of the strong attributes of his own poetry. Thus his literary work, which along with essays and translations also includes a children's book, becomes an original portrait of the author's mastership. An author who, in all seriousness, selected and categorized words into new contexts, where they gleamed once again.

WORDS

*I complain of words
like children,
that they are disobedient.*

*In the head they were
to rights,
agreed,
with talents under arms,*

*ideally ready,
put through their paces, hankering to go,
selected, lined up, set in order,
some weeded out but then accepted back,
prepared to fly in a flock
to the meadows of meaning.*

*But out of doors they seemed to find it cold,
seemed to move clumsily and feebly
at their new home,
in tender ears.*

O HEAD ON MY SHOULDERS

*O head on my shoulders
weighing me down,
like a can spouting
sentences neat!
O stars in the heavens
nettling my eyes,
as pitiless night
fetters my feet!*

*While vainly the love
of everything grand
warms up my spirit
like knuckles that press,
in your pleasant thought
digging deep pits
is doubt about our
exclusiveness.*

WITHOUT LOVE

*You lose time
dearer than salt,
without love
through the rigor-hole
you lose time.*

*You have forfeited time.
In less than a year you have forfeited all time.*

*You grow old
without children
who would answer
your questions with more beautiful
childish, real questions,
you grow old*

*without children
who on the brink of respect
would expressively rage at you
and would give you a cup of tea
respectfully full of stars,
you grow old*

*badly visible,
visible in the bad,*

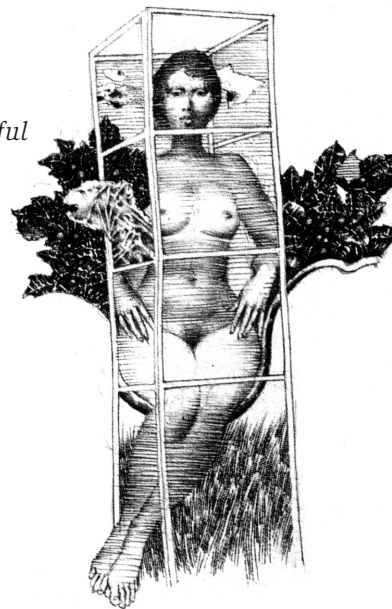
*with contrasting deeds,
with deeds of other kinds,
and with deeds grasped otherwise
with another explanation in another brain,*

*in a fog of peevishness
unbelievably sad,
uselessly good.*

*You lose time
dearer than salt.*

*Your work also
is impatient therefore.*

*It waits,
waits things out,
quickly grows.*



HOW PROFOUNDLY

*How profoundly though, how earnestly
in the cosy lair of the eye
she hides me, silvered
in the grey pupil
like a mink,
me, improved, smoothed of wrinkles,
meticulously reduced,
many times a day.*

Each of these moments I hold dear.

IMPERTINENTLY

*I look at your cast-off clothes,
which cannot rise from the chair.*

*I look at your smiling face,
which cannot leave the photo.*

*I look at your heedful hands,
which cannot slip from the wheel.*



Translated by John Minahane



Photo: Peter Procházka

Vlastimil Kovalčík

P O E M S

VLASTIMIL KOVALČÍK (1939), a poet, essayist and translator. He studied Slovak and Russian, and philosophy at the Philosophical Faculty of Comenius University in Bratislava. He worked as an editor at the Slovenský spisovateľ publishing house and later as a deputy editor-in-chief of the Literárny týždenník. He lives in Bratislava.

Kovalčík debuted with a collection of poems *Entering the Coat of Arms* (Vstupovanie do erbu, 1965), followed by the collections of poems *Medium* (Médium, 1968), *The Mirror Each Time Shallower* (Zrkadlo čoraz plyššie, 1970), *Aletheia* (Alétheia,

1971), *The Burning Hilt* (Horiaca rukováť, 1974), *Resins* (Živice, 1979), *Persistence to Questioning* (Vytvrlosť k otázkam, 1988), and *The Reflection of Fire* (Odraz ohňa, 1993). From Polish, he has translated the works of Zbigniew Herbert, Jan Twardowski, Wisława Szymborska, Karol Wojtyła – Pope John Paul II – and others. His translations from French include Stéphan Mallarmé, Saint-John Perse, and André du Bouchet.

His books of essays *On the Northern Threshold* (Na severnom prahu, 1983) and *Under the Coat of Arms of the North* (Pod erbom severu, 1997) are dedicated to his place of birth, the Zámagurie region, and to the study of life of the Carthusians and Camaldulensians in Červený Kláštor. The coat of arms is one of the basic elements of Kovalčík's poetry – spanning from the family coat of arms to the coats of arms created by metaphors. The poet searches for depth and opens up verticals. Kovalčík is a poet-philosopher, a follower of Martin Heidegger's line of thought and his

conversations on a country road or the wide spaces of the Universe, from which we receive the gift of knowledge, words and thoughts. That is, of course, only in case we are ready to accept and pass them forward. The closest of the elements to him is fire. "The word can best be compared to fire", says the poet. Fire, "the incredible bird in the wind's mouth", is according to the author "the only gender of all the dead". These bold dynamics of the wind give away the philosophers' most secret cave, where through the light of fire we see the shadows of words, beings, and our own shadow deciding about giving or not giving a testimony to modern people. A fascinating conclusion of Kovalčík's message is that "shadow is the only visible sadness of God". Thus his contemplative lyricism lets the image and word come out only to such an extent that it is an extent of God. Perhaps, Vlastimil Kovalčík said it for all the Slovak poets when he confessed that "out of the things that allowed me to forget death, remained only one: poetry".

PROPHECY

In my sleep I heard the bells tolling.

When I

*awakened I suddenly realised it couldn't be that
their voice could reach my place.*

Lights were

*visible only as the cheekbones of the skeleton of
night.*

*It is, though, a natural prophecy of the
heart of darkness through the mill of time.*

Maybe,

*somebody is dying somewhere right now, somebody I
knew, and, again, somebody is being born somewhere,
someone whom I will never know.*

But why did they

call me from my sleep?

Because there is nothing

*attesting that I am not in a labyrinth right now
and that is presence to everyone.*

It is impossible

to enter it and leave it at the same time.

What if

*we were not supposed to know why we should have
been born?*

*It is for us to understand that we yet
have to die!*

*Even though, it is all surrounded by
the promise of God's Secret.*

ARRHÉTON

Face to face to any death we feel that being is a secret.

Yes, but so it says that only for one's own death everyone must live up to it.

If we knew it,
to live wouldn't make sense.

Because it wouldn't
be the unsolvable, unreachable, unexceedable goal
for us anymore.

But even so it won't last
incessantly!

Still, on our ultimate human threshold,
we will be forced to it by death.

And face to face
will remain only the Unspeakable; Arrhéton.

STEWARD

Crushed ring of the heaven's shore.

The air has got
thicker visibly.

Gaping splendour is rooting lithely
into the gloom above the ground.

In this way
the gigantic bird, recognisable only by the rim of its
wings, lands again.

And those who get a glimpse of it,
start to dream.

Ripped out, scattered nest
of true whiteness.

Its heat is cooling off bonelessly,
multiwavelly and kissingly into flowing seed-dotted
sap during its flight.

And falling, self-sealing
flakes cleanly fill in that invisible, empty apple.
Shallow to itself, and yet deep and satiated
enough – for every one and every thing, as well as
for the whole world.

That is for everything that
lasts for a certain time but one day sinks into the
pond of not being.

Is it chilly steward himself
unaudibly and long clinking for now?

Yes.

Not

only as a boy; but even now – as a very grown man
– I wait with amazement for that unicoloured,
all-embracing rainbow.

After my death, there will
be no first snow for me.

Translated by Saskia Kovalčíková

SOMEONE

You place your hands on the single threshold of this winter night
Look, at this one, too, who withdraws into her gale
like a wall, a vineyard of breasts hard as wood. Wood in the shape
of a tree in a wheel of shades.

The seal symbolises:
how a thing is almost insignificant.

So let us summon
ourselves by fire and water.

The sleepers are related by blood only in sleep.
Until the dream is something like decay.

Yet someone has founded
a real threshold this winter night through the existence of a word.

GIFT

Sleepyhead: you closed your eyelids from a great
distance into the shape of a bird.

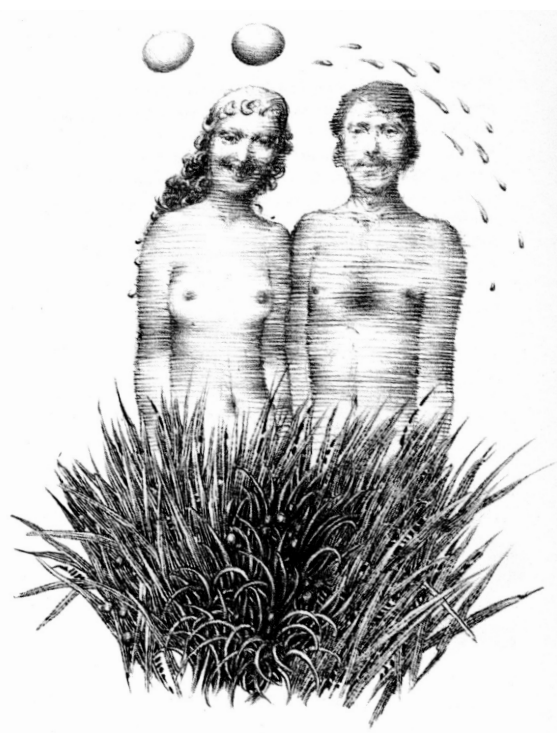
From the will of detail they have stuck to your
hidden nests overturned upon each other.

Through wings
they measure the silence of our dark sailing in the museum
of night when
the jug of all shades is smashed so that from the depths of the
reflection of fire
there could be a fundamental river bank.

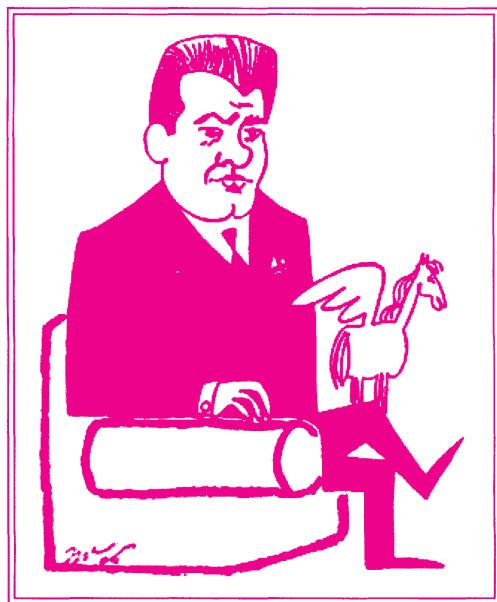
Only to being are we closest and
so once – from the moment of the death of one of us – we'll
be ever more distant from one another.

Only now
you sleep beside me: you have your eyelids closed
to the shape of birds
from a great distance.

Translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith



Albin Brunsowsky



VÁLEK'S MAN

ESSAY COMMEMORATING THE POSTHUMOUS
80TH BIRTHDAY OF MIROSLAV VÁLEK,
THE POET

Dana Podracká

Sixteen years have lapsed since the death of Miroslav Válek. This poet was among the first who had crossed the Rubicon of schematic writing, and started writing modern literature. Several literary critics believe that he would deserve to be nominated, before Milan Rúfus, as the Slovak Nobel Prize laureate. He made a lasting and unmistakable impact, not only during his 19 years of service as Minister of Culture, but also on the way of thinking of the younger and the youngest generation of Slovak poets. "Young talents", he used to say, "come with innocent and searching eyes, fighting on their own, fighting for literature – the kind of fight that must be fought time and again, because it never ends".

In the late 1990s I was sitting with Jožo Urban in the Slovak Writers Club, talking about Miroslav Válek. It was a Robinson-like debate. For one, Urban's debut in poetry was called *Short Furious Robinson*, and he wasn't trying to conceal his warm feelings about Válek and his poetry. Sipping wine, we shared our reciting of a fragment from Válek's *Robinson* from the volume *Attraction* (*Príťažlivosť*) published in 1961: "And you had to start from scratch, / where man rises to his feet, / where a maiden-white flint, / sparkles in your hands, obscurely / and you're falling to your face like a drunkard, / when you see, in stone and sand, / at the flash / of neon and candle light / the only solitary trace / of man".

Válek as a man, was always in the presence of other people, and, at the same time a solitary Robinson. To celebrate his 70th birthday, a theatre play was produced on the themes of Válek's life. It was written and directed by Roman Polák, who had borrowed a line from the poem *Robinson*: "I was looking for a ship that would be wrecked", and the play was titled *Robinson In Search of A Ship To Be Wrecked*. Today, ten years later, I strongly believe that Válek was a Robinson, in search of a Robinson. He knew, from the beginning, that, figuratively speaking, his political ship was wreck-bound. Otherwise, he would not have criticized, in his poetry, the power, of which he was a part, the power that was so short-sighted as to be unable to accept criticism and have no idea of self-critique either. That appears, from today's perspective, to be the purported meaning of his poems such as *Killing Rabbits* (*Zabíjanie králikov*) or *Drumming On The Other Side* (*Bubnovanie na druhú stranu*).

He was in search of and loved a solitary person, a person in the crowd who needs the energy locked in the poem, needs the power to be as good as his word and actions, the energy of what he has been through, as Válek believed, among other things, that energy is but a manifestation of matter, and so is poetry.

When you think of the juvenile Válek, what springs to mind is the image of a twenty-year-old poet who, on the 22nd of March 1947, at a joint meeting of Trnava's schools, presented, as senior student of the Business Academy, his own novella entitled *Saw How To Dance*

A Jitterboogie (Videl som tancovať Jitterbugie). The text has not been preserved, and we are left only to wonder as to its contents. We can but conjecture that the young Válek had a feeling for the rhythm of the *boogie-woogie* jazz style, characterized by a series of repetitions of the bass melodic structure, dancing to the *rock-and-roll* music.

Jitterbug is an energetic dance full of movement danced to a fast jazz or swing music, popular in the 1940s. Válek added the *ie* and used capital *J*. From that moment on, *Jitterboogie* became an obscure partner, perhaps the woman within, mother, daughter, mistress, wife, friend, but also Muse, Time or Death. Upon its author's death, every poetic oeuvre resembles a Cabbala that, by linking and intertwining the verses, makes the world anew. The *Jitterboogie* simile provides one option of Válek's inner story.

Since his early adulthood, Válek's positions imply his interest in "drumming to the other side". Drumming from within, from his substance, in the rhythm of swing and jazz, in the rhythm of the time he captured and analyzed and danced his Munch-like *Lebenstanz*.

In one interview he said: "Writing makes you, propels you to think of yourself as an intellectual problem. The answers are endless, but there is, essentially, only a handful of questions that we pose to ourselves". One essential question *he* posed to *himself* is the question of man and his will, which is distinctly tackled in his most famous and most cited poem *Home Is The Hands On Which You Can Weep* (*Domov sú ruky, na ktorých smieš plakať*). In the poem, a history professor concludes that "History is made by the power of a personality, and the ensuing events only conform to the will of a genius".

Through this solution of the will issue as one of the most fundamental questions of 19th and 20th century philosophy, Válek seems to join in on that streak of European thought framed by Schopenhauer's "*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*". According to Schopenhauer, will is a metaphysical principle, providing the most fundamental instrument for explaining the world. Will is the deepest part of nature in every organic and inorganic creature; intellect is but secondary.

For Válek, the answer to the history issue was *The Man of Personality*, and to the will issue *Man the Genius*. He found man to be the measure of all things, setting in motion the events of his life, as well as the lives of others, if intercrossing them. Válek does not speak as Nietzsche does on the will to power as such, although the former had his share of such power. He speaks of will as of one form of energy that is capable of determining its manifestations both in one's inner self and in the community-at-large – through word. Not by using power whose manifestations can be violent. Válek poetically encircles Nietzsche's idea of man-personality, in which a fully-fledged human being observes the drives of his own self, not the standards of social morality.

The reality of arts and power, in which he was involved, partly with self-assured confidence and partly as a solitary long-distance runner, was his common battlefield. As he wrote in the poem "Game of Chess": "...the game is often won by Knights, yet only the King can be check-mated", he knew that forms only may succumb, not the inherent energy of a work.

Today, Válek is a true classic of Slovak literature. The onset of the new literary generation is associated with the journal *Mladá tvorba*

(1956 – 1958), with Milan Ferko as the editor-in-chief and Miroslav Válek one of the editors. The foursome of poets: Ján Ondruš, Ján Stacho, Jozef Mihalkovič and Ľubomír Feldek (the only one born in Žilina) wanted to present as a “Trnava Group” with its manifesto. However, fourteen pages of that text was discarded, under political pressure, shortly before publication, and their esthetic program was lost forever. Ľubomír Feldek has reconstructed the destinies of the “Trnava Group” in his *Homo scribens*. One of the challenges of these Slovak lyrical poets was to be the “recovery of immediate sensual contact between man and reality”.

The story of the lost manifesto has an uncanny parallel with Válek's early lost novella *Saw How To Dance A Jitterboogie*. In the mystical arch, it seems to coincide with the true goal of the “Trnava Group”: to stop the growing loss of spiritual experience, a life lived “second-handedly”. To invite and treat the human being – the reader into one's own experience, to be able to enjoy one deeper dimension of one's own life. To love life and the world in the creeps of amazement.

Miroslav Válek has published eight volumes of poetry: *Touching* (Dotyky, 1959), *Attraction* (Príťažlivosť, 1961), *Restlessness* (Nepokoje, 1963), *Love with Goose-flesh*, *The Word* (Slovo, 1976),

From Water (Z vody, 1977), *Forbidden Love* (Zakázaná láska) and *Picture Gallery* (Obrazáreň). The names suggest his interest in the human being, in the authenticity of his/her relationships, but also his bitter testimony of his own belief. To engage in a deeply personal relationship is a gift that can hardly be given to oneself. That is the fundamental legacy of his poetry.

As he said on writing: “Every poet should feel the contours of his work in progress, not its specific form; this should be more of a prescience than a certainty, a feeling; in brief, the poet should feel the weighty presence of a certain sum of what has not been said as yet, to feel the size and weight of the future word (work) – and that about sums it up”.

Translated by Euben Urbánek

DANA PODRACKÁ (1954) is one of Slovakia's leading poets, who delves into the depths of femininity. Her poetry revolves around the socio-cultural phenomenon of pain, which she views as the fundamental energy of both emotional and rational cognition. In her essays, she intellectualizes this foundation by showing it against the background of historical, social, psychological and cultural facts.

THE POSTHUMOUS EIGHTIETH BIRTHDAY OF MIROSLAV VÁLEK

Alexander Halvoník

The poetry of Miroslav Válek is not difficult to assess, identify with, accept with reservations or, for any reason, to refuse. For what Válek did in poetry can only be compared to the poetic revolution of Janko Kráľ or Ivan Krasko. Before him, all sorts of modernism were used in an attempt to head the Slovak word into the international currents and the buzz of civilization, which took on a fresh new openness towards both skepticism and idealism. Slovak poetry responded often with unintended byproducts, somewhat sleepy and at a loss, with a touch of traditionalism and the usual reluctance. Moreover, Slovak literature was then under the heavy spell of the omnipresent ideology spreading the illusion that enthusiasm and pathetic optimism can cure the illnesses of humanity and society, civilization and universe, both then and to-be. That was not true, and Válek's poetry entered the scene of kitschy socialism with this very message. Miroslav Válek's robust poetic talent captured this in a truly robust manner. He introduced entirely new constellations of the Word, and made it capable of forming reality. Lyrical poetry ceased to be an ornament of feelings and emotions, and poetry became a genuine creative workshop, where the Unreal becomes real, the formless assumes assured proportions and the Unspeakable transforms into a breezy discussion with the most uncrackable mysteries of being. The unique talent gave birth to a tidal wave of poetry that was at odds with the omnipresent Orwellian wailing, but was the more so tied with the reason of an era that, once again, refused to be reasonable. A poetry that found it programmatic *not to give a damn about good manners*, but the more so to test the conscience of its time. A poetry informing the world, with a confident voice, about the truths the world had hardly known. A poetry tuned to the young, hence, defying aging. In this respect, Válek's poetry has not fallen to any significant fluctuations. From the beginning to the end, what was on was a mysterious *drumming* about the human being who – as a result of too much faith – has misgivings about everything, who –

loving too much – does not fantasize love, who does not hope for a cheap mercy – knowing that, in its essence, humanity is a hope redeemed at significant cost.

That's why Válek is a poet beyond reasonable doubt. In this, at least, rests the poetic justice clamored for in his poems.

Besides the uncontroversial qualities of his poetry, there is the highly controversial Miroslav Válek as a person. Like Ján Kollár, P.O. Hviezdoslav or Milo Urban, he, too, was the embodiment of *his 20th century*, *his controversial era*. Even if he chained himself to the cross, he still could not have unchained himself from its time. But then, he knew too well that man is a *project for years*, and having no chain in one's time is a freedom less treasured. At least metaphorically and with a bohemian sense of togetherness, he presided over the Trnava group of *Concretists* (Konkretisti) that accomplished the seemingly impossible transformation of poetry into a socially moving force, served as editor-in-chief of the cultish journal *Mladá tvorba* that became the *deformer's* nightmare, was president of the Slovak Writers' Union that gave birth to the revivalist *reformers*, ending up as the Minister of Culture that, to say the least, cultivated the political atrocities of the so-called consolidation era. At the time when some were banned, others could not, and the rest were afraid, Válek the man was allowed to, could and was unafraid. An enlightened policymaker in the time choked by debased politics, he managed to obtain more freedom than any common individual could have hoped for. In the stuffy air of the Normalization Period, his speeches and articles were eagerly awaited. Yet, Válek was usually the first to extend a helping hand before being asked to do so by those who had been adversely affected by the unfavorable times. He seems to have taken for granted to bring his own *creeps* on the market of the vanities of Normalization, while not succumbing to vain self-pity, although, amid the fearful, adaptable, ill-treated, irresponsible *and* powerful, he remained a solitary figure cobwebbed by intrigues. It is his

shared merit that Slovakia had fewer emigrants and dissidents than in the Czech part of the country. And it is also his accomplishment that Slovak culture has built its foundations that can hardly be undermined by any political or ideological storms.

So let those who can prove more brave and useful than him throw their stones. Those fearful and occasional winners would have little right to do so.

Translated by Euben Urbánek

ALEXANDER HALVONÍK (1945), prose writer, literary critic, translator, publicist. At present he is the director of *The Centre for Information on Literature* in Bratislava. One of the main themes in his story *The Itch in the Blood* (Svrbenie krvi, 1996) is the problem of conscience and the subservience to power.



Photo: Peter Procházka

CZECH POET PETR SKARLANT ON MIROSLAV VÁLEK

In his modest output, Válek produced an extremely ingenious mixture of several poetics. Many of his metaphors are inspired by Jacques Prévert, the former surrealist. Both *Touching* (Dotyky, 1959) and *Attraction* (Přitažlivost, 1961), have their share of the „poetry of common day“, as written and proclaimed, in the early 1960s, when the poetry had finally returned to its roots, by the group of poets around the Prague-based journal *Květen*. Válek puts things together, connects and mixes what has been seen as contradictory, making use of the difference and creating his poetics of contradictions. We find a Mallarmé-like poem (intimate pure lyricism), fragments of Apollinaire's *Zone* (the world's rushing reality) and a Prévertian story (a history-cum-metaphor); all this transforms into *Válek's capture of contradictions*. Válek does not close his eyes to dream. He keeps them opened, to differentiate, to name things, to make see and understand that there are the invisible truths and that questions *do* arise. And that these truths are unearthed and these questions addressed by *poetry alone*.

Translated by Euben Urbánek

Miroslav Válek

POEMS

INCOMPREHENSIBLE THINGS

Incomprehensible things amidst us.

“What’s this for and what is it like?”

*A little wheel set turning between our fingers
performs its perfect motion.*

But the watch isn’t going.

An apple tree in full blossom at the end of January.

But winter goes on.

A palpable feeling that someone’s calling you.

But the street is empty.

And other dings, too,

heard a hundred times:

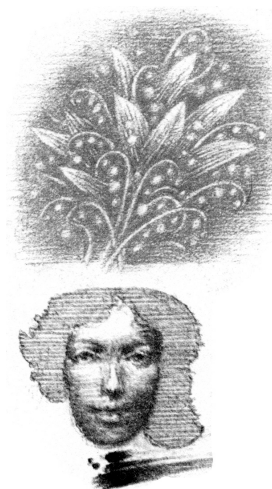
“... so he left her because he loved her ...”

*“... they made life miserable for each other
because they couldn’t bear being apart ...”*

*Where do these words come from, words
without logical justification,
without connection between one another,
incomprehensible
and odd?*

*Incomprehensible things,
let me be part of you,
pervade me with all senses,
let us touch each other
as a bow touches a violon.*

*Incomprehensible things,
you are within us.
Softly I utter words
and wait till you flare into life.*



PARADE

*It is eight in the morning,
the apple trees are in blossom, the dogs
are guarding the doors*

*and the winds are sleeping.
I didn’t feel like thinking about rhymes,
I examine my conscience
like an old album with your photographs
which you no longer resemble
and which you have long forgotten.*

*Don’t worry, I shan’t trouble you for long.
All is correct,
order arms!*

Translated by Ewald Osers

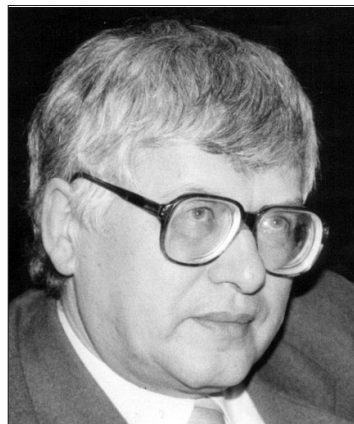


Photo: Pavel Kastl

ŠTEFAN STRÁŽAY (1940)

Since his first collection of poems, Strážay notices details usually missed by a regular observer, which he arranges in his verses into surprising, metaphorically powerful and touching poetry.

He entered literature in 1966 with his characteristically titled collection *To Things on the Table* (Veciam na stole). The book's sensual and subtle eroticism was gradually replaced by the everyday urbane experience of the Slovak Seventies and Eighties in the following key poetry books: *Igram* (Igram, 1975), *Artemisia* (Palina, 1979), *Malinovsky 96* (Malinovského 96, 1985), *Elegy* (Elégia, 1989) and *Interior* (Interiér, 1992). His other works are *Dawn, but Indefinite* (Úsvit, ale neurčitý, 1971), *Holidays* (Sviatky, 1974), *Podhorany* (1977), *Courtyard* (Dvor, 1981), *Sister* (Sestra, 1985) and *December* (1990). The majority of his poetry is based in a city environment and so it seems as if the author was permanently strolling amidst the objects of everyday use and things he sees in the streets. Strážay's philosophy is not complicated: with an invisible finger he points to the beauty around us, and pushes the things that separate us from it away. He connects beauty with morality, as if one could not exist without the other. Though his place is among people, Strážay prefers to keep back, being an observer, not a participant. He is soft and open-minded, accepting all possibilities of man including the bad ones. He writes in free verse and for the most part his verses are brief, dense, and concise. Strážay was the first one to bring conciseness into Slovak poetry, an unsentimental view of a very sensitive writer. It surely must be a difficult and contradictory position to choose but maybe because of this he can see things and relationships the way they are. He is not a poet of illusion. His poetry is a collection of noteworthy moments which draw the reader into his world and leave him there for a long time. Strážay is a selective poet. He avoids hurtful details as well as overly expressive statements. He remains chaste, though he is open and unscrupulous. His verses have set off a string of similarly oriented collections of poems. In the majority of them the source of inspiration is apparent.

Štefan Strážay

P O E M S



ANXIETY OF UNDRESSING

*Breathing quietly
The lamp remembers all about you,
You take off your shirt:
That's how you will lie dying.*

*Snowfall reaches up to the arms
Of naked crosses.
It is night, undressing and a lamp
shining within.*

SUNSET

*At the corner of two long
wide empty streets
A man parts with a woman.
Thirty, forty.*

*It is a long farewell. The sky
Arches above them, gigantic,
dirty grey. Now it is all
Figured and numbered -*

*This much time for love,
That much time for lying.
But none any more for illusions.
Sorrow is of the body.*

FROM AN OLD PAINTING

*A magical maiden stepped into
my sleep early one mornning. The dream
before
had been torn, full of frights,
restless,
And there she came, complete and naked,
vital, fair haired,
As if illuminated
By a dim lamp
from behind,
Composed and wholly
Tender, sensuous -
yet her face was grave.
Death was often painted
as an angel.*

OPHELIA

*Ophelia, already a trifle weary,
with tiny wrinkles around her mouth
and lovely eyes,
with a kid, flat and husband,
resigned, perhaps
happy -
at times, not often
she can still recall herself as a maiden
in white veils,
Snowily lovely,
floating in the long waters,
dead.*

THE CITY

*In the city statues have been veiled,
a long time.
It is like an ominous sign.
Theme: despair.
The past does not exist,
the future is covered
And time keeps working on
what is under the impregnated
Rubber-coated sheet
without us knowing how,
as we can't see.*

POSTPONEMENT

*Our apocalypse has got
our look. Smaller than others,
it's rather loose,
gradual, for most of us, though,
practically invisible,
devastating, but friendly,
continually eroticized,
postponed till tomorrow
and, what is worst, making us expect
subconsciously that what died yesterday
will bloom
into beauty next year.*

Translated by Martin Solotruk



Photo: Pavel Procházka

KAMIL PETERAJ (1945) is a native Bratislavan but the subject he has gotten the closest to in this poems is life in nature. He notices even the smallest creatures and with surprising imagery describes their existence. His work can be separated into poetry and texts, where he is the founder of a modern line of thought. Peteraj published his first poems in the journal *Slovenské pohľady* in 1964 and his first collection *Orchard of the Winter Birds* (Sad zimných vtákov) appeared the following year. In his debut and also in the next two collections, *Time of the Violin* (Čas violy, 1966) and *Queen of the Night* (Kráľovná noci, 1968), he followed to a certain extent the poetics of the dominant group of concretists (also known as the sensualists) in fulfilling the necessity of a sensuous

visualisation, but soon he created his own style. In the volume *A Walk with the Evening Star* (Vychádzka s večernicou, 1971), the author enriches his viewpoint on the theme of childhood and love, creating verses which can be described as gentle lyrics. The collection *Lipohrádok* (1973) is unique in the development of post-war Slovak poetry. Through a rich and original imagination he leads the reader to the world of herbs, flowers, leaves and beetles. In the collection *Faust and the Daisies* (Faust a margaréty, 1981) Peteraj's poetic style changed. In some of the texts there are expressive attributes of what is known as the civilisation lyric. The poet raises the actual problems of the contemporary individual. This appears also in the collections *One Minute Poems* (Minútové básne, 1986) and *Consolations / Maxims / Telegrams* (Útechy / maximy / telegramy, 1987) where Peteraj maps especially issues of human inter-relationships and contemporary feelings of alienation. In the collection *A Lyrical Promenade* (Lyrické korzo, 1991) Peteraj is inspired by commonplace events in human life whose description he enriches through reflection with telling points. An

inarguable and equal part of Peteraj's creative output is his work in the field of writing texts for popular music. He has been active in this sphere since the second part of the 1960's and together with Boris Filan he can be considered as one of the originators of modern Slovak song lyrics. Kamil Peteraj is the co-author of the legendary Slovak musical *Cyrano from the Suburbs* (Cyrano z predmestia, 1978). The entire time, Peteraj's poetry goes independent of any lines of thought or tendencies. The poet always remains himself and chooses the motifs which interest him at the time and will interest the reader. The branched-out images rich in associations in his older works, or the more brief expressions in his newer ones present an author who has captured the world with his imagery. It remains his building ground even today and in his poems he also describes the various colors of emotion, which we all know well, but not in such elegant form. Peteraj possesses a rich vocabulary. It seems as if he skipped the sowing and was around only for the harvest.

HISTORY OF A STONE

endlessly the stone waited
for its chance and then
a boy comes along
bends down to it
and throws it a little bit further on

STORK

some blue envelope
a cellophane packet
or at least a walnut
must hang from the long stork legs of poetry
which flies each Autumn through the windows
and leaves in our eyes
the blaze of eternal tracks

the whole of Spring it tugged warmth from our sleeves
it changed the points of branches
and thrust its blooming little inter-city
along happy tireless routes
and today wise and ripe
writes her last bird lines
yet doesn't leave pondering
if we are properly trimmed by her breezes
if we took something from her natural flowers
if we are poorer by at least a penny
and haven't up for an apple

close the windows friends come out
the stork of poetry is in the loft and perhaps
has brought something for us

POSTE RESTANTE

oh dead ones don't get up
it's unnecessary
with my finger (to fill in time) I only write
a greeting
poste restante
(to someone) in heaven

to someone who isn't there perhaps

oh dead ones
withstand for a while
this crazy wind
let it not blow me away

and you wind
listen please
to my commands

for I'm not waiting for any miracle
(so the answer)
is only for ordinary
summery
light blue images

TOMORROW CAN BE TOO LATE

I'm shouting
and I'll wake up my neighbours
and tell them
shout as well
and wake up your neighbours
and tell those neighbours
to shout, too
and wake their neighbours
because tomorrow can be too late

MAN AND HEN

a man feeds his pigeons
and doesn't even know
that growing
on his head is a sunflower

two gold bugs sit there
and play
tit for tat

oh it's a feeling
to go with an invisible sunflower
on one's head
where someone tickles
someone with their little legs

when he gets home
an impatient hen awaits
which flies into his hair
and pecks out everything beautiful
that was growing there

Translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith

TRAINING DURCH FRAGEN

Was hat den Stein in die Höhen
Geschleudert,
daß er auf die Knie fiel
und um Gnade bat
mit leeren Händen
bei den unschuldigen blinden Engeln,
die aus seinem Fleisch und Gebein sind?

Im tiefen Verlis
schlug die aufgeschreckte Taube
mit den Flügeln,

die Messer des Lichtes gleiten lautlos
an den Kehlen der Säulen hinunter,
wo ist hier Gott?

Flüstern: Widerhall
und Blumen –
leise Schritte derer, die kommen
und gehen.
Geblendet trittst du hinaus

BOSCH

Wieviel Licht
haben die Kerzen geboren
bis er vollendete
das unversenkbare Narrenschiff

was alles hat er verloren
bis er den Garten Eden
fand

geschaut hat er alle letzten Tage
aber nur einen hat er gemalt –
den erstletzten.

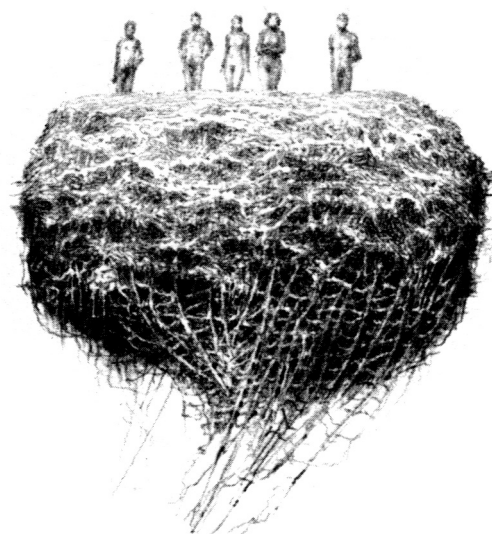
WINTERBILD

Wachse der Baum eine Zeit
mit dem Kopf nach unten

so wie er ist alt,
knorrig, ungestalt
der Baum ist wie ein Kreis
der sich ändert aus sich selbst
es herrscht eine gewaltige Ruhe
wie nach der Schöpfung
wenn in der Erde aufscheinen seine Äpfel
und oben im Wurzelgeflecht
ein Rabe sitzt –
sein Tod

und ihn schlafend führt
am Ärmel durch den Winter

Übersetzt von Waltraud Jähnichen



Albin Bruns

Reading is an Attribute of Humanity

Interview with Anton Hykisch by Anton Baláž

Anton Hykisch (born in 1932, in Banská Štiavnica) has a special standing in contemporary Slovak literature. Although novels are the focus of his work, he publishes collections of short stories, essays, news stories, non-fiction books and memoirs of his time spent in politics and diplomacy. His books have been translated into more than ten foreign languages, making him the most translated author in Slovakia. His historical novel *Adore the Queen* (*Milujte kráľovnú*, 1984) has met with such success in Germany that it was published there twice in one decade. At this year's Frankfurt Book Fair, together with his Austrian publisher Wieser, Hykisch introduced the German translation of another one of his historical novels, *Time of the Masters* (*Čas majstrov* 1977, 1983). Since the introduction of this translation in Frankfurt happened very recently, we started our interview inquiring about the translation of his novels into German and other languages.



Photo: Archive

ANTON BALÁŽ: You have extensive experience with translation of your books into other languages and since you speak many of them (German, English, Polish, and Hungarian) you can evaluate their quality very well. Within the EU, Slovak is among the least widespread languages and so when translating from Slovak, the translator's personality, knowledge of Slovak, approach to the text, and to the precision of the original text and so on, are crucial. Taking this into account, how do you rate the translations of your books, especially those published in German which include a lot about Central European life and institutions?

ANTON HYKISCH: I think I got lucky with translators. *Time of the Masters* which is set in the Middle Ages, requires the translator to know history, art techniques, and mining technology. The translators, of course, consulted with me and I had to clarify many things. The Hungarian (by Oľga L. Gályová) and Russian translations were perfect. The Russian translation also featured a historical foreword of the Russian literary scholar Oleg Malevič. The German translation of the novel is the work of an Austrian diplomat in Slovakia, Johannes Eigner. It is dense and with some reductions it attempts to appeal to the contemporary German reader. He also added his own notes. Interesting is that the translators want to see the setting of the novel. I had to drive the Russian translator Nina Šulginová from Bratislava to Banská Štiavnica and Mr. Eigner visited this town several times as a diplomat. All of them were enchanted by the mysterious charm of this historical town, which is on the UNESCO Cultural Heritage list.

The historical novel about Maria Theresa, *Adore the Queen*, includes a large amount of historical life and institutions. The German reader is very attentive. After the first publication, I received responses from readers who brought small inaccuracies, from the German viewpoint, to my attention. Unfortunately, Mr. Gustav Just, the translator, is very old and does not translate anymore.

It would be good if young translators translating from Slovak took more interest in historical prose, which has presently become quite popular.

ANTON BALÁŽ: Besides presenting your own work, you often introduce contemporary Slovak literature at literary events abroad. What is the knowledge and perception of our literature in neighboring and other countries like? What kind of books and subjects have a good chance at reaching foreign readers (and publishers, firstly) in German-speaking countries? And, Michal Hvorecký was, as the only Slovak writer, successful with his novel *Plush* (*Plyš*), there. Which authors and books could potentially draw interest on the German book market?

ANTON HYKISCH: We must analyze the possible cross over of Slovak prose into the world based on the trends in readers' interest. My visits of book fairs and bookstores abroad point to several spheres of literature, successful also from the marketing perspective.

Michal Hvorecký's prose, which you mentioned, is a successful

type of literature: a young author writing in the modern, reduced language of today's young reader, a writer-celebrity, provocatively raising exciting questions about life. I must emphasize these value questions, especially. Slovak publishers incline to the opinion that wild stories about sex, excess and shenanigans are still interesting. But they are out of style everywhere else in the world. The young European reader wants more than Slovaks tend to think. In a more modest literary form, he wants the answers to serious questions concerning life. This can be seen from the interest in religion studies, mysticism, Oriental philosophies, etc. We might even find such books on the bookshelves of young Slovak authors.

Another favorite, opposite to this, is the search for a world which has nothing to do with the present. There is great interest in fantasy, sci-fi which delivers a kind of modern fairytale for adults. Everydayness wears us out, it is boring and so we are attracted to mystery, the past, and unfamiliar time periods. The Renaissance of historical novel, which is still underappreciated in Slovakia, has much to do with this. On its own, each generation wants to know about its roots and whether it was worth living a hundred, five hundred or a thousand years ago. Dusty old history textbooks have to be reinterpreted so that, again, we can discover their adventure and appeal. (*Somebody is sleeping after a tiring journey. It seems as if took centuries. YOU ARE ALIVE, BECAUSE YOU EXISTED* – these are the first sentences of the novel *Time of the Masters*.)

The third direction is a mixture of everydayness and mystery, reality and fiction. It appears as if classic fiction was losing its momentum. Not everything can be made up, the entire book cannot be a figment of the author's imagination. People who lived through the two world wars and suffered under totalitarian regimes have discovered that reality surpasses the imaginations of 19th century writers. The stories of some real people are just more suspenseful. There is a worldwide boom of non-fiction (Word War II, fascism, communism, Che Guevara, etc.), especially among men. In the process of writing a novel, more and more facts, the mood of the era, citations from the media, family chronicles etc., get incorporated into the work besides the author's fiction. It is a new kind of novel – a crossbreed of fiction and fact.

I think that my historical novels, too, have these features and that is why they arouse certain interest.

ANTON BALÁŽ: The visitors to the Slovak bookstand at the fair in Frankfurt had an opportunity to read an excerpt, in German, from your newest novel *Remember the Tsar* (*Spomeň si na cára*) which is a continuation of your line of successful historical novels. The central character is the Bulgarian monarch Ferdinand Coburg. Please briefly describe this book, focusing on its "Slovak dimension" and its integration into European history. How would you rate its potential success abroad – including Bulgaria?

ANTON HYKISCH: I've actually already answered that question. *Remember the Tsar* is not a classic novel about a little known European monarch Ferdinand Coburg. He was an educated man, a Catholic, he spoke many languages, he was a gourmand and esthete, naturalist and traveler, politician, he loved women, automobiles, locomotives, butterflies, and he was a bit of a bisexual. And a good friend of Slovakia. He spent almost every vacation in the Slovak mountains.

My book is not a traditional biographic novel. Among other things, it is also an exciting investigation within my family. My father (who died exactly 30 years ago) used to tell me about his eldest brother Anton. As a Slovak in Austria-Hungary at a time when Slovaks were not even acknowledged as a nation, this man reached the top. He became a private secretary of the Bulgarian tsar, the strange and mysterious Ferdinand Coburg. He traveled all over Europe with him. I inherited his photoalbum with unidentifiable photographs. The book of family memories opens and as an author I suddenly recollect that I had met the old Ferdinand when my father took me to a castle in Sv. Anton. I used to see him driving an off-road Mercedes to church in Banská Štiavnica every Sunday. And that's how the image of the little known era before the year 1914 came about. What did our near ancestry do at that time? That's a "Slovak" range of vision. By crossing facts with fiction we get a novel about the complicated relationship between the monarch-politician and his servant, his secretary. It is about the relationship of political power and a simple young man. Politics versus everyday life. This level also reveals a broad image of a small, independent Bulgaria in the web of European power politics. The reader is transported not only to Sophia, but also Vienna, Budapest, Berlin, St. Petersburg and Paris, and at the same time to the magical Slovak mountains with castles and forts, every summer. In addition, there is a conflict and a tragic conclusion in the trenches of the first atrocious war on the European continent. That is the universal, or more general dimension of this novel, and it could make it interesting for readers abroad.

ANTON BALÁŽ: In your books of essays and published texts, you often meditate on the standing of literature and culture in the world today. You talk about, and it is understandable, about their increased endangerment. How do you think we can overcome this?

ANTON HYKISCH: The modern writer must come to terms with some unpleasant facts. This, especially, applies to writers from post-communist countries. The older writers, like me, have spent most of their lives "building socialism". Literature and arts were of substantial importance there. There was no opposition allowed in a state with one ruling party. Artists, mainly writers, were the only esteemed critics of the regime at that time. Through their books they tried to present

a true image of the reality and judged and criticized it this way. Writers, thus, substituted the non-existent opposition parties. They were popular and the public anticipated their every word, every new book.

Today we live in a democratic state and writers have all of a sudden become uninteresting, or even unnecessary, it seems. Writing and books are now mere products, just like cosmetic products, television sets, cars and dishwashers. Book prices have risen ten-fold, while the average number of copies printed have decreased ten-fold. This situation truly is disastrous.

As writers, we should realize that the world around us has changed. Reading books is no longer the only pastime. Our lifestyle has fundamentally changed with the arrival of new technologies. I grew up in an era when television did not exist. The radio (if a family-owned one), was a treasured piece of furniture set in the center of the living room, dependant of an electric outlet. We had to go to the movies if we wanted to see a film. And so we read.

Today, most of our leisure time is dominated by audiovisual media. We're slaves to TVs, cellular phones, computers and computer games. A young reader is often viewed as a nerd by those around him.

How do we overcome this? We have to push the book through in this fight. You cannot fall asleep with a computer laid out on your chest. With a book, you can.

Should we write books that one doesn't fall asleep reading? Maybe. And if it happens, we should analyze the dreams of such sleep. We should investigate whether they are useful or help us and what they scare us off from. I don't know.

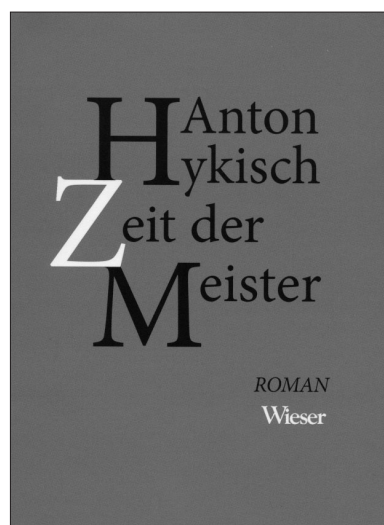
We have to get used to the fact that reading is not a pastime of the masses. It's more of a hobby of a certain group of people, entertainment and passion of a minority. We should acquaint ourselves with the things that entertain the majority. The solution, however, is not in stooping down to the level of reality TV shows. Books presume light, not darkness.

The only hope is what I had once called the "hope of the broken bowstring". The hope that one day people will get fed up with the never-ending stupidity of the mass media. The bowstring of the infinitely stretched out foolishness will break and people, the masses, will start demanding something different.

Perhaps, that will be the time for us, writers. We will have to have loads of humanity, empathy, love, and simple dialog – dialog in silence and solitude- between two people, in store.

That will be the time of books, one of the greatest inventions, without which our civilization would not exist. Dogs and cats, no matter how cute, don't read. Reading is an attribute of humanity.

Translated by Saskia Hudecová



The books by Anton Hykisch were translated into many languages. At the International Book Fair in Frankfurt am Main 2007, the famous novel *The Time of the Masters* (in German translation by Johannes Eigner) was presented at the FORUM FICTION.

Július Balco

THE DEVIL'S TROPHY

(Extract)

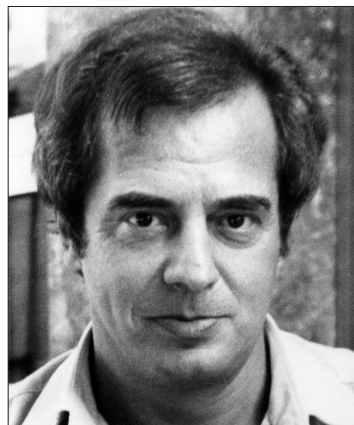


Photo: Viola Ivašková

JÚLIUS BALCO (1948) He is a distinctive, strong and artistically mature prose writer. He creates a unique atmosphere, diving deeply into the inner world of his characters and suggestively tells stories

and opens situations with a focus on morality and values. His debut was *Waxen Yellow Apple* (Voskovožtá jablko, 1976), a novel inspired by the WWII era. However, he offered an entirely unconventional and unheroic approach to the problems of war. The war is a present and disturbing backdrop of the story, but the central problem is the moral conflict of the main character between his civic duty and the love for his son and the responsibility for his life. His second book *The Violin with a Swan Neck* (Husle s labutím krkom, 1979) is rich in philosophy and symbolism from the life of Gypsies. Balco creates the image of a beautiful balladic people with fiery hearts, a unique set of morals, loving life and suffering, but nonetheless, ambitious people wanting to make themselves useful. His third book *Traveling There and Back* (Cestujúci tam a späť, 1988), again, is based in an intellectual environment. The basic outline of the novel is built on love, death, aggressiveness, desires, and dream visions, but mainly on the retrospective

assessment of morals and values on three planes – past, present and future. His book of short stories *Lairs* (Ležoviská, 1986) portrays a colorful palette of the people of our time and their inner worlds. Balco has also attracted child readers with his stories *The Witch's Christmas* (Strigôňove Vianoce, 1991) *The Witch's Vacation* (Strigôňove prázdniny, 1994), and *The Witch's Year* (Strigôňov rok, 1999), which were also made into radio and television programs, and with a book about the sparrows of Trnava titled *The Sparrow King* (Vrabčí kráľ, 2004). The author is a two-time winner of the VÚB literary prize. Július Balco's latest collection of short stories *The Devil's Trophy* (Diablova trofej), published by Regent as its first book of the re-instated Erb edition, was voted Book of 2006 in an opinion poll in Knižná revue (The Book Review), published by the Center for Information on Literature in collaboration with the Association of Slovak Publishers and Booksellers.

A thickset fellow in a forester's uniform was waiting for a fortune teller at the last bus stop in the village. His eyes were bloodshot as if he had been drinking, crying or had not slept for several nights. With bitter irony he muttered through clenched teeth that he was that renowned lynx hunter, gave the fortune teller a strained handshake and led him to his car.

They drove along a narrow asphalt road that wound uphill through the trees beside a mountain stream, until they came to an isolated gamekeeper's lodge.

During the journey the lynx hunter said nothing and there was nothing the fortune teller was inclined to ask. The price he paid for his exceptional abilities was a depressing awareness of the tragicomic predetermination of human existence. He lived from what he saw; it was hard, pointless and to no avail. Most of what he saw belonged to the past, or as a rule would happen later anyway; he couldn't change it in any way; for him it too was really the past, so what hope was there. Ever since he had discovered that life could no longer offer him anything better, nothing that could really fill him with enthusiasm, he was far less afraid of death than the average person.

He hadn't wanted to go there; he didn't want to get involved in anything. He didn't care whether the hunter shot lynxes or not. He had listened to his desperate telephone calls with the disdain they deserved, because the thing causing this fellow to go to pieces was such a banality that he just couldn't believe it. How could it compare to his own plight? Confused by contradictory visions, he suffered like hell and his income was shrinking all the time. That was in fact the only reason why he had allowed himself to be persuaded to look for a hunting trophy of some kind. He didn't know whether it was more ridiculous or humiliating. He, who usually successfully foresaw significant events, who had found a number of missing persons, was to search for some wretched lynx pelt. However, it must be of great value to this unhappy man, if he was offering so much money for it, along with a pile of fresh trout and a red deer in the autumn.

He had kept repeating that it was his most valued trophy and

the fortune teller inwardly mocked the purport of this word, whether in connection with a beautiful woman, stolen gold treasure or a wretched human soul. He should settle down at last, beget a new bearer of the wonderful illusion of meaningful reality, which he now only experienced in bed with young women, but marriage was the last thing he wanted. He moved from flat to flat, from town to town, driven on by the vision of an inevitably sad end.

They got out of the car and the fortune teller gazed down into the valley.

How picturesque and breathtaking was this delusive creation, he was thinking to himself, when a second later fierce barking was heard.

The unexpected, vicious torrent of aggressive sound flooded the whole valley, bouncing off the tops of pine trees swaying in the wind. He started in surprise, which made the lynx hunter grin idiotically, like most dog owners, haughtily proud of their fearsome four-footed pets.

"Amigo!" he shouted, but didn't succeed in silencing the furious animal at that distance. "Don't worry, he's penned in," he said, nodding to the fortune teller and setting off in the direction of the cottage. On their right there was a group of trout ponds surrounded by a fence and beside them carefully tended rows of vegetables. Flowering irises lined the fence and beyond them on a long chain a huge yellowish-brown Alsatian-like mongrel was barking madly.

A tiny woman came out onto the veranda.

"Don't tell her who you are or why I've invited you here. I don't want her to think I can't get over it. Stop that, Amigo!" he yelled once more at the dog and it fell silent at last.

"What kind of beast is that?" asked the fortune teller, just for something to say.

"A cross between a dingo and a wolfhound. He was left here by Russian soldiers who'd dragged him all the way from Cuba. He was specially trained to guard strategic sites. Then one cottager had him and he sent for me to shoot him. He'd bitten a lot of people... hadn't you, Amigo?"

The dog gave an ominous, malevolent growl.

"A real friend," the fortune teller nodded. "It was a mistake. You should have shot him."

The lynx hunter gave a slight nod, took off his greyish-green jacket and hung it over the fence.

"I'll catch a couple of trout now, so I can have a drink with you, because Amigo hates alcohol. He'll more or less put up with wine, but you have to watch it if he gets a whiff of spirits. Have you any idea how that Soviet soldier tormented him when he got rat-arsed on vodka? Most likely it wasn't even a Russian, but some barbarous Asian."

"*Sumashedshi*," said the fortune teller with a faint smile.

"Who?"

"They're called *sumashedshi*."

"That's some kind of breed?"

"No, an illness."

"Ah, yes, I get it..." he said, rolling up his shirt sleeves and revealing a scar left by teeth on his left elbow. "Look, that's what one tot did. But I didn't give up. I was determined to tame that dog, even if it was trained to be a cold-blooded killer. He won't attack me now, although to tell the truth, with him I can never be quite sure ... can I, Amigo?"

The beast stood, looking cruel, prepared to pounce.

"Here in the forest I've cultivated an iron will. If I once make up my mind to do something, I have to do it. When we go inside I'll tell you about my experiences with lynxes. Like me, a lynx kills everything it catches, more than it needs for food. I'll tell you how I hunt them. You'll see I really have lived in difficult conditions, but I've always found a way to manage. Except this time. I keep going round in circles like a squirrel in a cage and I can't find a way out. Thank God you've let yourself be persuaded and have come this far, to the middle of nowhere, to try and help me.

The tiny woman watched them from the veranda with interest.

"You should shoot him," urged the fortune teller.

"Well... you know, I've slaughtered so many animals that I've no taste for it any more, unless it's necessary... Not even a butcher in an abattoir has shed as much blood as I have, because in the abattoir they don't slaughter every day and I've been hunting ever since I was a child. I shot my first roe deer when I was five. My father, also a hunter, helped me to hold the shot gun. Shot guns are not allowed, they weren't even then, but he wanted to please me. He was very fond of me, he saw himself in me, because I had that passion of his in me. But that doesn't mean I don't like animals. I don't want to boast, but I know more about the habits of the animals that live here than anyone else, even someone who has studied them. I know how to lure different species into a trap, I could write a book about it, but I won't, because such a book could harm nature.

"That's nice of you," said the fortune teller with a smile. The idea was quite foreign to him. When it came to nature, he hardly even noticed the arrival of the swallows any more.

The veranda was deserted. The woman had gone inside.

Even from the other side of the fence it was possible to see through the water that the fish ponds were teeming with trout.

"Do you want to have a look?"

The fortune teller had no desire to, but the lynx hunter was already opening the iron gate. He cautiously approached the dog, talking to it in a soft voice. He caught hold of it by the collar and pressed its head towards the ground.

"Don't worry, you can come past!" he called to the fortune teller and much against his will the latter walked around the growling beast, took a cursory glance at the fish ponds and stiffly returned at once. He breathed freely again only when he was on the other side of the fence.

"Pick some nettles. I'll stuff the trout with them," called the hunter, successfully breaking away from the dog and going round to the opposite side of the largest fish pond, where he had a fishing net already prepared. He dipped it in and pulled out

a pile of silver trout, emptied the net into a crate and threw the smaller ones back into the water. Staring hypnotically at the sitting mongrel, he backed out of the pen.

"Pick some of those nettles in that ditch!" he shouted at the fortune teller and carried the crate of fish up to the veranda, put it down next to an old kitchen table and returned to the dog.

The fortune teller hated being ordered about, especially in such a tone. A strong aversion to any kind of activity came over him again. He sat down on a stool near the wall, held his face up to the sun and half-closed his eyes. It was beginning to get hot and the early morning wind had dropped. All he could hear was the occasional movement of the fish in the crate. He could see them – cold and slippery – desperately opening their mouths, their eyes popping out as they took a last look at the world he had become so indifferent to of late.

The lynx hunter fetched another crate half-filled with water, set it down next to the fish and stared at him disappointedly.

"Don't you understand? The nettles will keep them fresh until you get home."

This man of the forest can't stand any opposition, the fortune teller thought to himself and immediately regretted he had gone there. He suddenly felt so wretched, as if not only the fish ponds and the gamekeeper's cottage, but all the beautiful surroundings were lying on a dragon's vein. He reluctantly got up from the stool, went over to the ditch and stood looking down helplessly at the nettles. He wound a handkerchief around his hand and clumsily tore up the fiendish plant, roots and all. The nettles stung him and he flung them down angrily on the kitchen scales in the middle of the table.

The lynx killer finished off the fish as easily as if he was killing them with his own murderous will. He picked a trout out of the crate and it immediately went rigid, not even twitching when he gently, just symbolically tapped it on the head with the blunt edge of the knife. Sometimes two or three times, almost mercifully, like a lion when it pulls an antelope to the ground, granting it a last spark of hope and making it easier for it to die. The fortune teller was convinced that lions kill lovingly. That they get to know their prey, feel for it and know when to deliver the decisive blow. What looks like a cruel game is just the beast's feeling for its victim. He saw that the lynx hunter stunned the fish in the same manner, only to slash its belly a moment later with one stroke of the knife, pull out its guts, tear off its fins and remove the kidney with his thumb. While doing so, he cast a meaningful look in the fortune teller's direction and explained that the fish had a disproportionately large kidney running almost the length of the backbone, because it had to filter a huge amount of water, and if some lazy, stupid, drunken cook failed to remove the kidney completely, the flesh would have a bitter taste. Satisfied with his important advice, he rinsed the gutted trout in the crate of pond water and with his bare hands stuffed it with nettles, drawing the thicker end of the stem through its jaws.

"Doesn't it sting you?" the fortune teller asked in surprise. He could still feel an itching burn on his knuckles.

"Get used to it," retorted the forester, going over to the ditch, preferring to pick the nettles himself without the muddy roots. He laid them at the bottom of a plastic bag, placed the fish on them and covered them with the remaining weeds.

The three largest he left unstuffed.

"Take these, we'll fry them now," he told the fortune teller, who had realized by now that he was dealing with a perfectionist and possibly even a workaholic. The hard-working man of the forest had noticed his pathological antipathy for physical matter and revelled in tormenting him with details, just to make up for the humiliation he felt when he had tipsily lamented over the phone that he was on the verge of despair, that he would probably shoot himself, that the fortune teller was his only hope.

Translated by Heather Trebatická

Viliam Klimáček

COSMONAUT SQUARE

GENERATION Ю

(Extract)



Photo: Peter Procházka

VILIAM KLIMÁČEK (1958) is a multitasking author. He graduated from medical school, and as a doctor, he came to the Slovenský spisovateľ publishing house with the manuscript of his collection of poems *In Deep* (Až po uši, 1988). The publishing

elite of that time – the poet Ľubomír Feldek was in charge of the department of poetry – eagerly accepted it. It was Feldek's generation that appreciated the author's versatility and playful approach to the world as well as the seriousness of his testimony. (Let's not forget that one of the foremost poets of this generation, Ján Stacho, too, was a doctor and Jozef Mihalkovič was a chemical engineer...). The publications of his following works no longer needed the support of the publishing elite. Collections of poems *Medical Book for the Soldiers of Compulsory Military Service* (Zdravotní knižka pro vojáky základní služby, 1991) and *Toffees* (Karamelky, 1992), fairy tales, and dramatic texts followed one after another. As a prose writer, he debuted with a collection of stories *Distance Caressing* (Ďalekohľadenie, 1991). With this collection as well as with novels *Virgin in the Basement* (Panica v podzemí, 1997), *Váňa Krutov*, 1999 *Nadia's Got Time* (Nada má čas, 2002) and *English is Easy, Csaba is Dead*, 2004, he has proven his multilateral talent (in the creation of dramatic texts and poetry as

well as comical scenes in the screenplay of the sitcom *Teachers' Room* (Zborovňa, 2000), appreciated by students and teachers, and his ability to work on an extensive text. His latest novel *Astronauts' Square* (Námestie kozmonautov, 2007) won the main prize in the Novel 2006 literary competition and was published by the now-defunct LCA publishing house. Through novel, Klimáček has a better chance to show his wider perception of the world and the way of thinking of the generation which came after the year 1958. Through the Russian Ю, used in the subtitle of the novel – *Generation Ю* – he shows the entire spectrum of political views and the socio-political situation in which the author finds himself: whether it is the Russian Ю or the English *you*, there are still two sides here, in between which he must fit his perception of freedom, relaxedness, confinement, and uniformity. Viliam Klimáček is talented, and every talent needs its background. As a dramatist, he has found it at the GUnaGu theater, and as a poet and prose writer he has found it with publishers.

Yu (Ю, ю) is a letter of the Cyrillic alphabet, used here by the author to symbolize the English homonym "you" with reference to this generation's unquestioning admiration for the lifestyle in the West.

WEDNESDAY, EARLY MORNING

Maroš kissed his sleeping wife and quietly slipped out of the bedroom. He was carrying his jeans and a T-shirt with a picture of ball-bearings, a symbol of the time not so long ago when he was still working in a factory called Achko. The ball-bearings cuddled up to each other tenderly and tried to convince the public that they were what Achko produced. The picture had grown pale with frequent washing, as its owner had with early rising, and the public had also long been aware that the abolished ball-bearings firm was in fact an arms factory.

Maroš dressed himself with habitual movements. His forty-five-year-old body managed it without unnecessary rustle, although more and more often a sharp pain drew his attention to his right shoulder, but this was already an everyday sensation. A little uncertainly he went down into the garage and took out his father's bicycle.

Until recently its massive frame and large wheels had been an object of ridicule. The seat had two springs capable of absorbing the shock of a railway wagon. The bright Cyrillic lettering on the frame read – ЗИФ. But now this Soviet means of transport had already moved into the veteran category and begun to evoke dreamy respect in some of its generation. Maroš Kujan wouldn't hear a word against his navy blue ZIF.

He pushed it out of the gate of the sleeping house and walked down the steep slope through the cemetery. At the stones of the grotto sheltering a plaster Virgin Mary in a niche in the rocks, he

crossed himself perfunctorily. When he reached the dilapidated chapel, he mounted the creaking seat and let it carry him down the Road of the Cross.

He sped through the awakening town under his own momentum, but pedalled at least half way up the asphalt road leading under the viaduct and up a steep hill, away from the town – to a point level with the road sign VELKÉ ROJE, the limit of his fitness.

He dismounted and pushed his bicycle uphill, puffing as he went. He passed the metal gate with its welded D*R*E*V*O*Č*A*S sign, whose letters had once been separated by red stars, now only rusty. Only last month the company had employed him, but the coffee tables of pale walnut that always looked as if water had been spilled on them, or the mini-bars with protruding doors were so hideous, that not even their Belorussian partner would take them any longer. Maroš had been one of the first to be made redundant.

At the top of the hill he turned off onto a dirt road and hid his bicycle among the bushes. He opened the little leather bag behind the seat and took out a mirror, a brush and a tiny bottle of artificial blood, which made from ketchup, glycerine and food dyes.

First he changed his trousers for ones with a hole in the knee. Then he skilfully made himself up. The little mirror showed him a man with a cut over the eye and a bloodstained face. Maroš was satisfied. He sat astride his bicycle and waited at the edge of the dirt track.

The asphalt road was lined on either side with wild undergrowth and the turning off into the field was hardly visible. Well hidden among the leaves, he watched the traffic on the main road. Two rusty Skoda MBs, an Avia lorry carrying cement and an interminably slow tractor.

His heart was beating fast with excitement. He let several more

cars pass until an itching in his back told him the time had come. As a matter of principle, he only picked out luxury makes. He could distinguish them by the sound they made.

A Czech Hyundai and a woman at the wheel. He made up his mind in a fraction of a second. He pushed off hard with his feet and came hurtling into the bend at precisely the same moment as the red car. The Hyundai's brakes squealed and Maroš instantly shot off into the bushes. The car didn't even touch him. A few scratches were added to the painted blood.

He lay under the fallen bicycle and waited. The car came to a halt. For a moment nothing happened. Gurgling noises came from the exhaust.

Don't let her drive away like the one yesterday, he prayed to himself.

The car was put in reverse gear. Maroš let out a sigh of relief. The door opened and calves wearing red court shoes stepped out.

Matching the metallic paint, thought Maroš and groaned, "Help!"

"Are you all right?" the young woman cried out in Czech.

The well-oiled wheel of the ZIF spun impressively.

"Call...the police!" sighed Maroš, pulling himself to his feet with difficulty.

A look of horror appeared on the woman driver's face.

"For heaven's sake, I've got a new driving licence! Are you all right?" she asked anxiously.

"My head hurts," Maroš said, "and I've dislocated my knee."

He took a couple of steps and, with a painful grimace, leaned up against the purring car. "You were going terribly fast, miss. You'll lose your licence. Was it worth it? You could have killed me!"

The woman, already pale enough as it was, turned even paler.

Maroš added sadistically, "I've got a wife and child, but you obviously don't care, if you bloody well tear along at a hundred and ten!"

"We'll bandage it up..." the driver said in a shaky voice, pulling out an immaculate first-aid kit.

With trembling hands she unscrewed a bottle of tincture.

Maroš scornfully snatched the plastic box from her hands and hurriedly bandaged his knee. "The doctor will make me stay home for a week. I shall lose my job!"

"I'd pay you compensation," the woman reached into her handbag.

That was just what he had been waiting for. It was a moment worthy of organ music, when all the stops are pulled out and, to the thunder of pipes, from behind a cloud instead of God's son and the Holy Ghost the state's banknotes appear: Hlinka and Štefánik, with the signature of the governor of the national bank forming a filigree decoration around them.

Maroš blissfully half-closed his eyes.

"Here," the woman handed him quite different faces. "That's all I've got."

Maroš looked at the two one-hundred euro notes reminiscent of lottery tickets and recalled the previous day's exchange rate. Over eight thousand Slovak crowns! We-ell now... He took a deep breath and a fraction of a second later greedily stretched out his hand.

A look of doubt appeared on the woman's face, but the hooting of the cars heading at speed for the town forced her to get back into her shiny red car. However, it was possible to sense relief in her hurried steps. She slammed the door and took a last look in Maroš's direction. Just at the right moment his indestructible Soviet bicycle, the source of his livelihood, fell from his hands. He bent over with exaggerated difficulty.

The Hyundai started off and the warm breeze of that August morning dispersed its cloud of petrol fumes. The lead fallout gratefully settled on the little sour apples lining the branches of

a gnarled apple tree. Years ago it had been planted at the edge of the road by some trusting man, perhaps a distant relative of Maroš, a happy man who in his lifetime had met more horses than four-cylinder engines.

The ground shook. Somewhere a long way off riveting hammers were stitching Europe together.

Standing out like motley patches on a velvet coat, the new countries of the Union tried to keep their dignity in the emerging alliance, whose only clearly visible ideal was the common market. Along with an unconvincingly declared solidarity of the more powerful with the weaker. The inhabitants of the patches were well aware that at first Old Europe would show the world only that side of the coat where their gaudy blotch could not be seen, and therefore did not get any more excited than usual.

Who knows whether this meant they had missed a historic moment for sincere joy at unification? Many sensed it, but swallowed the moment as they had done a thousand times before, for experience had taught them that with us or without us, the wheel of history keeps turning.

It is probable that few people believed there could be a repetition on the continent of Europe of the miracle of the melting pot, which centuries before had united the nations emigrating to the territory of North America into a compact formation of one body and one mind, thus creating the most maligned letters of the alphabet in history – the twenty-first, nineteenth and first – that is, the USA.

In spite of these doubts, it was, however, certain that nothing better could happen to little Slovakia than to be stitched onto another piece of Europe that had created such wonderful things as Saint Peter's Basilica, psychoanalysis and the film *The Yellow Submarine*. The further from the capital, the less did the shocks of the riveting machines make themselves felt in the everyday lives of the inhabitants.

And in the epicentre of our story, in the town of Veľké Roje with its population of seven thousand, the ground did not shake at all. The last event worthy of that name had taken place fifteen years earlier and remained recorded in the town chronicle as a moderate earthquake that had produced cracks in the asphalt pavement outside the nursery school in M.R.Štefánik Street necessitating repairs to the tune of 12,860 crowns and causing the tragic death of one citizen.

The fact that the citizen had died an unusual death, in that he had been swallowed up by a rift in the ground and his body had not yet been found, was not spread around unnecessarily. Nor that until of late he had been the most famous inhabitant we are going to hear about.

Why the town was called Veľké Roje – Great Swarm – no one has yet managed to explain. Bees had never been kept on a large scale and no reference to them has been found in any chronicle. The number of beehives in the gardens was no greater than the national average, but no one protested when on the town's newly designed coat-of-arms a bee appeared, sitting on a wooden spoon. The production of wooden spoons had a century-long tradition here, gradually moving from the isolated hillside cottages in the surroundings to the Drevočas company, which, with good intentions, had extended its assortment to include unsaleable furniture.

Veľké Roje was a town that history avoided.

The emperor's coach had passed through its streets but once and only thanks to a broken wheel can the town museum now pride itself on the bent metal of its tyres. The Turks didn't get this far, the Hussites avoided the valley and Hurban's followers didn't even stop to fill their flasks with water. In the First World War only ten men were recruited, of whom six returned and the town erected a monument to the remaining four – a marble soldier with a marble rifle, admired above all by the children,

who were always trying to climb up onto the plinth and release the marble safety catch on his weapon.

Partisans had only fought in the neighbouring district, but fortunately they had also dug an underground bunker in the Veľké Roje area, so the village could declare itself an insurgent municipality, for which it later received a town charter. In August 1968 the Drevočas factory had been closed for the summer holiday, so it was the only company in the district that did not go on strike in protest against the invasion of the allied armies, which earned it the title of Company of the Order of the Red Star and it proudly welded on the red stars between the letters of its name. In 1989 only three young people from the town emigrated and no one ever heard of them again, so it is impossible to disprove the rumours they had joined the foreign legion that were divulged in the restaurant of the Horec Hotel after Fernet Stock and tonic.

The Velvet Revolution also passes without any slaps in the face and threats to members of the Communist Party, because every third inhabitant had been in that party ("For the children's sake!"), every other inhabitant had a member of the family in the party ("I'm not going against my brother, for God's sake!") and everyone had at least one good friend who was a communist ("do you know what he'd say over a beer?!"). The only real local dissident, Vlado Juráš, quietly returned from prison and built up an honest private business as a car mechanic.

Rising above the town was Javorové hill with its television transmitter and deep in the forests were the remains of a Soviet military base, which fortunately they had not had time to complete.

The town's days passed without quakes and tremors, the ground beneath it was firm until that Thursday..., but don't let's jump ahead, it is now only Wednesday, still fairly early, and Maroš is examining the one-hundred euro banknotes from all sides and feeling happy. The August air over the fields is warming up and the currents of air are lifting the flying nano-grains of pollen, sent whirling by the rustle of the banknotes, to dizzying heights.

One grain of pollen gets caught in the right current and the chimney of hot air carries it up steeply to where it mixes with the cold mass of wind and, having performed a mad pirouette, tentatively sets off in the direction of the town. From up there the pollen has a clear view of the geometrical purity of the streets, which fan out from the square lined with old houses and dominated by a strange building that from a height is reminiscent of a rocket prepared for launching, but the grain has no time to admire the town centre encircled at a respectful distance by satellite blocks of reinforced concrete flats, because the cool current carries it off to the opposite hill with its identical terraced houses with front gardens, two windows and gable roofs; it can already see in detail one with a washing line, on which a dark-haired woman is at that precise moment hanging out wet panties and the uncontrollable nano-grain with no nano-emotions whatsoever heads at full speed for the face of the woman, where it is sucked in at a terrible speed through the enormous opening of a nostril, to crash into the vibrating villi of the warm pink mucous membrane, which immediately connects with defensive mechanisms, sending the lungs an order to hold the breath, pull down the diaphragm and with a rush of air immediately drive the nano-intruder out from the body.

LATER WEDNESDAY MORNING

"Bless you," growled Mad Šani.

Milka wiped away the tears that had sprung to her eyes from the sneeze. She staggered a little, glancing unwittingly at the sun, and sneezed a second time.

This time Šani didn't bother to respond politely, but quickly disappeared in the direction of the back yard. He was hiding something awkwardly under his shirt. Milka hurriedly pegged out the rest of the washing and followed her father-in-law.

As a matter of principle, Šani Kujan, Maroš's father, used to improve things that no one needed and develop things no one had asked for. He was a Renaissance man capable of installing in the house a pneumatic message system driven by an ordinary vacuum cleaner, through which he would send orders to the children, but he was not willing to mend a hair dryer or sharpen a knife.

"Narrow horizon," is what he used to say.

Milka quickly glanced through the open window of the children's room. With his tongue stuck out in concentration, Peťko was fitting together red and yellow pieces of Lego. She ran round the house and tried the handle of the back gate. It was bolted.

"Open the gate, Dad!" Milka called. "I know you're there."

Instead of an answer, there came the sound of metal scratching metal. Šani was putting the finishing touches to one of his devices.

"Dad!" cried Milka in a louder voice.

The scratching speeded up considerably.

"If you don't open the gate, I'll break it down!" Milka shouted angrily.

The grating metal sound stopped. After a short pause it was heard again, this time with an even greater frequency. Milka knew she couldn't break down the gate.

"I'm going to get the axe!" she thundered.

The din of the work on metal was enriched by a quiet laugh. The gate was built in such a way that no one could get into Šani's polygon without his permission. Now a hissing sound was heard. Šani had let some gas out of a cylinder.

"You'll blow us all up! Me and the child!" Milka yelled hysterically.

Here and there the hissing of the gas drowned her voice. That maniac in his fortified garden was no doubt testing another of his inventions. The last device, a pocket flame gun for liquidating wasps' nests, which worked on the basis of processed petrol, which Šani had distilled, unaware that he had produced something like napalm, had been confiscated by the police after he had set fire to a wooden fence, next to which the unfortunate wasps had built a temporary home. As the secretary to the mayor of Veľké Roje lived on the other side of the fence, police intervention had been speedy, brutal and effective.

"Police state!" battered Šani had yelled.

In its report the patrol claimed that Šani had attacked them with the flame gun and here the testimony of two policemen against a single witness still had the power of the law. Now it was evident that he was determined not to interrupt his experiment, because his son's wife was on his land.

Milka took a step back, thinking that she would grab Peťko and their savings books, but then her fighting spirit returned.

"Dad?" she called out, seemingly calm, "if you don't open the gate, I'm going to stop your experiment in the washhouse."

The hissing of gas ceased. The sound of tools being put away could be heard and a moment later the metal gate was opened.

An angry Šani emerged. "Is it still going?!"

There was a dangerous glitter in his eyes.

Milka nodded. In the cellar, which in happier times had housed the washing machine, ironing board and juicer, there was now a cauldron with a stirrer, the handle of which kneaded day and night some kind of mixture, the purpose of which Šani had not disclosed to anyone. On paper the house belonged to her father-in-law and Milka Kujanová lived there with Maroš and Peťko only because there was no hope of getting a flat in Veľké Roje.

Translated by Heather Trebatická

Monika Kompaníková

WEIßE FLECKEN

(Leseprobe)



Photo: Archive

MONIKA KOMPANÍKOVÁ (1979) war wiederholt Finalistin des Literaturwettbewerbs *Erzählung* (2001 gewann sie eine Prämie, 2003 den zweiten Preis). Sie debütierte mit dem Buch der kurzen Prosawerke *Ein Platz für die Einsamkeit* (Miesto pre samotu, 2003), für das sie den Ivan-Krasko-Preis bekam. Ende 2006 erschien ihre Novelle *Weisse Flecken* (Biele miesta). Beide Bücher hat die Autorin auch selbst illustriert. Kompaníkovas prosaisches Debüt *Ein Platz für die Einsamkeit* fesselt mit seiner Wortlichkeit und einem feinfühligem Einblick in verschiedene Stimmungen der menschlichen Seele das Interesse der Leser. In ihren Erzählungen kann man den

inspirierenden und bereichernden Einfluss des magischen Realismus von Gabriel García Márquez finden, seine Welt der menschlichen Einsamkeit, die bei Kompaníková meistens die Form einer freiwilligen Isolation annimmt. Ihre überwiegend weiblichen Heldinnen entsagen der äußeren Welt. Sie leben in den auffälligen, für den Abriß bestimmten Häusern, wie zum Beispiel einer alten trüben Schwimmhalle oder einer Einrichtung für die Geisteskranken. Außer dieser räumlichen Isolierung sind die Personen ihrer Geschichte auch sozial isoliert. Es sind Menschen, die am Rande der Gesellschaft leben, Menschen mit einer unklaren oder nur ausschnittsweise angedeuteten Vergangenheit.

Die Novelle *Weisse Flecken* bearbeitet das Thema eines trübseligen Ortes auf dem entfernten und provinziellen Lande, wo der Tumult der zivilisierten „grossen Welt“ nicht angelangt ist. Hier ist die Zeit im negativen Sinne des Wortes stehengeblieben: es herrscht hier keine Idylle, im Gegenteil – Kompaníková schildert den Verfall und die Armut des Lebens in der topographischen und gleichzeitig gesellschaftlichen Peripherie. Unter solchen Bedingungen lebten die Geschwister Tereza und Dávid – ohne Vater, nur mit der schrulligen Mutter. Als sie nach vielen Jahren in das inzwischen menschenleere Dorf zurückkehren, finden sie in den Sachen der längst verstorbenen Mutter eine Art Tagebuch, aus dem sie erfahren, dass im Hof, irgendwo unter der Abfallhalde ihr toter Vater

eingegraben sein soll, den ihre Mutter anscheinend getötet hat. Das Rätsel wird nie aufgelöst. Als sie zum letzten Mal an die Stelle kommen, wo ihr Haus ursprünglich stand, finden sie bloß ein Trümmerfeld. Es wird ihnen klar, dass von ihrer ehemaligen Welt nichts mehr existiert und dass diese zum weissen Flecken auf der Landkarte geworden ist. Im Mittelpunkt Kompaníkovas Prosawerke stehen die Beziehungen, die dem Geschehen die Dynamik verleihen: Kontakte junger Leute mit der älteren Generation, die Wahl zwischen dem Leben in der Stadt und auf dem Lande, frühzeitige Reife, Frage der Erfüllung einer intimen Beziehung älterer Frauen, das Gefühl des „Anderssein“ eines Menschen. Die Autorin bringt in das anscheinend Traditionelle ihre eigene packende Sichtweise, die ganz spezifisch auf die aktuelle Welt und das Leben reagiert. Kompaníková überrascht angenehm mit ihrer erzählerischen Souveränität, dem Humor, der funktionellen Ironie, die entfernt an Timrava's Dorfwelt erinnert, aber auch mit der plastischen Zeichnung der einzelnen Personen. Sie schildert detailliert und mit Spürsinn für Kleinigkeiten. In diesen Schilderungen tritt das Künstlerauge der Autorin, die auch Malerin ist, sowie ihr Sinn für charakteristische Details hervor. In ihren Werken hat sie eine überzeugende, wirkungsvoll dargestellte Welt mit den verschiedensten Formen der menschlichen Einsamkeit gebaut, und sich damit erfolgreich den Weg in die zeitgenössische slowakische Literatur gebahnt.

Tereza sitzt im Bus und reckt den Hals, um zu sehen, worauf ihr Bruder, der neben ihr sitzt, mit dem Finger zeigt. Da sind Bäume, die sie bei der Geschwindigkeit nur als vorbeihuschende Flecken wahrnimmt, ein Stück weiter sieht sie einen Streifen gelben Grases, das nicht gemäht worden ist und Sträucher, dann ein gepflügtes Feld und hier und da aufeinandergestapelte Eisen- oder Holzgerüste, die jedes Jahr nach dem ersten Schnee am Feldrand aufgestellt werden, damit sich auf der Straße keine Schneewehen bilden. David ist nervös, er pocht mit dem Finger ans Fensterglas und zieht die Schnur vom Fotoapparat straff. Wenn sie durch irgendein Dorf fahren, erhebt sich David halb vom Sitz und sucht nach dem Friedhof. Es ist noch hell, die brennenden Kerzen von Allerseelen auf den Gräbern sind noch nicht zu erkennen, man sieht nur die schwarzen Rücken der Frauen, die Strohblumen und Reisigzweige in die Erde um die Grabkreuze stecken. Im überfüllten Bus duftet es nach Chrysanthemen und Wachsblumen, die wohl bis nächstes Jahr Allerheiligen halten werden.

Der Kiesweg, der zum Haus führt, ist mit Laub zugeweht. Steine sind in den Schlamm gedrückt, und wenn im Frühjahr niemand neuen Kies aufschüttet, wird sich im Sommer das wild wachsende Gras in den Weg fressen wie Rost und in einem Jahr wird vom Weg keine Spur mehr geblieben sein. Die Geschwister

gehen langsam, sie schweigen. Sie mustern den Weg, die Bäume, die Überreste von Zäunen verlassener Gärten, die Stromleitungen.

„Wann warst du das letzte Mal hier?“ fragt Tereza. Sie hat das Gefühl, dass sie Davids Gedanken lesen kann, doch sie möchte die Antwort von ihm hören.

„Und wann warst du hier?“ antwortet ihr Bruder mit der Gegenfrage, denn er empfindet ihre Frage als einen Vorwurf, ein Vorwurf, der ihr ebenso gilt wie ihm.

Tereza schweigt, bis das Haus direkt vor ihnen auftaucht, winzig ist es, geduckt steht es da zwischen einigen Bäumen. „Möchtest du gleich ans Wehr oder sehen wir zuerst nach dem Haus?“ fragt sie David. Statt einer Antwort beschleunigt er seine Schritte und schlurft mit den Beinen im Kies entlang, so wie er es gemacht hat, als er klein war. Hinter ihm auf dem Weg bleiben lange Spuren wie die Schatten der Steine. Vor dem Haus bleibt er stehen und verharrt unentschlissen.

(…)

Tante Franka legt eine Plastiktüte auf den Tisch und nimmt die Sachen heraus, die sie noch aus dem Haus geholt hat, nachdem die Červenkas sich dort eingenistet hatten. Ihre Augen glänzen, als sie erzählt, wie Štefan Červenka, der nun im Dorf die Grabsteine säubert, Terezas Hefte und Bücher sowie Davids Comics aus dem Kohleimer gefischt hat und sie verweist

darauf, wie sie selbst gerettet hat, was noch zu retten war, wie sie den Ruß weggeblasen und die umgeknickten Seiten geglättet hat.

„Kleidung habe ich nicht mitgenommen,“ sagt sie, „die hatten die Červenkas schon an. Ich habe sie dort erst nach einer Woche bemerkt und ich weiß gar nicht, woher die eigentlich kommen. Wenn es wenigstens welche aus unserer Zigeunersiedlung wären. Doch so ganz Fremde?“

„Wer ist für euch hier fremd? War Mama auch eine Fremde?“ fragt Tereza. Die Zigeuner tun ihr ein bisschen leid und sie nimmt sie in Schutz. Mama ist nicht in Medovarky geboren, ihre Familie stammt auch nicht von hier. Bevor Mama hierher zog, war sie kein einziges Mal in Medovarky gewesen.

„Das ist doch was anderes,“ meint Tante Franka.

„Das ist dasselbe. Sie ist hierhergekommen und ihr habt überhaupt nicht gewusst von woher.“

„Das stimmt, doch sie ist hier geblieben. Für immer. Wir haben uns an sie gewöhnt... und sie hatte schon den Schlüssel, als sie kam.“

„Sie hatte hier niemanden. Und niemand hat sich um sie gekümmert.“

„Das hat sie selbst so gewollt, liebe Tereza. Niemand hat ihr etwas Böses angetan, niemand hat zu ihr jemals laut ein böses Wort gesagt. Wir haben uns alle Mühe gegeben, doch sie war... eben anders.“

„Sie war hier fremd. Zwanzig Jahre lang. Ihr habt es nicht einmal gemerkt, als sie verschwunden ist,“ unterbricht Tereza die Tante und die schweigt für eine Weile, um sich ein wenig zu beruhigen. „Auch du hast davon nichts gewusst,“ denkt sie, doch sie spricht es nicht aus. Sie kramt in der Schachtel mit den Papieren und zieht ein grünes liniertes Heft heraus, das von einem Gummiband zusammengehalten wird. „Lies dir das hier mal durch, das habe ich hinter den Kacheln gefunden. Vielleicht kennst du das,“ sagt sie und gibt Tereza das Heft, „ich hab es nicht gelesen, ist irgendein Tagebuch.“

„Ein Tagebuch? Ich habe sie niemals schreiben sehen.“

„Sieht so aus. Ich hab es nur überflogen, ich wollte nicht...“ sagt Tante Franka und ihre Stimme zittert ein wenig; sie hatte es nicht durchgelesen, hatte nur einige Seiten angeschaut, die zufällig aufgeblättert waren.

„Das ist ihr Heft für die Rechnungen. Sie hat die Stromrechnungen und ein paar Postanweisungen da hineingeklebt, doch aufgeschrieben hat sie nicht groß was.“

„Ihr seid ja nicht immer zu Hause gewesen.“

„Ich hätte nie gedacht, sie... und ein Tagebuch. Sie hat ja fast nie was gesagt,“ weicht Tereza Tante Frankas Bemerkung aus.

„Ihr habt ihr nicht zugehört.“

„Sie hat nichts Wesentliches gesagt. Sie hat nichts gefragt. Sie hat immer nur von den Hühnern und vom Reis erzählt, immer wieder dasselbe,“ verteidigt sich Tereza und Tante Franka fasst nach Terezas Hand, hält sie ruhig auf dem Tisch, als ob sie so die lauten Worte beschwichtigen wolle. „Was sollte sie schon erzählen?“ fragt Tante Franka.

„Einfach irgendwas, was Bedeutendes. Irgendwas, das passiert ist...“

„Wo?“

„... in der Welt, im Dorf, in der Vergangenheit.“

„Was erwartest du, Tereza, worüber sollte sie sich mit dir unterhalten, sie hat ja nicht mal die Zeitung gelesen. Liebe Tereza, sie hat Medovarky in den zwanzig Jahren kein einziges

Mal verlassen.“

„Genau das ist es eben! Sie hat sich hier vergraben, lebendig begraben in diesem modrigen Haus. Sie hat nicht zugelassen, dass es etwas anderes geben könnte, sie hat sich nicht einen Schritt von hier wegbewegt und wir waren mitbegraben.“

„Ich habe sie nicht sehr gut gekannt, ich weiß nicht, was sie gemacht hat, bevor sie hierherkam und ich weiß nicht, wo sie jetzt ist. Doch ein Mensch zieht nicht einfach irgendwohin hin, wo er niemanden hat, Tereza,“ sagt Tante Franka energisch und blickt aus dem Fenster, sie ist froh, dass sie gerade David kommen sieht. Davids Haar ist vom Wind zerzaust und auf den Wangen hat er rote Flecken. Er ist außer Atem, denn er ist die zweihundert Meter vom Autowrack zu Tante Frankas Haus gerannt.

(...)

David musste im Kinderwagen schlafen bis er etwa sieben war. Sie hatten nur ein Bett, darin schlief Mama, und ein Kanapee in der Küche, darauf schlief Tereza. Das Kanapee klappten sie jeden Abend auseinander und am Morgen wieder zusammen, damit man sich überhaupt in der Küche drehen konnte. Für David gab es kein Bett und so blieb ihm nur Kinderwagen, den Mama zu Davids Geburt vom Betrieb bekommen hatte. Der durch Skoliose (dieses Wort musste sich Mama in ihr Heft schreiben, sie verstand es nicht, doch es klang wie der Name einer Zimmerpflanze und war bestimmt nichts Schlechtes) verkrümmte kleine Rücken sah auf dem Röntgenbild aus wie das Muster eines schmiedeeisernen Geländers und David war wegen der verkürzten Sehnen beim Rennen der Langsamste in der Klasse. Tereza wollte, dass er bei ihr auf dem Kanapee schlief, doch das erlaubte Mama nicht, denn der Herr Pfarrer hatte gesagt, dass Männer und Frauen einander nach Einbruch der Dunkelheit nicht berühren dürften; und er wiederholte das jedes Mal, wenn Mama kam, um im Pfarrhaus sauber zu machen.

„Mädchen in ihrem Alter sind wie Brot im Ofen. Wenn du nicht aufpasst, dann wird sie schwarz wie Kohle. Dann taugt sie überhaupt nichts mehr. Dann hat sie eine schwarze Seele. Verstehst du, Agata?“

„Verstehe.“

„Ich weiß schon. Wie alt warst du?“

„Achtzehn, als Tereza geboren wurde.“

„Achtzehn. Hmm. Was ist mit dem Vater?“

„Keine Ahnung, Herr Pfarrer. Fragen Sie nicht danach.“

„Bete für sie. Und halt sie kurz, sie kommt nach dir,“ sagte er und ließ Mama den Fußboden in der Kirche noch einmal wischen.

David musste wie ein Baby im Kinderwagen schlafen, damit Terezas Seele nicht schwarz wurde. Die Sozialarbeiterin, welche hin und wieder bei ihnen vorbeikam, besorgte ihnen auf diskrete Hinweise vom Pfarrer hin ein ausrangiertes Bett aus einem vor kurzem geschlossenen Krankenhaus. Doch auch das war ein Problem, denn sie hatten keinen Platz für das Bett, es passte weder in die Küche noch in Mamas kleine Kammer.

Das Bett wurde am Heiligabend von zwei jungen Kerlen vom Wohlfahrtsverband gebracht, die an diesem Abend ihre Runde machten, um alte und einsame Leute mit weihnachtlicher Sauerkrautsuppe zu versorgen. Sie waren zwar etwas ungeduldig, doch gut gelaunt. Sie ließen das Bett auf dem Hof im Schnee stehen, denn Mama sagte, sie werde schon jemanden

finden, der ihr damit helfen kann. Mama brachte ihnen Kuchen und Sliwowitz, und als die jungen Kerle verschwunden waren, setzte sich Mama aufs Bett und weinte solch trockene Tränen, als ob Wasser auf heißen Beton tropft. Draußen war es merkwürdig still wie es nur zu Weihnachten ist, in weiter Ferne konnte man nur Glocken und Hundegebell hören. Mama hatte Gummistiefel an, die schwarzen Hühner liefen ihr um die Beine herum. Sie hüpfen und plusterten sich auf und das einzige Geräusch auf dem Hof war das Rascheln ihres Gefieders. Dado sprang zunächst mit den Hühnern um das Bett herum, er maß es mit Schritten ab, um festzustellen, ob es gut für ihn war, und er fragte Mama, ob viereinhalb Schritte genug seien. Jeder von Davids Schritten sank in den Schnee ein, brachte die Asche darunter zum Vorschein und beschmutzte die weihnachtliche Erde. Als Mama ihm lange keine Antwort gab, merkte er, dass etwas nicht stimmte, und er stellte sich in die offene Tür neben seine Schwester, die nur abwartete.

„Macht die Tür zu, lässt die Wärme nicht raus!“ sagte Mama und das war das Einzige, was sie in diesem Augenblick über die Lippen brachte.

Dann saß sie nur lange auf dem Bett und rieb die Hände aneinander – sie hatte das Gefühl, dass, wenn sie die Finger noch bewegen konnte, dann konnte sie auch nachdenken und etwas tun. Zu den Kindern sagte sie immer, dass der Mensch sich selbst zu helfen wissen müsse, sonst taugt er nichts, und er soll keinen Fremden um etwas bitten, wenn es nicht unbedingt nötig ist. Wenn David nicht ans Regal hinaufreichte, stand sie nicht vom Tisch auf, sie streckte sich nicht einmal, sondern sagte nur: „Denk nach und hilf dir selbst.“ Und David konnte brüllen, sich auf dem Boden wälzen oder ihr auf den Rücken pochen, wie auch immer, sie schubste nur mit dem Fuß den kleinen Hocker in seine Richtung und wiederholte: „Hilf dir selbst. Im Leben hilft dir keiner.“

(...)

Nach einer Weile stand sie auf, hob das eine Ende des Bettes an und sagte zu Tereza: „Heb mit hoch!“ Dado hielt die Tür offen und die beiden plagten sich mit dem Bett ab. Mama wusste, wie das ausgehen würde. Sie hatte das miniaturartige Haus auf den Millimeter ausgemessen und wusste genau, was man hineinstopfen konnte und was nicht. Es war lediglich eine gutgemeinte Geste dem Sohn gegenüber, um ihm zu zeigen, dass sie alles tat, was möglich war, dass sie sich bemühte. Tereza erkannte an Mamas unsicheren schleppenden Bewegungen,



Albín Brunovský

dass sie alles nur zum Schein machte, dass das hier nur Theater war. Mama hatte gelernt, es mit vielen Dingen so zu machen und es funktionierte, und Tereza ertappte sich selbst jetzt öfter bei dieser Taktik, sie hatte sie sich auch schon angewöhnt. Und immer, wenn sie sich dessen bewusst wurde, tauchte in ihrem Kopf das Bild mit den vier in den schmutzigen Schnee gekratzten Furchen von den Beinen des Bettes auf, welches sie damals in die Küche zu zerren versuchten. Sie erinnert sich daran, wie sie damals Schränke und Möbel hin und her gerückt haben und wie Dado am Tisch saß, der voller Krümel war, und wie er den Grundriss ihres Hauses auf die mittlere Seite seines Heftes zeichnete, die man herausreißen konnte, und wie er für eine Weile wirklich zufrieden war, es war sein Weihnachten. Doch nur für eine Weile, denn selbst als sie den kleinen Weihnachtsbaum auf den Herd gestellt, die Stühle aufs Kanapee gestapelt und die Kommode auf den Hof getragen hatten, passte das Bett immer noch nicht ins Haus. Oder die Tür ließ sich nicht öffnen, oder man konnte nicht zum Herd gelangen. Mama entschied, dass sie es auseinandernehmen und auf den Boden bringen mussten. Dado überlegte, zeichnete, maß, bettelte, weinte, legte sich auf den Fußboden, er maß mit seinem Körper die Länge des Bettes ab, und Mama riss sich gerade noch so zusammen. Schließlich sagte Dado zu Mama: „Papa würde das hinkriegen!“ und da gab sie ihm eine solche Ohrfeige, dass er mit dem Gesicht in den Schnee fiel.

Sie nahmen das Bett auseinander und schafften es auf den Boden. Es war schon mindestens elf Uhr spät abends und draußen war es immer noch so merkwürdig weihnachtlich still, doch niemand schlief, die Leute machten sich beim Kerzenschein für die Mitternachtsmesse fertig und aßen noch auf, was vom Abendessen übrig geblieben war. Tereza schaute mehr auf Mama als auf ihre eigenen Füße, das Bett blieb ständig irgendwo hängen, sie konnten sich nicht einigen, wie sie es am besten über die Leiter auf den Boden hieven sollten. Mama sagte nichts, sie hatte die Lippen zu einer dünnen Linie zusammengepresst und die Zähne zusammengebissen, man konnte sehen, wie angespannt ihre Gesichtsmuskeln waren. Sie erlaubte sich keine einzige Träne, doch im Geiste wiederholte sie immer wieder Abschnitte aus der Lauretanischen Litanei, deren Rhythmus ihr beim Atmen half. „...du unversehrte Mutter... du liebenswerte Mutter... du wunderbare Mutter... du Mutter des guten Rates... du Mutter des Erlösers... du Mutter des Schöpfers...“

David half den beiden nicht, er lief nach draußen und sie gingen ihn auch nicht suchen, es war nicht das erste Mal, dass er verschwand. Auf dem Boden bauten sie das Bett wieder zusammen, und Mama sagte, es sei wenigstens gut zum Trocknen von Pilzen und Hagebutten. Am Morgen fanden sie David darin liegen, er hatte sich mit einer ausgedienten dünnen Steppdecke und mit alten Mänteln zugedeckt. Er war durchgefroren bis auf die Knochen und hatte eigentlich auch gar nicht geschlafen, er hatte versucht, diese kalte Nacht irgendwie zu überstehen. Er wollte nicht herunterkommen, und so brachten sie ihm wenigstens Kuchen und Tee. Am zweiten Weihnachtstag zog Tereza zu Mama ins Schlafzimmer und David bekam das Sofa in der Küche. Von da an teilte sich Tereza das Bett. Den Kinderwagen ließen sie auf dem Hof stehen, und nach ein paar Tagen war er verschwunden.

Übersetzt von Andrea Koch-Reynolds

The Translator Ewald Osers, the Recipient of the Pavol Országh Hviezdoslav Prize for Translation of Slovak literature

Interview with Ewald Osers, by Milan Richter

EWALD OSERS was born in Prague in May 1917 in a secular Jewish family. He studied chemistry in Prague and in London where he stayed after the Munich Agreement, working with the BBC until his retirement in 1977. Osers started translating poetry as soon as in 1937, mostly into his mother tongue, German. In the UK he continued with the translation work, since 1942 exclusively into his “host” language, English. He has translated dozens of non-fiction books from German, novels by Jiří Mucha, Arnošt Lustig, Ivan Klíma, Thomas Bernhard etc. but gradually became well-known for his poetry translations, first of all of Czech poets, such as Jaroslav Seifert, Vítězslav Nezval, Miroslav Holub, Jan Skácel but also of German poets (Rose Ausländer, Reiner Kunze, Hanns Cibulka and others), Bulgarian (Lubomir Levchev, Geo Milev and others) and Macedonian (Mateja Matevski), as well as poetry of the Silesian poet Ondra Lysohorsky. In the late 1980s Osers focused also on two major Slovak poets: Miroslav Válek (*The Ground beneath our Feet*, 1969) and Milan Rúfus (*And That's the Truth*, 2006 – together with Viera and James Sutherland-Smith). In the 1990s he published poems by Štefan Strážay, Milan Richter, Margita Dobrovičová and others in British and US literary magazines and in the Slovak Literary Review in Bratislava. Recently Osers translated the famous autobiographical novel by Alfréd Wetzler, one of the Slovak Jewish escapees from Auschwitz, *What Dante Didn't See* (under the title *Escape from Hell*) and two theatre plays on Kafka written by Milan Richter.

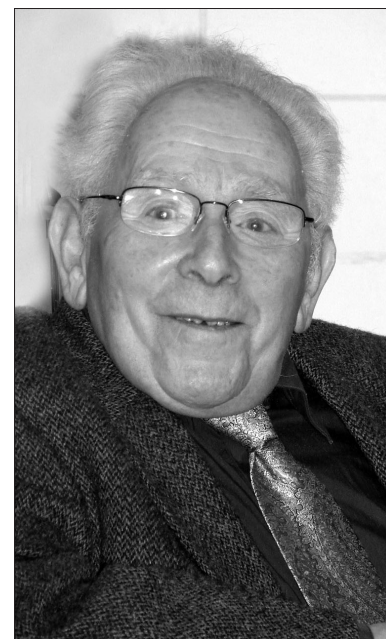


Photo: Milan Richter

MILAN RICHTER: *Without exaggeration you are one of the most experienced and longest „serving“ translators in Europe. You, indeed, started translating Czech (and even Slovak) contemporary poetry into German, your mother tongue, and publishing your translations when you were not even 20 years old. This happened over 70 years ago. Which authors, works, poetry did you consider the greatest challenge? And which of them was your greatest success?*

EWALD OSERS: These are difficult questions. The greatest technical challenge was probably Vítězslav Nezval's *Edison*. Rhymed couplets, of course, have a long tradition in English poetry, thanks mainly to Alexander Pope, but Nezval manages to tell the entirely serious story of Thomas Edison with occasional tongue-in-cheek turns of phrase and a great many unexpected “fun rhymes” – and these had all to be rendered in English. To my own surprise, however, this proved easier than I had expected – or perhaps it was easier because I enjoyed the linguistic and prosodic challenge and the result was applauded by several competent judges. The greatest success were probably my translations of Jaroslav Seifert's late poetry. They not only earned me the European Poetry Translation Prize but, more importantly, played a major part in getting Seifert the Nobel Prize for Literature. Whereas I was attracted to Nezval by his linguistic brilliance and poetic fireworks, what attracted me to Seifert was his slightly nostalgic looking-back to his youth and his love of Prague. I have often thought that if I were a major poet, I would be writing poetry very much like Seifert's. My translations of Seifert's poems were frequently republished, sometimes as the “texts” to photographic works, and I owe most of my Czech awards to my Seifert translations.

MILAN RICHTER: *Your encounter with Slovak poetry started in 1937 – Lukáč and Novomeský were well established poets then. Some 30 years later, after dozens of translations from Czech, German and Bulgarian, you returned to Slovak poets and became interested in Miroslav Válek's poems. What did you find so fascinating in his verses, in his poetic world?*

EWALD OSERS: I don't think I ever regarded Slovak poetry as a different world from Czech poetry. Few Czechs before World War Two knew – as distinct from understood – Slovak. But I had skied in the High Tatras as a teenager (I remember learning with some surprise that “to ski”, in Czech “lyžovat” is in Slovak a reflexive verb, “lyžovať sa”) and I had climbed there (with a guide) in the summer. And I suppose I am still a federalist at heart. Slovak literature was to me just part of the literature of Czechoslovakia.

I think that Miroslav Válek, who was an admirer of the Czech poet Mikulášek, would have held a similar view. Anyway I met Válek and his poetry, it appealed to me and, with the encouragement of Peter Milčák, whose beautiful *Modrý Peter* publications I admired, I began to translate him. My volume *The Ground beneath our Feet* was first published in Slovakia, but it sufficiently impressed Neil Astley, the proprietor of *Bloodaxe Books*, to decide to bring it out again in England. I have since also translated Válek's poems for children – technically another challenge – but children's books with coloured pictures are expensive to produce and the publisher is still looking for a sponsor.

MILAN RICHTER: *In the 1990s, after having introduced Seifert, Holub, and Nezval to English-speaking readers, you began translating poems by Milan Rúfus. It must have been a major challenge to transfer the specific Rúfus world with its traditional religious images into a much more sober language, a much more secular culture, wasn't it? How does Rúfus's poetry appeal to British or American readers? Have you received some feed-back from them since the volume *And That's the Truth* was published with Bolchazy&Carducci Publishers last year?*

EWALD OSERS: So far I have seen no reader or critical reaction to *And That's the Truth*, but there hasn't really been enough time. I don't think that Milan Rúfus's world is entirely strange to the Anglophone reader: there have been religious and symbolist poets even since Gerald Manley Hopkins. What worries me rather more is whether the fact that this is a bilingual publication – I am a firm believer that this is the best way of presenting translated poetry – might not scare off some readers, who might regard this as a “scholarly” publication. Time will tell. The fact is that success or failure of a “borderline” publication often depends on one single review in an influential publication. A good review in the *Times Literary Supplement* or the *New York Review of Books* would be enough to establish the book on the Anglo-American market.

MILAN RICHTER: *Comparing the position of Czech or Bulgarian poetry in the editorial programmes of British and Irish publishers, comparing all those names, known and unknown to the English speaking (and reading) audience, with the few Slovak poetry books ever published in English (by Novomeský, Válek, Rúfus, Buzássy, Laučík) – what could be done more for the promotion of excellent Slovak poets, living and dead, such as those already mentioned, as well as Ján Smrek, Štefan Žáry, Ján Stacho, Lubomír Feldek, Štefan Strážay, Míla Haugová, Ivan Štrpka, Ján Zambor, Ján Švantner, Dana Podracká, Anna Ondřejková, Viera Prokešová, and others, for the promotion of their poetry in the English-speaking world?*

EWALD OSERS: Books are written by their authors, but bestsellers, and even midlist sellers, are made by their publishers. It all, unfortunately, comes down to money. My four volumes of Bulgarian poetry are not selling at all, they are not even borrowed from public libraries. Czech poetry is doing a little better – but even here it is not Seifert or Nezval that sells in appreciable numbers, but Miroslav Holub. As one of Holub's principal English translators I am naturally pleased about that – but I also realise the reason. Holub used to attend literary festivals, read his poetry (often together with me), he was amusing and funny when he gave interviews, a deliberate clown and he became a popular figure in the “performance poetry” world. So much so that in the USA he was paid \$400 for a reading. In an ideal world, if Slovakia could afford to bring a poet over to England, if he (or she) could give public readings at half a dozen festivals and in a dozen bookshops, colleges and universities, if the Slovak embassy could host repeated presentations, inviting every literary critic to attend a generous buffet, not just canapés and one drink, if the embassy could persuade (and finance) a “Week of Slovak Literature” in one of the major chains of bookstores, if it could insert (and finance) articles on Slovak literature in the major daily papers, or at least the Sunday papers, it might become “fashionable” to buy a volume of Slovak poetry – but of course we are day-dreaming. And it would help if the woman poet was beautiful. In our real world we

(I mean pOSERSple like me, I myself am near the end of my career) must just work away, inch by inch.

MILAN RICHTER: *Recently, in October 2007, you were awarded the prestigious Hviezdoslav Prize in Bratislava. After many prizes, awards, medals and orders you have received for your translation and promotion of Czech, German, Bulgarian and Macedonian literatures in Great Britain, this is your first award from Slovakia. What does it mean to you, to a multilingual personality who after 70 years spent in England still fluently speaks Czech and even Slovak?*

EWALD OSERS: Of course I am delighted that my work for Slovak literature has been rewarded by this prestigious prize. As for what you call my multilingualism, it is not the case that, after 70 years in England, I “still fluently speak Czech and even Slovak”. The truth is that, as my old friends all assure me, I speak Czech better now than I did when I was living in Prague. This, of course, is due to my intensive contact with Czech writing and, more importantly, with Czech *friends*. For the past 30 years or more I have been visiting Prague regularly, at least twice a year. My Slovak, while quite good for a Czech, is very far from perfect, but if I have a lot of time I can probably write a letter or even an article in Slovak with not too many mistakes. Incidentally, it is my intention to bring out an English volume of poetry by a Slovak poet from your generation in the course of 2008.



EWALD OSERS published three volumes of his own poetry and a book of memoirs (*The Snows of Yesteryears*) which was translated also into Czech. He served as chairman of two British institutions (the *Translators Association* and the *Translators' Guild*) in the 1970s and 1980s and he was vice-president of the FIT (International Federation of Translators) for two terms. For his translations of around 150 books and promotion of national literatures in the English speaking world he has received more than 25 prizes and honours, e. g. the Schlegel-Tieck Prize 1971, the European Poetry Translation Prize 1987, the Order of Cyril and Methodius, Bulgaria, 1987, the Austrian Translation Prize 1989, the Officer's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany 1991, the Macedonian Literature Award 1994, the Medal of Merit of the Czech Republic 1997, both Aurora Borealis Prizes (for fiction translation and for non-fiction translation) 2002, and the Pavol Országh Hviezdoslav Prize, Slovakia, 2007.

*Ewald Osers and Milan Rúfus in Bratislava, 2007
Photo: Milan Richter*

A REMARKABLE AND INSPIRING STORY

Stefan M Hogan

Alfred Wetzler
*Escape from Hell: The True Story of the
Auschwitz Protocol*
Berghahn Books, New York, Oxford, 2007

This book comes at an important point in history, for Slovakia and the world. The Holocaust and its literature are topics that still make headlines. Just a few months ago, Holocaust deniers held a conference in Iran to “prove” that many of the facts about the Holocaust were exaggerated. And, in Slovakia, the debate is still raging over the legacy of Father Jozef Tiso, the priest who led the country when it was a Nazi puppet state, and just how complicit his regime was in the deportation of Slovakia's Jews.

“Escape from Hell” was written by one of those Jews, Alfred Wetzler, who, along with his companion, Walter Rosenberg, was the first person to escape from Auschwitz. The book was first published in Slovak in 1964 – under Wetzler's pen name, Jozef Lánik – and again in 1989. This is the first edition in English. The story is written in a third person voice so that Wetzler and Rosenberg (represented as Karol and Val in the story) could incorporate events that occurred to others. Wetzler and Rosenberg were clerks in Auschwitz, which gave them freedom of movement around the camp and access to important evidence – a ground plan, details of the gas chambers and crematoriums, and, most damningly, a label from a canister of Zyklon poison gas. After their escape in 1944, after more than two years as prisoners in

Auschwitz, they compiled this evidence and their testimony into a report known as the Auschwitz Protocol and released it to the world, eventually saving the lives of over 100,000 Hungarian Jews.

But the protocol was initially met with disbelief from western governments and humanitarian organizations. In one instance after their escape, the men report this exchange with a Swiss journalist and a lawyer:

When [Val] speaks of the liquidation of families, of men driven to slave labour, and of their women and children, who were murdered, the Swiss stops chewing his gum for a moment and asks:

‘Women too?’

‘And children,’ Val answers wearily.

'You mentioned hunger in Majdanek [death camp],' says the lawyer. 'Was that hunger there from the start or did it only begin later?'

After escaping from Auschwitz, Wetzler and Rosenberg made their way on foot to Slovakia, hiding in bushes during the day and walking only at night. They eventually reached Žilina, where friends supplied them with Aryan identity papers.

Wetzler's assumed name was Jozef Lánik, an identity he also used while a member of the Slovak resistance movement. Rosenberg's was Rudolf Vrba, which he kept for the rest of his life.

The book was translated by Ewald Osers, a multilingual Czech translator who has translated over 150 books.

(...)

There are many times when the text is downright poetic – even transcendent – perhaps not so surprising when one considers that Osers was credited by Nobel Prize-winning poet Jaroslav Seifert with helping him win the prize:

Bread...

Every evening you receive it with trembling hands. You take it eagerly and make sure that there is no bit of crust missing from your piece. Bread is all-powerful; bread keeps the

dying little flame of life inside you burning. You eat ten or twenty grammes of bread, the little flame flickers more strongly inside you, your eyes get a little clearer and, for a while at least, a little more warmth flows through your veins. You pick up a crumb of bread from a puddle or from dung, unhesitatingly you'll pull it out from a dead man's pocket. You pull it out boldly and without a twinge of conscience because you know full well that he would do the same. He knew the value of bread and long ago forgave you your action in advance.

Such text powerfully conveys Wetzler's harrowing experience, and shows the courage it took to survive the horrors of Auschwitz and bring it to the world's attention.

Overall, Wetzler's is an important story, simply and movingly told.

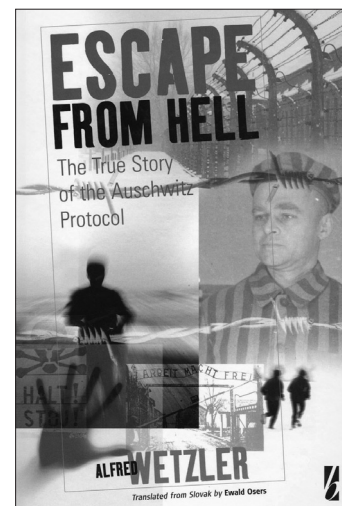
As distinguished British historian Martin Gilbert writes in the book's Foreword:

"Wetzler [was] a central figure in one of the most remarkable acts of saving lives in the Second World War. The publication of his book enables his remarkable and inspiring story to become known in full for the first time, and is a tribute to his memory."

And Pavol Mešťan, director of the Museum of Jewish Culture in Slovakia, told The Slovak

Spectator weekly newspaper: "This type of literature usually tends to suffer from sentimentality or naturalism. Wetzler's book suffers from neither. It should be included in the curricula of all secondary schools in Slovakia."

This reviewer strongly agrees.



A BOOK AS A MEMENTO

Edita Chrenková, specialist in Hungarian linguistics and literature, translator

Juraj Špitzer

I Did Not Want to Be a Jew / Nem akartam zsidó lenni

Bábel Kiadó, Budapest 2007

Translated by Oľga L. Gály

The publication of Oľga L. Gály's Hungarian translation of Juraj Špitzer's *I Did Not Want to Be a Jew* (Kalligram, Bratislava 1994) is a noteworthy and significant editorial act. The author felt the need, even duty to share his memories of the events he had witnessed,



with his posterity. His testimony astonishes and horrifies because it is authentic. He tells the stories of people forcefully taken from their homes, families and friends. In the concentration camps, where they were taken, they directly experienced cruelty, humiliation, restrictions, aggression and sadism. The uncertain future ahead of them brought them fear and sorrow. Anger and helplessness did not allow them to think freely. There was no help for them. It was a life spent on the border between despair and moments of hope. These people's only "mistake" was that they were born Jewish.

The younger generations do not remember the horrors of this not-so-distant past, perhaps they do not even believe it. The story of these events is written by a person who personally experienced them together with millions of other innocent victims. This young man of nearly 20 years spent two-and-a-half years in a labor camp in Nováky, separated from his family. It was not until later that he learned that his parents had died in Poland. In the absurd environment of the camp, he searched for the meaning of life and the relation in the inhuman acts of the guards, whom he characterized very accurately. He tried to peek into the minds of people facing extreme situations, while trying to remain a human being under all circumstances. He gives a very interesting account of camp inhabitants' night talks on the topics of homeland, assimilation, otherness, collective guilt, the feeling of helplessness and danger, and the indifference of others. These people's unhappiness sprang

from their feeling like outsiders, even though they lived in their place of birth. The others considered them to be outcasts, doomed to extermination.

The author believes that complexes and feelings of inferiority of Central Europeans – Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks, the Polish and Russians – rooted in history, result from the differences in their development and their relationships with one another. But the Jews are scattered all over the world, their home being the entire globe. This idea must have seemed absurd in a camp encircled in barbed wire.

The significance and contribution of the Hungarian translation of this book is in its availability for Hungarian readers because the same events took place in Hungary, only a little later. Many Jews who tried to save themselves by fleeing to Hungary encountered the same fate. The author's testimony – a mosaic of events in a camp where lives were eliminated on a mass scale, proves that one can remain a human being even in the most absurd and dangerous situations. It is also a documentary about Bratislava, and about Židovská (translator's note: Jewish) street, an enclave of poverty and pogroms.

Juraj Špitzer's *I Did Not Want to Be a Jew* is meant to be a memento with an exclamation point so that the horrors of the past never repeat, and people, despite their differences, are tolerant towards each other. That is the message for the civilized world of today, for Central Europe and Slovakia as well.

Translated by Saskia Hudecová

Márius Kopcsay***Zbytočný život (Useless Life)***

Levice, LCA Publishers Group, 2006

It started with *An Important Day*, then came *The Lost Years*, and finally (for now) it all ended up with the *Useless Life*. In exactly ten narratives the author confronts the memories as well as his contemporary problems. Despite some poetic license that allows for fantasy, Kopcsay's protagonist walks in and out of the stories without a significant change of identity; he truly is alive, a being composed of flesh and blood, and not an artificial construction. The reader is ready to believe, thanks to the subtle hints, that all the experience was derived from the author's life, especially a reader in his forties and one trying to live like a good citizen and parent who has to make his living honestly. Kopcsay's *Useless Life* is more than the stories offered here. It is about the feeling of life that is forced on the protagonist, where everything conspires to tell him he is useless.

Already the introductory story, "Coal Holidays" suggests an atmosphere of uselessness. As the Pupil, with a capital "P," does not go to school, as there is no coal to heat it, he is bored and tries to fill his time by daydreaming about flying. This is how he can overcome the feeling of emptiness. The inner world becomes more important than the real world. The story "Visual Perception" is the story of the week. People just bum around and like pawns make a step forward, only to make one back the next day and some other day a step aside to the left or to the right. Days turn into weeks, weeks into months and years and an entire life. The author takes a critical look at the present situation. His mood could be characterized as being in a state of permanent anger. However, he does not only lash out, but ridicules himself, adopting an ironic manner, dealing with the world he lives in ironically. The story "Stink," is only a brief comical sketch, a hyphen among the other texts. In the "Complex colourful Story," the author continues to compare: the manifold story of an erotic strawberry that the Writer only dreamed about produces a sharp dissonance with the reality of his life. His inability to develop the flirt and take off from his wife and child for adventures as a bulldozer of female hearts shows up in the story "Love." And so the unfinished dreams remain unfinished only by suggestion: their unfinished quality of the narrative is their conclusion. "The Climax (An Unfinished Composition)," takes the reader back to the protagonist's childhood. This time, the main narrator and character is called Oliver. He describes the vacations, the excitement of time with his relatives, the reactions of his mother, but also his own loneliness while undergoing his treatment of an allergy. The climax here is his dream about being a train engineer free to travel wherever he wants, just to escape the reality of the divorce of his parents. In the "Saviour," Kopcsay makes an absurd joke with the help of aliens for whom our planet is too stupid and vulgar. The following story, "The Young Lady behind the Counter," is a variation on the erotic embarrassments. Satirical thorn is sharpened here on the narrator with a significant name Paľo Kriak-Trnistý (the hyphenated last name meaning "thorny bush"). The story "Moving Out," talks about the search for an escape from a depressing fate, this time in alcohol. The moving of the family, new employment, inability to perform in an extramarital affair are only a few motives for the narrator's ambition to become an alcoholic. The conclusion of the collection is a story from the future, "Vacations in Orbit." In a form of diary retrospective, the son returns to the years of his father's hopelessness, sadness, and embarrassment.

Some consolation comes from the knowledge that even the son, though he never lets anyone know, experiences similar disappointments as he did once before. The feeling of desolation, failure, the running in the circle, of vanity, is the feeling that is experienced by the present generation as well as the former and obviously will be recognized by the future ones, too. Kopcsay talks about ordinary people and things, he does not invent experiences, he lets the action flow in a linear fragmentary chain, only here and there interrupted by the memories of the past and the attempt of searching for the roots of the exceptional. In this sense, Kopcsay's texts remind one of therapeutic search for the roots of the dependence (on the loss of hope). They talk about the everyday life in an extraordinary manner.

Luboš Svetoň**Erik Jakob Groch*****Em***

Prešov, Slniečkovo, 2006

This collection of two dozen poems forms the first book of the edition "Verses on line." Erik J. Groch is a poet of particularly spiritual lyrical poetry who continues in his own poetic—philosophical road that has been in the last few years connected with the search for love. However, he seeks love not as a value in itself, but as the deepest cause and principle of life, and a principle of inner awakening. His effort is expended to make love believable even in the 21st century. That is why his poems aim at the expression of love's essence and it seems that this essence is in its incommunicability and the dialectics of desire and the nearness of death. Groch aims for love "with torturous joy," (p. 8) and his subtext connects experience, spirituality, and intellect. Love here comes in concrete images of nature and body, in the spiritual vision of existence, and the intellectual openness of perception. Into the one interconnected whole thus flow lover's poetry, prayers, and philosophical meditations. Truly, we haven't seen for a long time as persuasive and intense evocation of love as in the poem "Waiting," and as pure and devoted prayer with an individual ethos as in the poem "Litany," and as ethereal a meditation with an open sensual charge as in the Poem "Love." The poems are strong and new because of the synthesis of the three elements which evoke the representation of the love relationship in the literary art of the mystics. The last two "poems" are texts from an email communication: they serve as a moment that concretizes and brings down to earth and thereby intensifies the authenticity of preceding poems. This opens the possibility to see the chain of poems as an inner kaleidoscope of the mental states of the lyrical hero in love with a woman hidden, as the title suggests, under the pronounced M. Erik J. Groch breaks down the contemporary kitsch of our everyday life, because his love is not exclusively emotional and his mind is not cynically speculative. His love is poetry.

Radoslav Matejov**Karol D. Horváth*****Karol 3D Horváth***

Koloman Kertész Bagala, L.C.A. Publishers Group, 2006

With the third, blue, Karol Horváth (the previous ones were red and yellow respectively) the author concluded his "true color" cycle of stories two years after his late debut as the author of the same name and the finalist of the literary competition *Anasoft Litera 2005*. Here

the author lets us know where his method of recording complex human stories and grotesque events comes from. He is answering a postmodernist challenge that calls on us to ridicule the classical and modernist literary effort and to use the multimedia effect to disturb the old settled genres and the evanescent nobility of the tradition. If one can set oneself an aim like that, then we can say with clear conscience that Karol Horváth managed to achieve his aim. In his stories there is no respect for tradition, or traditional characters, not is there for traditional topics. This is true of all three of his coloured books, particularly of the last one. But on the other hand, there is a lot of other stuff, such as theatrical and performance elements.

First of all, there is a lot of tenderness. While at the same time, the first thing that hits the reader's eyes and senses is blood and vulgarity. The eyes can see and the nose can smell and the ears can hear everything palpable. Most of the stories are contaminated by the destruction of people by cruel men. The characters murder or witness murders of the American calibre improved by the Central European specifics. They move in the world where a nice word is considered impolite and the soul with its suffering is seen as a contemptible embarrassment. The gangsters, the underground lost souls and the foolish consumers don't even look for an opportunity to shoot someone, rob their neighbour, and to show their power: they all live in the centre of cruelty, lies and violence. However, they often do something that deviates from this norm and makes them eccentrics in this strange world: they go to a funeral with a cactus and fall into the grave ("The Flight of a Fly"), they write on a piece of wood a gnomic poem to the secret lover and set it on fire in front of her door ("The Best Gnomic Poem"), or demolish a kitschy country feast in bloody mayhem together with the participants ("I Hate Oompapah Music"), or when no better possibilities beckon, they make an attempt on their own life. It is because they live in the author's image of the real world and behave the way they should. As if in a modern music video, they quickly move from a situation to another situation, from an action to another action until their self-destruction. Their life story maps with merciless precision and horror-like grotesqueness all the evil, though, of course, this is not their literary intention. The intention is a warning caricature of the world set in consumerism and digitalization. Its meaning is the paradoxical exposition of the inner life of the characters that cannot be realized in the action, but which nevertheless exists and shows itself in the eccentricities that do not fit the phenomenology of the consumer age. The first paradox: Horváth is fast, harsh, and full of action, but it is above all about the emotion, its absence, deformation, or deviant expression. All those ridiculed and undelivered bouquets, cacti, burning poems, dreamy reality shows and exaggerated sex are expressions of unfulfilled humanity and Horváth deals with them with borderline sentimentality.

The second paradox: the stories are full of literature. Horváth knows all about mystery, horror, thriller, fantasy, realism, adventure and sentimental prose. He also knows about the quixotic iconoclasm of the so-called serious literature. All of that has left some traces on his own vision of prose that is both a ridicule, as well as a parody and at the same time an attempt to build his own style. If we say that his stories have a beginning and an end, it means they managed to transform the formlessness of the contemporary feeling of the world and give it a precise shape in which the mental organism works thanks to the details that connect the relationships. If the dimension of the meaning shows horror and decadence, the dimension of the stylistics introduces a matter-of-fact

language with significant dialogues. Third paradox: There is a lot of civilized intellect here. Horváth likes the village and the suburbs, but his main theme is the infiltration of the relationships by the ultramodern lifestyle and technologies. That truly is a work for a fine diagnostician with a sense of comedy and the talented Horváth fulfills without a doubt these roles.

Alexander Halvoník

Viliam Klimáček Námestie kozmonautov – Generácia IO (Cosmonaut Square – Generation IO)

Koloman Kertész Bagala, LCA Publishers Group, 2007

Viliam Klimáček won the literary competition for *Novel 2006* with *Cosmonaut Square*, and his pseudonymous gangster parody *English is Easy, Csaba is dead* has become one of the most successful revivalists of the postmodern picaresque novel. However, he is also a member of the literary school that was based on the stages of the alternative theatre scene. This long process of destruction of the traditional novelistic mythology is felt in his prose. Action dominates, comedy is stressed, together with the hyperboleization of language. At the same time there is a relativizing irony that dissolves everything using any available means, so that the form of the novel is only a communication package delivering diverse contents. This is how the postmodern authors deal with the “freezing” of the genres that used to operate in a larger temporal and space dimensions and worked with relatively closed systems of action, characters, and time, but could not get to the plurality of the human authenticity or prevent the truth from being ideologized. It seems that dashing around the worlds of novelistic openness on the steed of virtuality became boring even for Viliam Klimáček. One cannot suck a novel out of one’s finger, however magic it may be, and in addition to the craft one does need a bit of conceptual ideology, a pinch of closeness, and certainly also the risk of simplification. So here comes the first point: *Cosmonaut Square* is looking for a novelistic statement.

Above all, Klimáček has invented the *Generation YU*. This is a generation born around 1958 that matured during the time of the Soviet occupation and is marked by its admiration for the western lifestyle symbolized by the English homonym “You.” These are the two relevant circumstances that caused the notorious generational schizophrenia with consequences that are worse than the Divine Wrath: maybe it was not painful, but it pushed everything into the level of absurd humor.

In Klimáček’s novel, socialism is no longer the point, what is important are the consequences of socialism surviving in the schizophrenic situation. We find ourselves in a post-communist period, in a small town called Veľké Roje that “the history passed by,” but which always kept its hand on the pulse of the time no matter whether it produced weapons, hosted a Soviet military base, built monuments to heroes, celebrated foreign victories, while all the time diligently destroying its own people. After the Velvet Revolution, the Christ’s Calvary, that was renamed the Calvary of the Cosmonauts, again becomes the Christ’s Calvary. The secret employees of the secret weapon factory become the unemployed, the loyal citizens become gangsters, strange businessmen and homeless, so the destruction of one’s own people

continues despite all the hypermarkets for all. Everybody wants to live the new life, but the muddy footprints of the past cannot be overcome. The action of the novel takes place during four days when the small town celebrating its three-hundred-years anniversary is visited by the respectable people as well as the rabble in order to perform, among the props built from noble intentions deformed by reality, their own absurd human comedy. The characters have to remember a lot and re-evaluate their lives: the novel is filled with memories and outlandish actions of the characters, all this being a continuation of senseless history that moves the characters into the role of actors on the stage with the mission of capturing the interest of the audience. Klimáček’s characters are all tragic and what distinguishes them is the degree of absurdity revealed by their gestures and actions. The author understands them and is compassionate to them, but as far as the philosophical overview of the situation that the novel necessarily demands is concerned, it is lacking and the novel stays on the level of helpless understanding. This is the tax paid for the audacity to elevate postmodern openness for a novelistic statement about a generation at the time when the novel has to search for a new mission, after its tradition has been put in doubt, and when the new ideas are still nowhere to be seen. The author was trying to excise a painful appendix but he hit on a vein of gold of inspiration. It is entertainment, but mostly painful, though the vein may indeed be full of gold. Klimáček is trying to make up for the lack of spiritual dimension by introducing magic with comical or horror elements. At any rate, in his novel he created a generational vision by applying the means of postmodern poetics that he managed to overcome to a certain extent. In this century, this is the first relevant attempt to provide a novelistic statement about the eternal argument between the subjective and the objective.

Alexander Halvoník

Anton Hykisch Spomeň si na cára (Remember the Tsar)

Martin, Vydavateľstvo Matices slovenskej, 2007

Anton Hykisch showed many times in his novels *The Times of Masters* and *Love the Queen* that the historical novel is not merely his pastime, but his serious creative domaine where he has at the moment no competition in Slovakia. He knows how to find a theme, how to honestly research it, document it with historical facts and furnish an attractive story for all of this is such a manner that it could carry the message incarnated by complex characters. That is the reason why Hykisch, the historical novelist, is being read, translated and that is why he is aging less than more fashionably modern sounding masterpieces.

The most recent of Hykisch’s novel, *Remember the Tsar*, while based on a historical reality, could hardly be considered historical, though its theme is indeed historical. It is the reconstruction of the life story of the author’s uncle, who was the right hand of the Bulgarian Tsar, Ferdinand Coburg (1858-1945), “the most eccentric ruler in Europe” who was active particularly during the years of the First World War, before it, while all the time being in love with the mineral rich mountains of Slovakia. And so he enters the historically mapped terrain with the accidental family keepsakes and the life of a Slovak youth with diplomatic ambitions and moreover, with the author’s attempt to combine into a whole the fragmentary knowledge about his relative according to the possibilities offered

by a concept of a novel with its message. The author was offered this topic which in its multidimensionality is almost postmodern and where all the dimensions will remain equally important and whose final outcome will not only introduce the European character of the Slovak contexts, but will search for a more inclusive philosophy, meaning, or sense. After all, the title itself, with its imperative accent, points the reader to other than one-directional reading.

Hykisch is magnanimous and kind to his characters. He depicts Ferdinand Coburg as an overly sensitive man who loved his dead mother, nature, butterflies, modern technology, a man involved in the pleasures of the fin de siècle and experiencing a sense of nostalgia for it, but at the same time as an ambitious man who was possessed by the diplomatic wheeling and dealing in Europe full of little wars and ripening for the big one. His aide-de-camp, Anton H., comes from the modest means of Central Slovakia, and educated in the classical Slovak respect for the authorities, he seems preordained to become the faithful servant and to forget about himself and his native land in the service. The author takes the reader on a tour of European royal courts and places of action of the fermenting Europe, mapping the ruler’s historical accomplishments, crimes, while letting us peek into his weaknesses and not always pure intimate relationships. One can always sense the ironic distance that eventually issues into the harsh criticism of the European aristocratic helplessness to stop the slaughter of human beings. But the author does not save the irony when dealing with the Slovak servant whose blind obedience seems equal to the lack of charm and his awkwardness, particularly in the matters of love and eroticism, and reaches the point of the absurd. When finally the Slovak youth loses his innocence in the service of the eccentric ruler, he takes a wrong track and solves his problem by defrauding the crown for which he pays by being sent to the most horrible hells of the First World War, where he also perishes. His lover, the teacher Anna, reminds him after his death:

“I’ve seen those monarchs of yours, those aristocrats, and such like, how they put the partridges and the grouse, birds created to fly, how they placed them, suddenly frozen, deeply humiliated, their muscles seized, into the mud stomped by their polished boots... Defence against overpopulation... Son they will start the war against the overpopulated Slavs, against the Yellow Danger, against the Chinese, Japanese, or the Malays... You, the hero, the graduate of the diplomatic academy, the magician of diplomacy, the master of dodges without weapons, why don’t you clearly stand up against these criminals?”

And so this noble and highly matter-of-fact reconstruction of the story of the master and the servant, even though bearing the same love for Slovakia, is punctuated by sober chapters and measured with regular narrative rhythm, documented by the period photographs is not merely making the history or a history of a man alive for us today. It is also a reflection of the times and an urgent actual challenge.

Alexander Halvoník

Kamil Peteraj Čo sa šeptá dievčatám (Whispering to the Young Girls)

Bratislava, Ikar, 2007

Despite the large offering of book titles, it is almost impossible to ignore this newest collection of poems by Kamil Peteraj. An

attractive cover, top graphic design on a god paper and impressive illustrations will please the curious eye of a reader—a surprise in the guise of Peteraj's experimental photographs. The collection subtitled "Texts, poems, and statements about love," closes a gnomic aphorism: "The history of love/ is written/ by the conquered..." I apologize for starting at the end, but this statement by Peteraj is characteristic and suggests a clearly defined line of thought for this text.

His poetic expression does not lack melodic ease, expressive precision and economy, or gradual dynamic fall. Peteraj, ever since his entrance into literature and later in his song lyrics period, was immune to the inflationary sludge of words and linguistic rigidity. His central motif is not exclusively love and its emotion, but these motifs serve him as a bridge to other important situations. Significant place here is taken by the palpable quantity of time, its merciless flow on the background of changing reality. Peteraj in this wild flow takes stock of himself, his attitudes and opinions. His scale of values is however clear and unchanging and he feels no need to correct it from the point of today. He does not have to return to the words their former polish, since in his understanding they never lost it. Maybe because in his texts resonates humility, silent scepticism and ever-emerging hope. Maybe it is a careful hope, but it motivates and renews one:

*Tomorrow another moon will come out
It won't be so painful.*

Impressive, too is Peteraj's playfulness and self-irony that shows up quite often in his texts. This fact is always welcome in an author of "serious" lyrics and seems quite refreshing. In the moment when doubts appear, this self-irony is at its most effective. His thesis: *I no longer know what it is I believe in* can be accepted only with a temporary validity, since his faith in the noble emotions is transparent and permanent. I cannot void a negative comment for his settle phrasing of the type: "swinishly complex," "disgustingly beautiful," "messy like the inside of a tank," that stick from his texts like straw

from the shoes of a farmer. They are disturbing from the point of view of the whole composition.

It is noteworthy that Peteraj does not live off the momentum of his popularity, but offers in his newest opus a good quality and attractive poetry. It may not be inventive and surprising poetry, but it certainly is unmistakably his and it inspires one.

Miroslav Brück

Marek Vadas

Liečiteľ

(Healer)

Koloman Kertész Bagala, L.C.A., 2006

In his newest collection, *Healer*, the author has ventured into the Dark Continent for the second time after his *Tales from Black Africa* (2004). Vadas has created in Africa a world that seems made for the expedition experience: it is an alternative, parallel world that exists—to paraphrase the narrator of the story "River"—independent of our present life and one that we are eager to get to know. Vadas in this world takes the reader to the border where the sacred and the profane coexist: the fantastic is quite a natural and everyday event there, same as in a myth or a fairytale. Vadas aims further: he returns mystery and myth to the prose and moreover, he does that in a competent manner also stylistically, inventively and successfully. In his stories he uses two basic interpretative codes: on the one hand there is the archetypal, mythical, "primitive" one (manifested by the "African" view of the world), where the fantastic is natural and on the other hand, there is the sophisticated "civilized" one (manifested by the "European" view of the world), in which the fantastic is unacceptable. These two conceptions either exclude each other (hence confrontation that forms the meaningful heart of his stories), or the first one of them is

operational (in stories that are poetic pictures of the African world or in his oriental quasi-stories). Most of the stories keep to the basic scheme: the introduction sketches out the fantastic, that in accordance with the first conception is perceived as natural, only to get to a "conceptual" reversal: the originally fantastic gets a rational explanation (in the story "New Job"). The reversal does not constitute only the point and conclusion of the stories, but are found in various places of the stories in the form of surprising, but inevitable paradoxes. A strong point of the narrative is a collection of "identities" of the personal narrator (Vadas uses the impersonal narrative rarely): it could be a white man, or a black, or an old man, a child, or a woman.

Fantastic motifs chosen by Vadas are expressively archetypal, archaic, known from the traditional folklore: "David woke up with a strange feeling. In the evening he lied down on the mattress as a man full of strength, in his best years, and in the morning he woke up as a woman" ("Desperately Beautiful Life," p. 95). The female element in this paradigm of the world culture is physical and sensual, admirable and positive, as well as erotic and motherly. Despite the fact that there are fewer female characters in these stories than male ones, the female archetype fulfills an important role here. Vadas' stories, despite their ironic reversal could be understood as an effort to return to the original archetypal situation (of the country, person, culture...), as the movement from the civilization with its negative connotations towards the pure origin, towards the borderline between the good and evil, alive and dead, where the possible and impossible meet at the border. This border is depicted positively: it is a space where one meets oneself, a place to linger, to find oneself, a place of cure. An alternative world is seen as a counterbalance to the contemporary consumer taboo-less world/culture. That is why I consider this collection of Vadas's stories the best one he has written so far.

Jana Pácalová

SLOVENSKO

Slavomír Ondrejovič

History. Theatre. Music. Language.

Literature. Folk Culture. Fine Arts.

Slovaks Abroad

Edited by Magdaléna Fazekašová

Bratislava, Literárne informačné centrum and Perfekt, 2006

In the introduction to this compendium we learn that this publication "wants to inform Slovaks and others about our history, theatre, language, music, literature, fine arts, architecture folk culture and about Slovaks abroad. Let it serve as the primary source of information for us and our descendants."

This would be a fitting formulation providing there was no other compendium of this sort and if there were no other encyclopedic publications about Slovak culture for the wider public. However, in the recent period we have seen several such publications and some of them were published under the same title. We are pointing this out in order to suggest that this publication is not that much of a pioneering venture as is suggested here, however, there is no doubt that its content

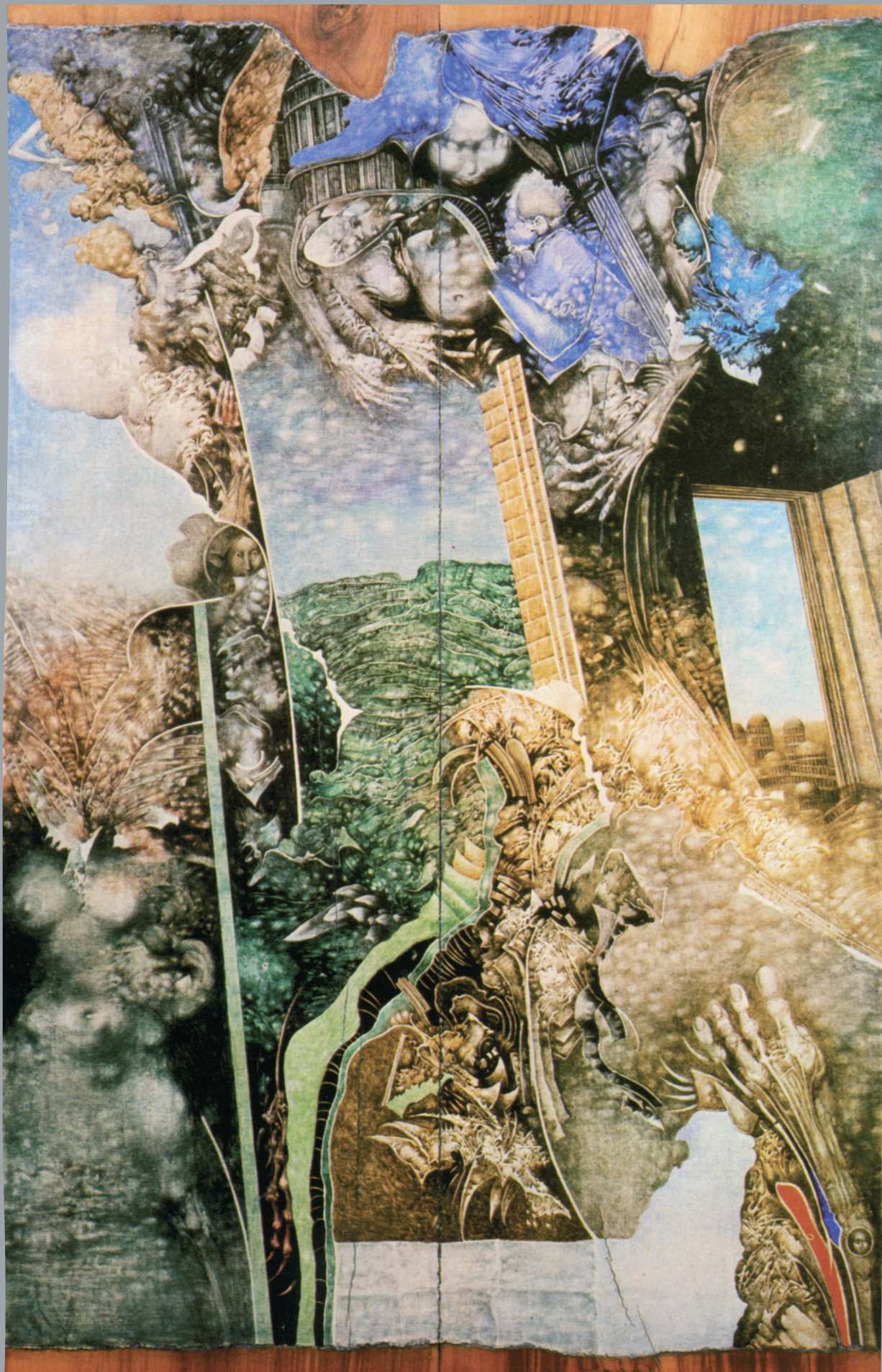
and its graphic design make it a successful project.

The authors first take the reader through the history of Slovakia. One can see they are trying to interpret history objectively. The writing is interesting and the illustrations fittingly enhance the facts and connections. This is particularly true in the chapters on theatre and music in Slovakia, where it is confirmed that the development of these arts was enabled by social and political events. We find a voluminous section on language, its story on the territory of the present Slovakia that, for example, in another compendium, Slovakia, published by the Otto publishers in 2006, is unaccountably missing. When it comes to literature, it is obvious that we are dealing with a work by a number of authors, but that does not mean that the characteristics are not fresh and clever and that the evaluation of authors are not different than in textbook literature. Similarly, in the area of folk culture, which is organized in a folkloric and ethnological manner, and in the area of architecture and fine arts. In this connection it was well said that the area of Slovak culture was supplied

"by the flow of foreign influences," and that the caravans of wanderers, merchants, and fighters automatically packed some elements of the spirit of our people and took it out to the rest of the world. The exposition is symbolically concluded with a chapter on Slovaks abroad. It is a very informative ethnographic chapter that would benefit by giving more information on the life of the Slovak language in various parts of the world. They could have also found some place for a chapter about the minorities and minority languages in Slovakia.

The beautifully designed book (Braňo Gajdoš) with great illustrations concludes with an index of names and things. We have heard that there are plans to translate this book into other languages. In this case it would be useful to consider whether it would not be a good idea to add to this picture of Slovakia some other aspects: more detailed exposition of the political and social life in Slovakia and its inclusion in the European Union. The book would be more complete and useful "for us and our descendants."

Translated by Peter Petro



Albín Brunovský:
Heavenly and Earthly Love, (1971)

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Albín Brunovský:
The Ninth in this Month, 1987 – 88



Am 21. Juni 2007 fand in der Stadtbibliothek in Stuttgart die Autorenlesung *JENSEITS VON WORTEN* statt. Mit ihren Gedichten stellten sich die Autoren Mila Haugová und Marián Hatala vor. Beide wurden mit grossem Interesse aufgenommen: die Videopräsentation von Marián Hatala und die interessanten Kommentare von Mila Haugová zu ihrem eigenen Schaffen haben das Publikum begeistert. Den literarischen Abend bereitete das Literatur-Informationszentrum mit der Stadtbibliothek und mit dem Honorarkonsulat in Stuttgart vor. (Foto von links: Daniela Humajová, Dr. Sabine Giebler, Marián Hatala, Elena Hesse, Mila Haugová.)



This year the traditional summer event of CAPALEST was devoted to the anniversary of signing the Treaties of Rome. Besides readings and performances, LIC also organized three panel discussions concerning the cultural and political situation in Slovakia and former Czechoslovakia at the time of signing the Treaties (1957). Slovak intellectuals as well as guests from abroad discussed the topic. In the picture from the left: Anton Hykisch, Magda Vášáryová, and Michel de Maulne in a heated debate.



On November 7th, at the premises of the Embassy of the Slovak Republic in Madrid, Spain, a presentation of the Spanish edition of a collection of poems by well-known Slovak poet Milan Richter, *El silencio de los árboles en Hyde Park* (The Silence of Trees in Hyde Park), took place. The event was hosted by the Ambassador of the Slovak Republic to Spain, Ján Valko. Translator Alejandro Hermida presented the books of Milan Richter and Milan Rúfus, two outstanding Slovak poets. Photo: from the left Milan Richter and Alejandro Hermida.



EU Commissioner Vladimír Šucha visited the Slovak stand at the International Book Fair in Frankfurt on October, 11th 2007. In a discussion with LIC director Alexander Halvoník and Daniela Humajová, he emphasized the importance of joining the EU structures for the Slovak peer organizations of writers, publishers and booksellers. In the picture from the left: Alexander Halvoník, Vladimír Šucha from Daniela Humajová.

The portraits of Slovak writers were written and translated by Saskia Hudcová, Daniela Humajová, Eva Melichárková, Dana Podracká, Viera Prokešová and Anna Šikulová. The book reviews on p. 38 – 40 were translated by Peter Petro.

SLOVAK LITERARY REVIEW REVUE DER SLOWAKISCHEN LITERATUR

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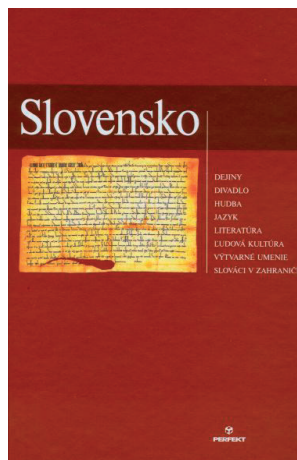
Poet Dana Podracká represented Slovakia and LIC at the 2nd International Festival of Literature which took place from 19th till 23rd September 2007 in Budapest. Its main topic was “Sin and Secret”.

Am 5. und 6. Dezember 2007 stellten sich in Rom slowakische Autoren Ivan Štrpka, Jana Beňová und Katarína Kuchelová vor. Die erfolgreiche Präsentation wurde vom LiteraturInformationszentrum und vom Slowakischen Institut in Rom vorbereitet.



Am 5. Dezember fand im Slowakischen Institut in Berlin in vorweihnachtlicher Atmosphäre der literarische Abend PIKANT UND LEBENSNAH statt. Der bekannte Autor Anton Baláz las aus seinem neuesten Buch *Vydrica – ein historisches und stündiges Stadtviertel von Pressburg* und Mária Kopcsay präsentierte sich mit seiner Erzählung *Das Fräulein hinterm Ladentisch*. Auf dem Foto: Anton Baláz und Mária Kopcsay.

Der slowakische Botschafter Ivan Korčok
(auf dem Foto rechts) mit Johannes
Scherer, dem Direktor der Stuttgarter
Buchwochen.



ALBÍN BRUNOVSKÝ (1935 – 1997) represents one of the trends in Slovak visual Arts of the 1970s and early 1980s which has taken a new form of imaginative art. In 1961 he graduated from The Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava under the supervision of Professor Vincent Hložník. He was one of the rare artists whose creative work is exceptionally varied in technique, subject-matter and expression, rich and immensely attractive for spectators. Like an illusionist he created images that one can feel and touch, but hardly believe. He created the perfect illusion of reality, but in the “new reality” of phantastic origin there is a lesson for life, a moral and social attitude. It is remarkable and a trademark of the artist that he managed to take whatever technique he chose and execute it out with great concentration to absolute virtuosity. The imaginative spirit of graphic artist, painter and illustrator Albín Brunovský is expressed in the most progressive traditions of modern Slovak art of the twentieth century. His works have been displayed at many exhibitions at home and abroad and at international biennales of graphic art, illustrations and book-plates. He received many prizes, e. g. First Prize at the Biennale of Graphic Art in Varna, First Prize at the 10th Biennale of Graphic Art in Cracow, and First Prize at the Concorso internazionale exlibristico Gabriele d'Annunzio in Pescara.

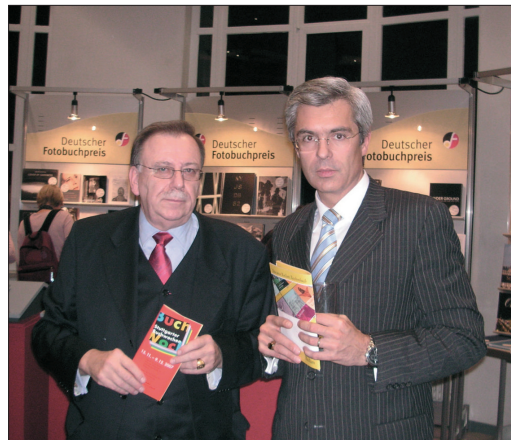
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On October, 12, the Literary Anthology of Visegrad Four Countries was presented at the Slovak stand at the Frankfurt Book Fair. This presentation took place simultaneously with the main event in Bratislava, where the Anthology was presented to the Ministers of Culture of the V4 countries. Representatives of all four countries attended the presentation at the Slovak stand and afterwards enjoyed a glass of wine, Slovak cheese and vivid folk music played on accordion by Renáta Hudeková. In the photo from the left: Daniela Humajová, Alexander Halvoník and Ina Martinová.



Diesmal kamen Anton Hykisch und die junge Autorin Gabriela Futová nach Frankfurt, um ihre Werke zu präsentieren. Die Leseprobe aus dem lustigen Buch „Suche eine bessere Mama“ von Gabriela Futová hat unser Mitarbeiter und Übersetzer Mirko Kraetsch den jungen Besuchern vorgestellt. Dann hat er zusammen mit dem Maler und Illustrator Juraj Balogh, der auch die Bücher von Gabriela Futová illustriert hat, den Kindern geholfen, ihre eigene Mama zu zeichnen. Die Kinderbuchautorin Gabriela Futová diskutierte mit jungen Lesern bei der Präsentation ihrer Werke auf der Buchmesse in Frankfurt.



Die Stuttgarter Buchwochen fanden in diesem Jahr vom 15. 11. bis 9. 12. 2007 statt. Der Ehrengast war diesmal die SLOWAKEI. Am 17. November las Michal Hvorecký mit grossem Erfolg im Buchcafé aus seinem Roman *City. Der unwahrscheinlichste aller Orte*, vor. Am 21. November begrüßten die Leser in Stuttgart Peter Pišťanek. Er stellte sich mit einer Leseprobe aus seinem Roman *Rivers of Babylon* vor. Am 27. 11. fand die Präsentation LITERATURZIRKUS statt: Kornel Földvári, Tomáš Janovic, Daniela Kapitáňová, der Herausgeber Koloman Kertész Bagala und der Musiker Pavol Hammel sorgten für eine lockere und angenehme Atmosphäre an diesem Abend. Am 4. Dezember stellte sich die Autorin Mária Bátorová vor. Sie las aus ihrem Buch *Da Vincis Codes*. Die Besucher konnten sich während der Buchmesse zwei Ausstellungen anschauen: die wunderschönen Fotos von Karol Kállay unter dem Titel SLOWAKEI. LANDSCHAFT UND KULTUR, und die Reportagefotos von Peter Procházka DAS LITERARISCHE LEBEN IN DER SLOWAKEI. An der feierlichen Eröffnung nahmen der slowakische Botschafter Ivan Korčok, der Direktor des Slowakischen Instituts in Berlin Dr. Peter Ilčík, der Honorarkonsul der Slowakischen Republik in Stuttgart Christoph Goesser, der amtierende Generalkonsul in München Jan Nedorost und andere Gäste teil.

Kornel Földvári (auf dem Foto rechts) zusammen mit Dr. Peter Ilčík, Direktor des Slowakischen Instituts in Berlin (links) stellten in Stuttgart das literarische Leben in der Slowakei vor.

