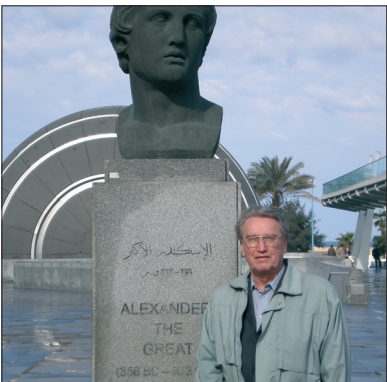


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Viera Žilinčanová:
Blue Lake, 1995

On December 6, 2007, the novel by Peter Pišťanek *Rivers of Babylon*, translated by Peter Petro, was introduced in London. The presentation was organised by the Centre for Information on Literature and by Professor Donald Rayfield, a well-known English Slavist and publisher (Garnett Press). At the event were also present Slavists Dr. Tim Beasley-Murray and Dr. Rajindra Chitnis, publishers and friends of Slovak literature. Simultaneously, book reviews on Pišťanek's novel were published in *The Guardian* and in *Literary Review*.
On January 1, 2008, Peter Pišťanek himself presented his successful novel *Rivers of Babylon* in the bookshop Sandoe Books in Chelsea. Rajendra Chitnis and Tim Beasley-Murray, Julian Evans, Professor Robert Pynsent and the deputies of the Slovak Embassy in London and of the British Royal Library, were also present at this reading.



From February 13, till February 17, the „Days of Slovaks Living Abroad“ were held for the first time in Tel Aviv. The event was organized by the World Association of Slovaks Living Abroad under the auspices of the Slovak Ambassador to Israel, Mr. Milan Dubček. The Centre for Information on Literature (LIC) participated in this event through the project „We Are One Slovak World“. Director of LIC Alexander Halvoník introduced Slovak books with the topic of life of the Jewish community in Slovakia and their tragic destiny during WWII, that were published by LIC or with its support. It is an anthology *Božia ulička* (God's Alley), by now the only wide selection of poetry and prose on the Holocaust topic, Hebrew translation of poems by Milan Richter, *Anjel s čiernymi krídlami* (An Angel with Black Wings) and English translation of Jozef Lánik's book *Čo Dante nevidel* (in English: Escape from Hell), by Ewald Osers. Part of this book is a unique document: a report of A. Wetzler and R. Vrba on the Auschwitz death camp. The two men succeeded in escaping the camp in 1944 and for the first time they brought to the world an authentic evidence of a hell in the so called "labor camps".
A literary event devoted to the depiction of Holocaust in the works of Slovak and Israeli writers took place in Tel Aviv, Israel, in the presence of the Slovak Ambassador to Israel, Mr. Milan Dubček. On this occasion Alexander Halvoník and Vladimír Skalský introduced a new project: an Anthology of Slovak poets writing abroad, *Medzi dvoma domovmi* (Between Two Homelands).
Photo: Petr Zártek



Mrs. Edita Drorí-Ermstová
presented her book
Olupená o právo na život
(Robbed of her Right to
Live) in Jerusalem.

The portraits of Slovak writers were written and translated by Matthias Barth, Saskia Hudecová, Inka Martinová, Peter Petro, Renata SakoHoess and Anna Šikulová.
The book reviews on p. 38 – 40 were translated by Peter Petro and Saskia Hudecová.

SLOVAK LITERARY REVIEW
REVUE DER SLOWAKISCHEN LITERATUR
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Slovak writer **Jana Juráňová** participated at the TransEuropaExpress, the 4th edition of a conference that took place in Rome from February 27, till March 1. The topic of this year's meeting was *Feminism and Plurality in Europe*. Twenty six female participants from all over the Europe referred in their speeches about the position of women in society, in politics, about the equal opportunities, etc., the discussion on feminism in Central Europe followed.



▲ For the first time LIC organized a collective exhibition of Slovak publishers at the International Book Fair in Leipzig. Leipzig Book Fair is located in a new exhibition centre on the outskirts of the town. The Book Fair primarily focuses on readers and wide public. Around 1,600 events took place in the whole town of Leipzig as well as in the exhibition centre itself. The grand central Glass Hall is an ideal place for live music performances, readings and meetings with authors on a Blue sofa. In each of the modern exhibition halls there are several places for the presentations, readings and discussions. Slovak publishers displayed their books on 9 square meters, which was enough for the start. Many East German visitors were familiar with Slovakia, especially with the mountain areas of the Tatras, and travel guides and books from publishing house DAJAMA were high in demand.



▲ Slovak literature was represented by writer Dušan Šimko, who introduced a brand new German translation of his novel, *The Japan Divan*, at the forum Leipzig liest International on March 14, and German translation of his novel *Esterházy's Lackey* at forum Kleine Sprachen – Grosse Literaturen on March 15. Šimko's cultivated presentation and charismatic personality brought him an avid interest of viewers. His reading was well attended and even the Director of the Slovak Institute in Berlin Mr. Ilčík and his

colleague Ms. Blau arrived to both readings to give the author moral support. The Slovak stand became the meeting place for Slovakists and translators, among them Utte Rassloff from Humboldt University, Mirko Kraetsch and Elena Hesse.
Although this was our first time at the Leipzig Book Fair, we believe it was not the last – it would be a shame if Slovakia were the only one missing from the Central European countries.
(Photo: Dušan Šimko and Ute Rassloff)



▲ During the International Book Fair Salon du livre de Paris 2008, the Center for Information on Literature prepared an accompanying event. On March 19, at the premises of the Embassy of the Slovak Republic in Paris, a presentation of two outstanding Slovak authors, Jana Juráňová and Anton Baláz, took place. The event was hosted by the Director of the Slovak Cultural Institute in Paris, Božena Krížiková. The Director of LIC, Alexander Halvoník, presented the books of Jana Juráňová and Anton Baláz. The informal gathering provided an opportunity to discuss shortly some of the issues of Slovak literature and specific problems of translation and publishing of Slovak literature abroad.
Photo from left: Anton Baláz, Jana Juráňová and Alexander Halvoník



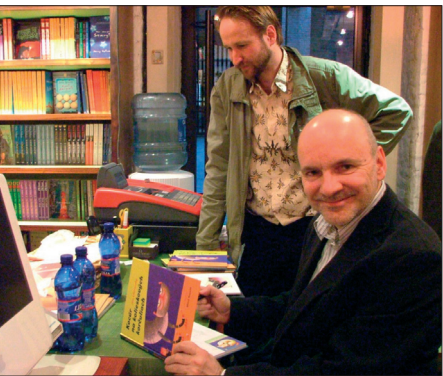
▲ The ambassador of the Slovak Republic to France, Ing. Ján Kuderjavý, visited the collective stand of Slovak publishers at Salon du livre de Paris on March

19. During his two-hour visit Mr. Kuderjavý discussed a lot of problems connected to Slovak literature and culture. In a discussion with Alexander Halvoník, director of LIC, and other participants at the book fair, he also touched upon the current situation in the Slovak Republic in general and he also emphasized the importance of intercultural dialogue in Europe. Photo: The ambassador Ján Kuderjavý in a discussion with Alexander Halvoník at the Slovak collective stand in Paris.

In connection with the International Book Fair of Children's Books, well known Slovak author of children's books Ján Uličiansky presented his books, together with two illustrators of his books, Miloš Kopták and Peter Čisárík, in Bologna this year. The exhibition of their excellent works, showing their unique imagination, opened on April 2, 2008, and was warmly received by the public.



▲ The Ambassador of Slovak Republic to Italy Stanislav Vallo, translator Miroslava Vallová, director of the Centre for Information on Literature Alexander Halvoník and Italian guests in the stand of the Slovak Republic at the Bologna Children's Book Fair.



▲ Writer Ján Uličiansky and illustrator Miloš Kopták signing their books in the bookstore Giannino Stopanni, specializing in children's books.

VIERA ŽILINČANOVÁ (1932–2008) belongs to the most original contemporary visual artists in Slovakia: a sensitive lyricist, but also the author of bizarre images of human passion, pleasures and pretences. She studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava (1950–1955), department of portrait and compositional painting, under Professor Ján Mudroch. In 1956 she spent two months at the Schule des Sehens of the renowned painter Oskar Kokoschka in Salzburg. There she acquired the ability to capture primary sensual experience on the canvas convincingly, achieving strong emotional effect. In the 1970s Žilinčanová was largely responsible for the birth and development of the magical or poetic realism. This is a fact that plays a crucial role in the evaluation of her life-long creation and in the overall classification of her work in the context of modern Slovak visual art. In her case, art detached from illusionistic-imitative functions was charged with spirituality and acquired the status of a symbol bearer. Žilinčanová acquired over the years a large collection of awards and prizes for her paintings at home and abroad and she exhibited her paintings in many prominent European and world cities (Paris, Copenhagen, Rome, Milan, Budapest, Prague, Vienna, Geneva, Tokyo, New York, Washington, Brussels etc.). Above all her work has met with immense praise and interest in Japan from the side of the general public, gallery owners and art dealers, as well as private collectors.

For enquiries regarding licensing of Viera Žilinčanová's works of art please contact LITA, Society of Authors at vytvarne@lita.sk or lita@lita.sk. You will find more information on www.lita.sk.

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Alfonz Bednár | Leopold Lahola | Klára Jarunková | Ivan Kupec
Ján Johanides | Vincent Šikula | Peter Jaroš | Vlado Bednár | Karol D. Horváth
Peter Pišťanek | Andrijan Turan | Elena Hidvéghyová-Yung



THE DECADE OF HOPE

Vladimír Petrík

The 1960's are usually considered as the star decade of Slovak (and Czech) culture and arts. The reason for this probably lies in the fact that this decade was preceded by years of crude schematism. However, we have to admit that in the atmosphere of political and ideological liberation all arts thrived. This happened not only in literature, visual art and music, but also in the performing arts such as film and theatre. Czechoslovakia at that time – although still safely hidden behind the Iron curtain – started to catch up with the West and managed to assert itself by individual achievements even in the demanding field of culture. To achieve this, two operations were necessary. First, the cultural scene as a whole had to turn away from the totalitarian 1950's and go back to the original starting point, which means that it had to start over at the point where the developmental line was severed by the so called Victorious February (1948). Second, authors had to reconnect with European and world culture. It was a long process, of course, but after working on it for a whole decade results finally came. What we achieved during that decade and what we eventually lost was to be seen after August 1968 when the whole cultural scene fell back into the marasm of 1950's.

However, the process of cultural and social reawakening actually started in the fifties or more precisely, in the late fifties. The change was initiated by the Second Congress of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers in 1956. Most writers denounced their past creative practice and promised themselves not to lie again. The poet Milan Rúfus, speaking on behalf of young authors, said: „Our generation is led by a desire to detect truth in life as well as in art and a resentment to self-deception and deceiving others.“ So, it was not a new poetic but a moral gesture that made the radical changes possible in the beginning. One of the tangible results of the Congress were newly established literary magazines for young authors. In Slovakia it was *Mladá tvorba*, first published in September 1956. In short time a close circle of authors, poets, prose writers and dramatists was formed around it, soon joined by visual artists and musicians. Ján Johanides, Peter Jaroš, Vincent Šikula, Rudolf Sloboda, Ladislav Ballek and Vladimír Bednár among other writers got the opportunity to publish their works in this magazine. It should be noted that young authors did not enter literature under the same flag as their predecessors. First of all, they fought for their right to express subjective experiences, to talk about private moments (the début of Ján Johanides was called *Privacy / Súkromie*, 1963) which was in sharp contrast with the programme followed by the older generation which emphasized great historical and social themes. Young authors considered the works of the older literary generation as artistically unconvincing, based on black-and-white perception of reality and false pathos. These works consisted mainly of lengthy novels dwelling on themes like the war, the Slovak National Uprising, building of the new socialist society. Young writers were not avoiding social problems but were much more critical. They clearly denounced atrocities of the Stalin era and political excesses that still occurred quite frequently, because they felt that official criticism of Stalinism was very superficial and those who had political power were not

willing to give up when it came to old habits. The fight between the younger and older generation often concerned the very nature of Stalinism. The renowned writer Vladimír Mináč viewed Stalinism as a temporary deviation from the right direction, while young critic Milan Hamada denounced it as a failure of humanity. The nature of these arguments led to polemics on a larger scale about socialism as such. The young ones were accused of betraying socialist ideals. Everything was eventually „settled“ by the so called normalization (a consequence of Soviet occupation) when the whole culture and society was forced to adopt Stalinist standards once again.

Literary and artistic groups were formed in the mid-fifties (such as Trnava Group and later *Osamelí bežci / Lonely Runners/* or *Galandovci* in visual art) publishing their manifestos which were partly resented by those in power, but the new wave of authentic expression of the author's subjective experiences could no longer be stopped. During the sixties even more authors joined this trend. The poets of surrealism (*nadrealizmus*, Slovak version of surrealism in the decade 1935-1945) who after World War II gave up their original poetic, found new inspiration in their earlier works. Lyrical and poetical elements, the main ingredients of so-called lyricized prose and works of literary naturism since the 1930's (Dobroslav Chrobák, Margita Figuli, František Švantner) which disappeared completely from the poetic of socialist realism, were slowly coming back. This was mainly thanks to young authors like Vincent Šikula, Ladislav Ballek and others. Lyrical nature of narration and poetization of reality are characteristic traits of all Šikula's prosaic works: *No Applause at Concerts* (*Na koncertoch sa netlieska*, 1964), *Perhaps I'll Build Myself a Bungalow* (*Možno si postavím bungalov*, 1964) *With Rosarka* (*S Rozárkou*, 1966), *You Won't Find an Inn on Every Hill* (*Nebýva na každom vršku hostinec*, 1966) *The Breeze* (*Povetrie*, 1968), etc.. Ballek in his book *Lily-Red Journey* (*Púť červená ako ľalia*, 1969) used the model of naturalistic prose in new circumstances while giving his story a different meaning. His other works from the sixties – *Escape to the Green Meadow* (*Útek na zelenú lúku*, 1967), *White Sparrow* (*Biely vrabec*, 1970) – were written in the best manner of Slovak modernistic prose between the wars. Other authors were also significantly influenced by the lyrical tradition in Slovak prose, such as Andrej Chudoba (*Where Rainbows Drink / Kde pijú dúhy*, 1962, etc.); Rudolf Sloboda (1938–1995) in his novels *Narcissus* (*Narcis*, 1965) and *Razor* (*Britva*, 1967) wasn't trying to revive any particular period but to return to the essential task of literature and namely prose, which in his case consists of reflecting life, searching for a meaning, painful analysis of man-woman relationships, dealing with issues such as suicide and death. Sloboda's autobiographical hero is unable to accept the limiting social conditions in which he has to live and as a result he fails, thus indirectly accusing the régime of destroying human subjects. During the sixties literature could explore problems that were absolutely unthinkable in the past. Young writer Vladimír Bednár (1941–1984) gave his first book a self-confident title *Get Out of My Way* (*Uhni z cesty*, 1964) which was characteristic of his generation's offensive; here he

described a conflict between the older and younger generation by means of humour. His young hero (imitation of the picaresque hero) travels through Slovakia making humorous and satirical comments on events and people he meets. Bednár expressed noncommittal criticism of contemporary society in his other works too.

As most writers returned to their original sources, attempts were made to bring back into literature those authors who used to be influenced by modern literary trends such as impressionism, symbolism, decadence, expressionism etc., who were banned from history by the Marxist cultural policy and labelled as bourgeois. As early as 1955 an article was published by poet and translator Ivan Kupec (1922–1997) under the title *Defending Poetry* (Na obranu poézie) which later became part of his book *In Defence of Poetry* (Obrana poézie, 1963) where he criticized contemporary literary practice, demanded full rehabilitation of proscribed authors and pointed out the necessity to open up to world literature. He fought against „one-sidedness and one-stringness, against black-and-white pseudoideals, against refusal of the right to make formal experiments“ and for „free verse and the right of any subject to create“. Ivan Kupec as a former surrealist admired modern poetry and that is the reason why he so bitterly resented the miserable situation in Slovak poetry and prose. His initiative, however, came too soon, the régime was not prepared to make any changes yet, and Kupec had to be punished. For his uncompromising attitude he was put on the black list once more at the beginning of the normalization period and for the next twenty years he was not allowed to publish his own work with the exception of translations.

After 1956 the situation started to change and doors to the West were finally opened. Impulses coming from there (existentialism, French *nouveau roman*, theatre of the absurd etc.) originally occurred in chronological order and caused a lot of polemics, but in the Slovak context they mingled into one. Young authors were strongly influenced by them. Existentialism and *nouveau roman* marked the writings of Ján Johanides: *Privacy* (Súkromie, 1963), *The Substance of the Quarry* (Podstata kameňolomu, 1965), *No* (Nie, 1966) and Peter Jaroš *Consternation*, (Zdesenie, 1965), *Scales* (Váhy, 1966), *Journey to Immobility* (Putovanie k nehybnosti, 1967), etc. Rudolf Skukálek was obviously influenced by theatre of the absurd *The Clock* (Hodiny, 1963) *The Broom* (Metla, 1964), *Sawdust* (Piliny, 1965) which became popular thanks to plays by Eugène Ionesco and Samuel Beckett and other European dramatists that were performed in Slovakia. Absurdity as a general feeling permeated most literary works disregarding borders of all genres. In the 60's Franz Kafka became the contemporary idol and a conference on his work was held in Czechoslovakia, the first of its kind in a socialist country. Monthly literary magazines such as the *Czech World Literature* (Světová literatura) and *Slovak Review of World Literature* (Revue svetovej literatúry) made the „Western“ literature more accessible. As the door to the West opened a little, many writers and intellectuals used the opportunity to visit Czechoslovakia including Slovakia. (Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir et. al.) The number of translations started to increase and the Iron curtain became a bit rusty.

The 60's were a favourable time for children's literature too. This was initiated namely by Klára Jarunková (1922–2005) and her books *The Diary of a Hero* (Hrdinský zápisník, 1960), *Don't Cry for Me* (Jediná, 1963) and *The Silent Wolf's Brother* (Brat

mlčanlivého vlka, 1967). The young protagonist is no longer a mere object of the writer's interest, she managed to create a fullbloodied subject with rich inner life and authentic language. Her writing was so powerful that it was soon noticed in other countries and Jarunková became the most frequently translated Slovak author.

This decade was also characterized by new developments in theatre and playwriting. Apart from theatres financed by the government new theatres were founded thanks to individual initiative. Such was the Radošina Naïve Theatre established and directed by Stanislav Štepka, who was also the author of numerous plays that became very successful and popular all over Slovakia. The philosophy of this theatre is based on amateur village theatre but by far exceeds its limits by high intellectual standard and social insights. Another type of small theatre was Divadlo Na korze with two protagonists: Milan Lasica and Július Satinský. Among others the famous play *Not Waiting for Godot* (Nečakanie na Godota) was performed here. Lasica and Satinský built their plays (*An Evening for Two* / Večer pre dvoch, *Soirée*, *Joyful News* / Radostná správa, etc.) on humorous dialogue – following the example of the Czech Osvozené divadlo – full of satirical comments on current events and the state of society as such. During the normalization period the theatre was closed by the government. Amateur theatre was founded at the University in Prešov by Karol Horák, dramatist, dramaturge and director, which moved from the absurd to postmodern. The politically liberated atmosphere of the sixties attracted Leopold Lahola (1918–1968) who returned to Slovakia after being in exile since 1948. After World War II he belonged to the best dramatists and three of his plays were performed at the Slovak National Theatre. In the late sixties Slovak theatres had the opportunity to perform his plays *Sunspots* (Škvrny na slnku) and *Inferno* and his book of novellas *Last Thing* (Posledná vec) was published in 1968. Leopold Lahola went through the hell of concentration camp and the National Uprising, he lost all of his family in the war and spent many years in exile. These facts of life gave birth to his humanistic philosophy, in spite of everything. He showed evil in man to uncover his humanity.

So, what were the 1960's really like? It was a new start in all spheres of art (even in popular music) caused by hope and perspective and also by more freedom of thought. Not everything that was created at that time still bears the seal of quality. Superficiality and froth often resulted from the quick opening of doors. But the core was ripe because authors earnestly searched for the truth about life and themselves. The cage of totality was hardly visible then. But eventually it was closed tightly when nobody expected it to. Hope was replaced by bitter disappointment and resignation but even that didn't last forever. But that is another chapter.

Translated by Alena Redlingerová

The literary historian Dr. VLADIMÍR PETRÍK, PhD. (1929) is interested in researching Slovak literature of the 20th century. On issues on the development, authors and works of this period he has published a number of books, articles and papers: *In Search of Present Time*, 1970; *Values and Motives*, 1980; *The Slovak Novel of the 1970's*, 1990. He has paid special attention to the prose writer Ladislav Nádaši-Jégé: *Man in Jégé's Work* (1979).

Alfonz Bednár

DIE ORGEL

(Leseprobe aus dem Drehbuch)

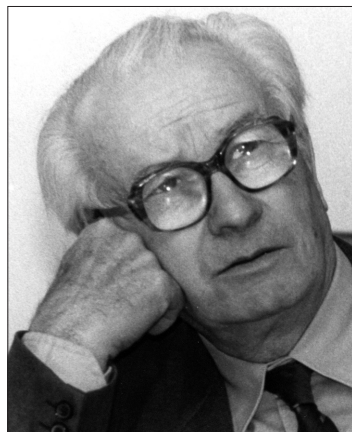


Photo: Peter Procházka

ALFONZ BEDNÁR (1914 – 1989) Schriftsteller, Dramaturg und Drehbuchautor, Kinderbuchautor und Übersetzer, studierte Latein, Tschechisch und Slowakisch in Prag und in Bratislava. Nach Anfängen als Übersetzer (Prosa englischer und amerikanischer Autoren) debütierte er mit Sammlungen für Kinder (*Baum / Strom, Vergebliche Lüste auf Gelüste / Márne chůtky na pochůtky*, 1949-50). Die Aufmerksamkeit der Kritiker weckte sein Roman *Der gläserne Berg* (Sklenný vrch, 1954), die Tagebuchbeichte einer jungen Frau, deren Kampf um die Aussöhnung mit der eigenen Vergangenheit tragisch endet. Bednár ersetzte die bis dahin gesellschaftlich determinierte Hauptfigur durch eine Persönlichkeit mit einem individuellen und zudem tragischen Schicksal. Nicht nur dank des Mutes des Autors erfuhr der Roman einen ungewöhnlichen

Widerhall bei der Leserschaft, sondern auch deshalb, weil er neue Techniken in die slowakische Prosa einführte: das Sujet mit einem Geheimnis, die Abwechslung mehrerer Zeitebenen, die intime Tagebuchform der Aufzeichnung, den hervorragenden Erzählstil und die souveräne Beherrschung verschiedener Erzähltechniken und -vorgehensweisen der modernen, v. a. der angelsächsischen Prosa. In entscheidendem Maß zeigte sich dies auch in den Novellen *Stunden und Minuten* (Hodiny a minúty, 1956). Ein modernes episches Zeugnis über ein slowakisches Dorf und seine fünfzigjährige Entwicklung ist der Roman *Donnerkeil* (Hromový zub, 1964), der erste Teil des angedachten Romanzyklus *Felder* (Role), dessen Fortsetzung *Der löchrige Dukát* (Deravý dukát) nach Eingriff der Zensur erst postum erschien, als Teil des Romanzyklus *Felder I-IV* (Role I – IV, 1992). Im humoristisch-kritischen Roman *Der Balkon war zu hoch* (Balkón bol prívysoko, 1968) und in den Sammlungen *Block 4/B* (Blok 4/B, 1977) und *Bei den Ellen des Pechs* (Pri holbách smoly, 1978) legte er das Augenmerk auf das städtische Umfeld. In der Trilogie *Eine Handvoll Kleingeld* (Za hrst drobných, 1970, 1974, 1981) analysierte er kritisch die Moral der Gegenwart. Das Drama wurde durch die Groteske ersetzt, über die Schicksalsschläge des Ingenieurs berichtet der Hund Philipp. Mit der Kritik an der gesellschaftlichen Moral fuhr er auch in den Romanen *Wie wir die Wäsche trockneten* (Ako sme sušili bielizeň, 1985) und *Kündigung* (Výpoveď, 1986) fort. In dem Roman *Ad revidendum, gemini* (1988) kehrte er vor dem Hintergrund eines Klassentreffens mittels Briefen zu den Aufstands- und

Nachkriegsbegebenheiten zurück. Sein Romanschaffen beendeten die Werke *Einsamer Rabe* (Osamelý havran, 1989) und der postum erschienene Roman über das Schicksal einer Bauernfamilie *Kranz auf dem Teller* (Veniec na tanieri, 1993). Mit der Tochter Katarína bereitete er das dokumentarische autobiografische Buch *Aus den Gesprächen* (Z rozhovorov, 1994) vor. Seine erfolgreichen literarischen Drehbücher *Sonne im Netz* (Slnko v sieti), *Orgel* (Organ) und *Drei Schwestern* (Tri sestry), die an der Wiege des modernen slowakischen Films zu Beginn der sechziger Jahre entstanden, erschienen gemeinsam unter dem Titel *Drei Drehbücher* (Tri scenáre, 1966). Er verfasste auch weitere Drehbücher (*Genius / Génius, Ostern, großer Tag, / Velká noc, velký deň, Penelope / Penelopa, Kameradinnen / Kamarátky*), das Fernsehspiel *Morgen unter dem Mond* (Ráno pod mesiacom, 1980) und den vierteiligen Fernsehfilm *Meine gescheckten Pferde* (Moje kone vrané, 1981). Das mehr als dreißigjährige Schaffen von Alfonz Bednár bedeutete für die slowakische Literatur, für deren Prosa einen ausgesprochenen künstlerischen Gewinn. Seit den ersten Anfängen war er ein besonderer Autor, der keine fertigen Ideenschemata übernahm, sondern einen eigenen Schaffensweg verfolgte, obwohl er ununterbrochen auf die Missgunst der Macht und das Unverständnis der Kritik stieß. Das nach seinem Tod erschienene Romanepos *Felder* (Role) bewies nur die hohe künstlerische Qualität von Bednárs Schaffen und dessen unersetzlichen Platz in der modernen slowakischen Literatur.

8. Bild

Klosterkirche: Tag

Im Kirchenraum Sonne, Lichtstrahlen, wenige Menschen, hier und da einige kniende Frauen, da und dort in der Bank eine alte Frau oder ein alter Mann, am Seitenaltar liest ein Priester die Messe, ein Knabe ministriert. Es ist eine Stille Messe, vor dem Altar eine Gruppe kniender Frauen. Sanftes Glockengeläut.

Mönch 2 wird von niemandem wahrgenommen.

Der Innenraum der Kirche wie üblich, wie gewohnt: Altäre, Skulpturen (Darstellungen in einem Habit wie Mönch 2), dazu Bilder (modernes Handwerk).

Mönch 2 geht verärgert in Kirchenhintergrund auf und ab, weiß nicht, was er tun soll. Auf einmal beginnt in seinem Korb ein Huhn zu kreischen. Er läuft mit den Hühnern im Korb Richtung Tür zur Empore. An der Tür hängt das Bild eines heiligen Klosterbruders im gleichen Habit wie er, Mönch 2, selbst. Er atmet erleichtert auf, blickt um sich, öffnet, geht durch die Tür und schließt sie hinter sich.

Der Klosterbruder auf dem Bild ringt kniend die Hände gegen Himmel. Er hat Fischaugen, betet. Um seinen Kopf ein riesiger Heiligenschein.

Zartes, idyllisches Glockengeläut.

9. Bild

Villa in einem Badeort : Abend

Die Turmuhr: Mitternacht. Bekannte Klänge aus dem Radio,

ein Schlager aus der Zeit des Slowakischen Staates „Noch einmal werde ich zu dir kommen...“ Das Radio – modern, groß, ein Modell aus dem Jahre 1939. Ein zeitgemäß möbliertes Zimmer, lauschig-intime Beleuchtung, angenehm und mild im schwachen Dunkel. Ein Tischchen, überladen mit Resten eines tête-à-tête – Mahles: Brot, Schinken, Wurst, kaltes Geflügel, Bestecke, zwei Tassen, Gläser, eine Flasche. Eine andere Flasche unter dem Tisch, von zwei kräftigen nackten Männerbeinen über den Teppich gekippt.

Ein starker, gesunder Mann, gut gewachsen und mit angenehmen Gesichtszügen beginnt, seine Mönchskutte anzulegen, die der des Mönches 2 ähnelt. Das Gesicht des jungen Mannes ist von gesunder Farbe. Er lächelt glücklich.

Leise, anheimelnde Musik geht durch die Wohnung.

Eine Wohnung in einer großen, modernen Villa. Hier einige ältere, dort moderne Möbel. Eine Holzterrasse führt zum Obergeschoss. Dort schläft in einem Zimmer mit einem großen Zierbalkon im Stil eines Badeortes ein junger Mann, gut zwanzig Jahre alt. Auf einem altmodischen Nachttisch das angenehme Licht einer Nachttischlampe, daneben Streichhölzer, Zigaretten, ein kleiner Aschenbecher mit einigen Zigarettenstummeln. Der junge Mann sieht gut aus, hat scharfe Gesichtszüge. Dem Zimmer ist anzusehen, dass es einmal ein Studentenquartier gewesen ist: In der Ecke ein kleiner Tisch, an der Wand Bücherregale, Bücher und Portraits von Dichtern wie Shakespeare, Goethe, Puschkin.

Die Musik durchströmt die Wohnung aufs angenehmste.

In der Küche döst eine Frau auf dem Stuhl vor sich hin, vor

sich auf einem Seitentischchen eine behagliche Lampe, in ihrem Licht ein aufgeschlagenes Gebetsbuch mit einem Rosenkranz.

Die Musik klingt zurück in das Zimmer mit den Resten des intimen Mahles.

Der Besucher, in ein elegantes, neues Mönchshabit gekleidet, ist von gesundem Aussehen und lächelt zufrieden. Mönch 3, der Guardian des Klosters (Klostervorsteher) steht vom Bett auf.

Aus dem Radio erklingt Musik.

Mönch 3: „Gute Nacht, Frau Katharina!“

Katharina, eine kräftige untersetzte Dame im Morgenrock mit einem großen Kopf und nicht unschönen Gesicht: „Gute Nacht! Wie soll man in so einer Nacht gut schlafen?“

Mönch 3: „Wie recht Sie haben, Frau Katharina!“ Er küsst ihr die Hand.

„Ist alles in bester Ordnung! Ihre Firma Molnar&Erben nebst Besitz, und dann diese Villa hier... Haben ja schon nachtschechische Zeiten und werden wohl für tausend Jahre an die Deutschen kommen, auf ewige Zeiten... Die tschechischen „Gevatter“ sind schon nicht mehr, und auch die jüdischen Diebe werden wohl verschwinden.“ Er lacht und verbeugt sich: „Gute Nacht, Frau Katharina!“

Katharina: „Gute Nacht!“

Er schleicht leise an der Küche vorbei, zieht ein Heiligenbildchen (das gleiche wie das an der Tür zur Empore in Bild 8), legt es der Frau in der Küche ins Gebetsbuch zu ihrem Rosenkranz und verschwindet im Dunkeln.

Die Frau in der Küche erwacht aus ihrem Schlummer, schaut auf das Heiligenbildchen und greift erschrocken nach dem Rosenkranz. Ihr Kreuzchen am Rosenkranz schwingt hin und her. Sie geht mit dem Rosenkranz in der Hand das Haus abschließen.

Draußen schlägt die Turmuhr die nächtlich späte Stunde. Sanfte Musik aus dem Radio.

Das Kreuzchen am Rosenkranz schwingt hin und her, sie betrachtet es voller Angst.

10. Bild

Eine Klosterzelle: Nacht

Das große Kreuz an der Wand bewegt sich: eine alte Holzstatue, die Farbe ist abgeblättert. Die Christusfigur ist mager, bleich wie ein verflüchtigtes, abgetragenes menschliches Gewissen. Die Klosterzelle ist schlicht möbliert. Unter dem Kreuz eine Gebetsbank, darauf kniet Mönch 3 in einer neuen, eleganten Kutte. Der Mönch betet in übertrieben zerknirschem Ton, geradezu unappetitlich devot, im Gesicht die Gewissheit, dass nach dem Gebet die ersehnte Wirkung eintritt.

Seine Worte fallen in totale Stille, tauchen aus ihr auf und steigen auf zur Christusfigur.

Mönch 3: „O Jesus Christ, mein Dulder, mein Erretter, Du unser aller Erlöser, gib, dass mich mein tiefer Glaube führe und mich Deine unendliche Güte mit Deiner Gnade beschenken möge, um auf gottesfürchtigen Wegen schreiten und gute Taten vollbringen zu können, auf das Er mich erhebe aus der Morast der Sünde und dem Abgrund der ewigen Verdammnis.“

Christus in seinem Leid schaut auf den betenden Mönch herab, hölzern und skeptisch.

Der Mönch betet weiter mit seinem gesunden, feisten Gesicht: „Steh mir bei durch Deine Gnade, mir, Deinem armseligen Diener, der demütig die Schwäche seines Verstandes erkennt, hilf, dass ich durch meine Taten und meinen tiefen Glauben teilhaben kann an Deinem Erbarmen, an Deiner Gnade und Deinem erlösenden Werk. Amen. Ad laudem et gloriam!“ Er birgt sein Gesicht bußfertig in den Händen.

Der gekreuzigte Christus blickt skeptisch auf ihn nieder und spricht auf einmal mit hölzerner Stimme zu Mönch 3: „Du bist auf keinem guten Weg! Du gehst zu einer Sünderin, und dein Verstand beginnt sich bereits zu trüben und dein Wille neigt sich dem Bösen zu. Tu, was immer du vermagst, um wieder auf den Weg des Guten zu kommen!“

Mönch 3 zuckt zusammen, schaut Christus an und betrachtet ihn.

Christus' Antlitz verzieht sich mit skeptischem Lächeln zu einem hölzernen, spöttischen Grinsen.

Über den Holzboden läuft eine Maus an der Wand hin und her und hält bisweilen inne.

Christus' Hohngelächter wird lauter.

(...)

13. Bild

Klosterkirche: Nacht

Mönch 2: Seine Hände vibrieren und spielen. Von der Orgelempore ergießen sich die Töne ins Dunkel. Die lebendigen Orgelpfeifen werden eins mit dem Wald.

Plötzlich sticht das Licht einer Taschenlampe ins Dunkel des Kirchenschiffs.

Das Orgelspiel verstummt plötzlich. Es verstummen auch das flehentliche Bitten, Anrufung und Verzweiflung.

Mönch 3 kommt durch die Kirche auf die Empore und schreit: „Was soll das? Was soll das bedeuten?“ Nach einer Weile: „Wer bist du, Mensch?“

Die Orgel verklingt mit leisem Echo. Zu hören ist nur noch ein samtenes Sausen gleich einem Windhauch.

Mönch 2 erhebt sich von der Orgelbank, hebt die Hände und breitet sie in hilfloser Ohnmacht aus.

Mönch 3 blickt ihn erschrocken an, schaut auf seine Kutte. Es kommt ihm vor, als ähnele Mönch 2 dem in einem einzigen Moment gekreuzigten und wieder von den Toten auferstandenen Christus.

Das Kirchenschiff füllt sich mit Mönchen, der eine im Licht eines Streichholzes, ein anderer im Schein einer Kerze, ein Dritter mit einer Taschenlampe. Es entsteht ein wirbelnder Tanz aus aufgeschauelter Angst und heillosem Durcheinander.

Mönch 3 dreht sich zum Kirchenschiff hin und ruft: „Seid ihr nicht wie eine von unserem Dulder, Erretter und Erlöser verlassene Herde?“

Die Mönche bleiben stehen und rufen im Chor: „Wir sind es!“

Mönch 3: „Kehrt ihr zurück zu eurer Lagerstatt?“

Die Mönche: „Gewiss, wir kehren zurück!“ Sie verlassen die Kirche.

Stille, nur das samtene Rauschen der Orgel.

Mönch 3 wendet sich langsam und ängstlich Mönch 2 zu, leuchtet ihm mit der Taschenlampe ins Gesicht und fragt mit milder Stimme: „Was soll das heißen? Wer bist du, Mensch?“

Mönch 2 (auf Polnisch): „Ein Zeuge.“

Mönch 3 erschrickt, schaut angstvoll um sich, reißt sich aber nach einer Weile zusammen und fragt: „Ein Zeuge? Wofür?“

Mönch 2 (auf Polnisch): „Des Jüngsten Gerichts...“

Mönch 3: „Des Jüngsten Gerichts...?“

Stille. Samtenes Rauschen der Orgel.

Mönch 2 (auf Polnisch, langsam): „Ich bin gekommen...“, er verneigt sich, „Ich suche einen Menschen, der diesen Tempel, dieses Kloster und seine Stadt vor dem Jüngsten Gericht errettet.“

Stille. Samtenes Rauschen der Orgel.

Mönch 3 (mit sanfter Stimme): „Schalte die Orgel aus und lösche das Licht! Es ist Krieg! Die Kirchen müssen verdunkelt werden. Komm, komm und erzähl mir: Vor welchem Gericht? Komm und erzähle!“

Mönch 2: „Ich komme.“ Er löscht das Licht, begibt sich vom Orgelspieltisch herunter und schaltet das Instrument aus. Er nimmt den Korb mit den Almosen und den Hühnern und geht nach vorn.

Mönch 3 schüttelt den Kopf, zunächst verständnislos, dann verständnisvoll, erschrickt plötzlich beim Blick in den Korb, geht Mönch 2 hinterher und treibt ihn mit dem Lichtstrahl seiner Taschenlampe vor sich her.

Sie gehen durch das Kirchenschiff, blicken sich ängstlich um und Mönch 3 löscht die Lichter des Kronleuchters. Sie treten ins Dunkel.

In die Stille hinein krächzt warnend ein Huhn.

19. Bild*Klosterzelle: Abend*

Ein Haufen Heiligenbildchen mit dem Konterfei eines Klosterbruders ist schön geordnet, zum Teil noch unausgepackt, auf der Gebetsbank aufgelegt. Die Abendglocken läuten, die kleineren hell, die großen ertönen schallend.

Eine nackte Wand mit einem Kreuz: Auf der Gebetsbank betet völlig zerknirscht und kriecheisch Mönch 3, der feiste Guardian (Klostervorsteher) mit den Fischeugen.

Seine Worte fallen ein in das Glockengeläut, tauchen aus ihm auf und erheben sich zu Christus.

Guardian: „O Jesus Christ, Du unser Dulder, Erretter und Erlöser, gib, dass ich Dir meinen innigsten Dank für diese Eingebung ausspreche und gib, dass sich die Gläubigen von den Leiden des Krieges loszukaufen vermögen! Ich glaube zutiefst, dass die Erlösung im Ewigen Leben um so gewisser sein wird, je größer das Leiden ist in diesem irdischen Leben, diesem Jammertal. Denn wozu, ewiger Erlöser, gäbe es sonst so viel unendliches Leid? Du ewiger Dulder und Erretter, gib, dass Pater Felix, so lange noch Zeit ist, Deinen Namen durch seine Kunst loben und preisen und so dazu beitragen kann, durch die Schönheit der Heiligkeit die Leidenden zu erlösen! Ad laudem et gloriam!“

Christus in seinem Leiden schaut kalt, hölzern, skeptisch und wütend auf den betenden Guardian.

Der Guardian ist mit seiner feisten, wohlgenährten Visage ins Gebet vertieft: „Hilf durch Deine Gnade mir, Deinem elenden Diener, damit – indem ich Dich um Gnade für Pater Felix bitte – ich an den guten Werken teilhaben kann, die aus Deiner so gütigen Eingebung hervorgehen! Amen! Ad laudem et gloriam!“ Er lässt sein Gesicht reuevoll in die Hände sinken.

Christus an seinem Kreuz blick reglos erstarrt, skeptisch und unbarmherzig auf ihn herab und beginnt ihm auf einmal zornig zuzulächeln – es ertönt eine Stimme, als hätte der Guardian mit hölzernen Worten gesagt: „Dein Fuß bewegt sich schon lange auf unguten Pfaden und ist dabei, sich auf noch schlimmere zu begeben! Du willst einer Sünderin durch Orgelspiel Ehre erweisen, hast in der Adventszeit Hochzeitsfeierlichkeiten zugelassen, in Zeiten der Trauer und Buße dem Orgelspiel zugestimmt und nennst dies alles Schönheit des Heiligen! Noch ist es Zeit, erbarme dich deiner und erlöse dich selbst, ohne dabei andere zu verdammen!“

Der Guardian mit in den Händen verborgenem Gesicht: „Andere?“

Christus: „Du weißt nicht, was du tust!“

Guardian: „Ich und andere verdammen? Beschütze ich sie nicht? Habe ich nicht mit Pater Felix Erbarmen gehabt und ihn gerettet?“

Christus: „Ja, das hast du.“

Guardian: „Und beschütze ich ihn nicht auch jetzt?“

Christus: „Das tust du.“

Guardian: „Errettet uns etwa nicht die Schönheit des Heiligen? Hast Du mich nicht durch die Ankunft von Pater Felix zum Erretter dieser Stätte und Stadt bestimmt?“

Christus: „Das habe ich...“. Sein Antlitz erlahmt in Erstarrung. Sanftes Läuten der Abendglocken.

Der Guardian erhebt sich, lässt den eingeschüchterten Christus unbeachtet, blickt einen Moment aus dem Fenster in den Garten und beginnt nachdenklich durch die lange Klosterzelle zu schreiten. Unter seinem schweren Gewicht knarrt und kracht der Tannenholzboden. Bei der Mausefalle hält er inne, blickt auf die tote Maus, geht zum Tisch, drückt auf einen weißen Knopf in einem alten Holzrahmen und geht langsam zur Tür.

Eine schlichte Mönchszelle, nackte Wände, ein einfaches eisernes Bett, an der Wand das Heiligenbild eines Mönchs (wie in Bild 18), an der Wand zum Flur ein Kachelofen, vom Gang aus beheizt. An der Wand neben dem Tisch ein Regal mit dicken Büchern.

Es klopft an der Tür.

Der Guardian zuckt zusammen und dreht sich um: „Herein!“

Herein kommt der alte Bruder Mönch 5 in gebückter Haltung

(die Gestalt aus Bild 15). Er verbeugt sich und grüßt mit lispelnder Stimme: „Ad laudem et gloriam!“

Guardian: „Ad laudem et gloriam! Schaff diese Maus weg!“

Der alte Bruder eilt mühsam gebückt zur Wand und hebt die Mausefalle auf.

Guardian: „... und Pater Felix möge kommen!“

Der alte Klosterbruder verbeugt sich, sagt „Ad laudem et gloriam!“, verbeugt sich noch einmal und geht mit der Mausefalle davon.

Der Guardian schreitet mit langen Schritten durch die lange schmale Klosterzelle, macht kehr und schaut auf die Christusfigur.

Der hölzerne Christus blickt ihn vorwurfsvoll an.

Es klopft an der Tür.

Guardian: „Herein!“ Er schaut sich um, Angst im Gesicht.

Pater Felix tritt ein, er verbeugt sich und sagt: „Ad laudem et gloriam!“

Guardian: „Ad laudem et gloriam!“

Beide stehen eine Weile schweigend da, Pater Felix hager, demütig, der Guardian gebieterisch, strotzend vor Gesundheit, übermächtig, feist und lächelnd. Seine elegante Kutte steht in scharfem Kontrast zur abgewetzten Kutte von Felix.

Der Guardian gerät in Verlegenheit, kämpft mit sich selbst, zögert und taxiert Felix, wägt ab und sagt nach einer Weile: „Pater Felix! Ich hatte eine Eingebung, eine göttliche, wie ich zutiefst glaube. Unser gnädiger Gott und Dulder, unser Erretter und Erlöser wird vielleicht schon bald zulassen, dass sich die Kriegsschrecken unserer Heimstatt nähern. Es ist in der Tat würdig und recht, Ihm, dem Herrn und allmächtigen Vater, dem Ewigen Gott immer und überall in aller Schicklichkeit und um Heil heischend Dank zu sagen. Gott war auch dir bisher gnädig, Pater Felix, er ließ dich leiden, denn wir glauben in demütiger Erkenntnis der Schwäche unseres Verstandes, dass nur das Leiden uns zu ewigem Ruhm führt. Wie gäbe es sonst so viel Leid auf dieser Welt? Unser gnädiger Gott hat aus dir einen Zeugen des Letzten Gerichts gemacht. Das Letzte Gericht ist über deine ganze Sippe und über dein Volk gekommen, man hat euch vernichtet, ja von der Erdoberfläche getilgt. Darauf hat der gnädige Gott deine Schritte so gelenkt, dass du nun ...“ (Angst und Mitleid stehen im Gesicht des Guardian geschrieben)... dass du nun Pater Felix geworden bist. Wenngleich kein Ordensmann, lebst du durch deine Kunst zu Lob und Ruhm unseres gnädigen Gottes. Wie auch könnte Gott zuwider sein, dass wir Ordensleute aus Mitleid und Erbarmen unter unserem Dach einem armseligen, verfolgten Menschen Zuflucht und Unterkunft gewähren? Nein! Solches kann Gott nicht zuwider sein. Aber ...“ – der Guardian denkt längere Zeit nach und fixiert Pater Felix – „aber unser gnädiger Gott ist dabei, uns einer schweren Prüfung zu unterziehen, durch Krieg und Vernichtung, durch das Letzte Gericht.“ Der Guardian blickt während seiner ganzen langen Rede und auch jetzt forschend auf Felix, kneift die Augen zusammen und denkt nach. Um seine Augen bilden sich winzige Falten. Noch einmal schaut er forschend auf Felix.

Felix steht da. Ehrerbietig und aufmerksam hört er zu.

Der Guardian kneift die Augen zusammen, öffnet sie wieder, um festzustellen, wie Pater Felix reagiert. „Mag sein, dass es schon zu spät ist, vielleicht ist auch nur noch wenig Zeit. In unserer Stadt hier gibt es außer unserer Klosterkirche noch andere Kirchenräume. Der jüdische ist derzeit Lagerraum. Die Firma Molnar&Erben lagert dort Mehl und andere Lebensmittel. Dergleichen sollte eigentlich nicht gestattet sein, auch nicht das Lagern irgendwelcher anderer Dinge dort. In unserer Stadt haben wir dann auch noch den Dom des hl. Michael – mit einer prächtigen Orgel. Mir ist die göttliche Eingebung gekommen, vom Pfarreiverwalter und dem Organisten und Chorleiter die Genehmigung zu erheischen, darauf spielen zu dürfen. Du hast dich schon genug in Küche und Garten abgerackert, hast auch schon genügend Mäuse gefangen... Auch wenn das alles Arbeiten sind, die Gottes Werke verherrlichen, die Werke unseres Schöpfers zu seinem Lob und Preis, möge dir doch vergönnt sein, auf einem dir würdigen Instrument zu spielen, damit die Gläubigen erfahren, zu welchen Höhen der Kunst Gott den

Menschen emporheben kann, damit ihnen in den letzten Augenblicken vor ihrer gnädigen Ruhe die Schönheit des Heiligen vergönnt sei! Gut möglich, dass das Feuer des Krieges und der Vernichtung über uns kommen wird und so von unserem Dom und unserer Orgel samt unserer Kunst nichts übrig bleiben wird. Möge die Schönheit des Heiligen die Gläubigen in diesen letzten Augenblicken zu göttlicher Wahrheit und menschlicher Güte, zu Gottes Lob und Preis und zum tiefen Glauben an unseren Dulder, Erretter und Erlöser führen! Mein inniger Glaube lässt mich zu der Überzeugung gelangen, dass sich durch deine Kunstfertigkeit, durch die erweckte und auferstandene Schönheit der Heiligkeit das Feuer des Krieges und der Vernichtung von unserem heiligen Ort und unserer Stadt abwenden wird. Ich hatte die Eingebung“ – der Guardian kneift die Augen zu und öffnet sie wieder mit schnellem Blick auf Pater Felix – „hatte also die göttliche Eingebung, dich und den Organisten und Chorleiter vom Dom des hl. Michael mit der Bitte anzugehen, wenigstens, wie du gesagt hast, teilweise zur Rettung dieses Ortes und unserer Stadt vor dem Letzten Gericht beizutragen. Ich werde daher den hochwürdigsten Pfarrevorsteher sowie den Organisten und Chorleiter bitten...”

Felix steht demütig da.

Christus macht ein erschrockenes Gesicht.

Guardian: „... dir zu gestatten, die Orgel spielen zu dürfen.“

Pater Felix (in gebrochenem Slowakisch): „Danke, Pater Guardian, Dank auch unserem Dulder für die Eingebung.“ Er überlegt: „Ob denn aber wohl der Herr Organist und Chorleiter das gestatten wird?“

Der Guardian blickt sich ängstlich um, lächelt dann und sagt:

„Gestatten oder nicht, darüber wird er sich wohl kaum Gedanken machen. Er wird ganz einfach einverstanden sein. Gewiss wird auch er an der Schönheit des Heiligen Interesse haben, und das sogar in höchstem Maße! Möge dies in uns beiden tiefen Dank und Ergebenheit gegenüber Gott erwecken! Ad laudem et gloriam!“

Felix (vorsichtig, in gebrochenem Slowakisch): „Aber der ehrwürdige Herr...?“

Guardian: „Er wird einverstanden sein.“

Felix (vorsichtig, in gebrochenem Slowakisch): „Ist der Herr Organist und Chorleiter ein guter Orgelspieler?“

Der Guardian hebt ein wenig die Hände und lächelt.

Felix (vorsichtig, mit zitternder Stimme und in gebrochenem Slowakisch): „Aber, Pater Guardian, werde ich mich denn nicht selbst verraten und vor allem auch Sie, dass ich ...?“

Der Guardian wiegt den Kopf, ein wenig erbost. „Ich habe da keine Angst. Und du, fürchtest du dich etwa?“

Felix: „Nein, ich habe keine Angst.“

Guardian: „Wirst du auch vorsichtig sein?“

Felix: „Aber ja. Ich werde vorsichtig sein.“

Guardian: „Und wirst du dich auch nicht auf Gespräche mit den Leuten einlassen?“

Felix: „Nein, werde ich nicht.“ Er verneigt sich, sagt: „Ad laudem et gloriam!“ und geht.

Der Guardian lächelt in Richtung Tür und schaut auf Christus. Christus fährt das pure Grauen ins Gesicht.

Abendglocken. – Ein Kreuz, ein altes!

Übersetzt von Gerlinde Tesche

Leopold Lahola

LAST THING

(Extract)



Photo: Archive

LEOPOLD LAHOLA (1918–1968)

Born as Leopold Arje Friedmann. Prose writer, playwright, film and television scriptwriter, film director, poet, translator and journalist. By birth a Slovak from a Jewish family, he spent much of his productive life in exile in Israel, but mainly in Munich. He emigrated in 1949 as an established playwright who by then authored three plays, the last of which, *Assassination Attempt* (Atentát, 1949), had met with a negative reaction from the dogmatic Stalinist literary critics.

His first attempts were *Dead Calm in Zuela* (Bezvetrie v Zuele, 1947) and *The Four Sides of the World* (Štyri strany sveta, 1948) dealing with Lahola's reaction to the war as an existential mystery or an apocalyptic event that defies rational, political, or even moral considerations. It was only in the late 1960's, that his plays *Sunspots* (Škvrný na slnku, 1967) and *Inferno* (1968) appeared in

Czechoslovakia during the liberalization that led to the Prague Spring.

His 1940's prose written in exile evokes the war (he joined in the Slovak National Uprising of 1944 after his internment in a camp for Jews in Nováky).

In 1968 appeared his collection of fourteen stories (re-published in 1994), *Last Thing* (Posledná vec). They deal with human dignity and Holocaust. The following excerpt from *Last Thing* illustrates this theme.

Other works, *Scorpion's Poison* (Ako jed škorpióna, 1995) – showcase Lahola's poetry. *Chamsin* (1940) – his translations of New Hebrew poetry. Film scripts: *White Darkness* (Bílá tma, 1948 directed by František Čáp), *Returning Home* (Návrat domů, 1948 – directed by Martin Frič), *Wolves' Lairs* (Vlčie diery, 1948 – directed by Palo Bielik).

For a moment it seemed that Melius was breathing with difficulty and that he was striving against some weakness. But when the man with the moustache moved he shouted, „Pick up the saw, because it doesn't bother me. You know what I think. If Joco is dead I don't see why I should have pity on you.

Besides you're revolting; I've had a hundred impulses to blow a hole in your stomach from the moment I saw your moustache the first time. But it doesn't matter, we aren't parted yet. Stop messing about and take hold of this saw.“

To add emphasis to his words he placed the automatic across

his lap. This annoyed the man with the moustache even more. "You went to the subaltern school," he shouted. "Saw the corpse in half."

"You weren't at that school when I was studying there," whispered Melius quietly which increased the man with the moustache's anxiety and he placed the saw carefully with its sharp teeth on Joco's back above his hips.

Joco was cold from the frost and stiff from a death which had happened four hours before. Melius measured out what should be half of Joco's length.

"What are you measuring?" the man with the moustache jeered.

"A half."

"A half," the man with the moustache touched his head, "If it's a lump of cheese or sausage you can talk about a half. But a man, do you hear, subaltern, a man is not sausage. There's no such thing as half of a man."

"I was thinking of half of the weight," Melius said.

"The best thing would be if you cut off his arms also and put one with each half. Or perhaps you prefer to saw him along his length?"

"You swine," Melius snapped at him not really knowing why. "Take hold of the saw with both hands. He's hard as bone."

Then he pulled himself together, swallowed the tears which had flowed down thinking that he might vomit them as his stomach was queasy. As soon as he began to saw he felt the resistance of the vertebrae in the backbone.

"You," Melius was startled and bewildered as a child and he reassured himself, "it can't be painful for him, with this saw."

"You don't know," ventured the man with the moustache trying to gather hope for the last time.

"Of course I don't know," Melius lowered his head. "Those who do know say that the dead can't feel pain."

"From those who say so, none of them was a dead half," said the man with the moustache sharply and for a moment felt he had the advantage.

"You want to tell me that what we are doing here is hurting Joco?"

"One thing I know for sure is that he can't express his pain as he's dead. More I don't know. And neither do you."

"Then everyone should feel pain who is buried deep in the earth in a grave and in spite of that burying has been done from time out of mind."

"You don't know if all of them don't in fact feel pain," objected the man with the moustache and was pleased with the direction of the discussion.

Melius was seized by a fear he had never experienced and when after a short while he had recovered he said, "So I don't know. It's better that Joco suffers pain from me than from those who would have to plough over him."

When he settled over the saw again the man with the moustache shouted at him, "It is criminal what we are doing! It's almost like a crime. There's a law which protects the dead. You can't even touch their graves otherwise you're up to your neck in it immediately. And worse when cut the dead into pieces. You go to gaol for sure."

Melius wasn't persuaded. He was under a compulsion he couldn't resist. The compulsion came from so deep within him that it seemed strange.

"We're cutting up nothing," he said, "And nothing is punishable. In a dark room there is still a crucified blackness. Take hold of the saw with both hands."

So they sawed in silence. At the beginning the saw jumped twice, then it bit into the body and plunged into it, at first slowly then more powerfully and finally it unexpectedly pierced somewhere and the man with the moustache turned his head aside so that he wouldn't see. Melius forced himself to think about everything different in the world to free himself from the saw which held him and tore him, Lord save him, it was an absolute swine, as he gazed at it and the blood in Joco which had

somehow vanished and turned into a little glittering dust which didn't flow. From the bowels something steamed out. Melius desperately searched for an idea which would rid him of the present moment. He learnt to fly and left these mountains. He left everything that had happened and had done so a long time ago. So he didn't know why he had been so afraid. From the sky it wasn't visible that there were mountains. He was in a world where there were only plains. But that endlessness was worse because there was nowhere to hide when the shooting started and it would have to start sometime. Or better to imagine a time in the future when as many centuries had passed as had from the Glacial period and the scaly lizard Joco had described. Nobody would remain who could remember, there would be no continents and the sea would cover everything, what had happened, molehills and cathedrals and the whole globe uninhabited for a long time. There would only be the circulation of the ocean with the moon reflected in it and the fixed stars and many other worlds. But even this image could not console Melius. Any way he tried to disengage himself with carried the price that anyone else who didn't succumb to destruction would carry the memory of it permanently in his mind. This could not be God or the angels but it had to be a human being, an exclusively human subject to decay and through that be able to desire consolation. Because if there were one immortal to offer calm, if he had no notion of what it meant to decay he would albeit unknowingly return under this uprooted tree where the saw had fallen from his hand, where he expected the man with the moustache to say something to him which might bring consolation.

But he was sweating and pointing in shock at Joco's head.

"His hair's standing on end," he said and Melius looked closer.

"The hair of the dead doesn't stand on end," he spun away heavily from him. "It must have been standing on end before."

"A moment ago when his cap fell off it was smooth. Now it's standing on end."

"You're right," said Melius. "It is standing on end. I'll carry Joco's head."

The man with the moustache was afraid.

"I mean the half with the head," Melius corrected himself and stood up to help the man with the moustache load the lower part on to his shoulders. Thus they carried him with Melius walking in front. It threatened to tip him over here and there but he kept on his feet. When they were deep in the mountains somehow Joco's hand got in front of his face and he wanted to turn so the man with the moustache could help him. Then he noticed that far behind him the man with the moustache was ridding himself of his burden and started to run. There wasn't much point in calling him to stay. So Melius put his part of Joco carefully on the ground and emptied the whole magazine of his gun after the fleeing man. One of the shots forced the man with the moustache to sit down where he was. He did so deliberately and with concentration. From a pocket he produced a cigarette. He didn't have time to put it into his mouth. A spasm of cramp crushed it to nothing and he gave up the ghost.

Melius brought his half of Joco up to the other half which was lying not far from the man with the moustache. He lay down on the frozen earth and leaned on an elbow waiting for what would happen. To start walking with one or other of the two halves was impossible for him. Hell, the man with the moustache was right, he thought. There isn't a half of a man even when he is cut into two or whatever.

It seemed that people were coming or it was only a hallucination. He pulled himself to the tree, took hold of it carefully and, leaning against it, pulled himself to his knees again. He looked at where Joco was lying and though he didn't know why he was sure that it was for the last time. Joco looked as though he was whole but his face was turned to the ground and both the soles of his feet were turned to the sky, turned inwards somewhat indecisively as those of the living sometimes are.

Translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith

Klára Jarunková

DER BRUDER DES SCHWEIGENDEN WOLFES

(Leseprobe)



Photo: Peter Procházka

KLÁRA JARUNKOVÁ (1922 – 2005), Schriftstellerin, Publizistin, Autorin von Kinder- und Jugendbüchern, wirkte nach Beendigung der Schule als Dorflehrerin im mittelslowakischen Korytárky. Nach dem Krieg arbeitete sie im Rathaus von Bratislava, später als literarische Redakteurin des tschechoslowakischen Rundfunks (1953 – 1954) und in der Redaktion der humoristischen Zeitschrift Roháč (1954 – 1958). Seit 1984 widmete sie sich professionell dem literarischen Schaffen. Sie ist Autorin von 23 Büchern für Erwachsene, Jugendliche und Kinder. Ihre Bücher erschienen in 39 Weltsprachen in über 150 Ausgaben. Die Handlungen von *Die Einzige* (Jediná) und *Bruder des schweigenden Wolfs* (Brat mlčanlivého Vlka) gingen dank 70 Übersetzungen in den goldenen Fundus der Weltliteratur für Kinder und Jugendliche

ein. Für ihr Werk erhielt sie den italienischen Nationalpreis *Bancarellino* und wurde in das internationale Ehrenverzeichnis des Hans-Christian-Andersen-Preises eingetragen. Aufgrund ihrer internationalen Akzeptanz wurde sie von der slowakischen Vereinigung der Schriftstellerorganisationen für den Literaturnobelpreis und den Astrid-Lindgren-Preis vorgeschlagen. Sie war die initiierte Persönlichkeit und langjährige Vorsitzende des Klubs der unabhängigen Schriftsteller. Für ihre außergewöhnlichen Verdienste um die Entwicklung der slowakischen Kultur verlieh ihr der Präsident den Pribina-Orden 1. Klasse und den Ludovít-Štúr-Orden 1. Klasse (2005). Zu ihren wichtigsten Werken gehören der schon erwähnte Mädchenroman für Jugendliche und Erwachsene *Die Einzige* (Jediná, 1963) und der im Gebirge spielende Jungenroman *Bruder des schweigenden Wolfs* (Brat mlčanlivého Vlka, 1967). In die Linie dieser Werke reiht sich die Novelle *Rächer* (Pomstiteľ, 1968) und der Jugendroman *Der Ausreißer* (Tulák, 1973). Ihre weiten Interessen und ihr reiches Talent dokumentieren die Reisetagebücher *Ein paar Schritte durch Brasilien* (Pár krokov po Brazílii, 1972), sowie das Buch humorvoller Märchen *Über den Hund, der einen Jungen hatte* (O psovi, ktorý mal chlapca, 1974). Erlebnisse aus der Kindheit verarbeitete sie im Roman *Leise Stürme* (Tiché búrky, 1977), die Vorlage für die Novelle *Treffen mit dem Verschollenen* (Stretnutie s nezvestným, 1978) entlehnte sie dem exotischen Umfeld des Himalaya. Im Buch *Talisman von der oberen Hron* (Horehronský talizman, 1978) erzählt sie die Erlebnisse des eigenen Vaters im Dienste des

bulgarischen Zaren. Nach authentischen Erlebnissen entstand der Roman mit Kriegs- und Aufstandsthematik *Schwarze Sonnwend* (Čierny slnovrat, 1979) wie auch das Reisebuch über Kuba *Bilder von der Insel* (Obrázky z ostrova, 1979). Zum Schaffen für die aller kleinsten Leser kehrte sie mit den Märchenbüchern *Über Thomas, der das Dunkel nicht fürchtete* (O Tomášovi, ktorý sa nebál tmy, 1978), *Es war einmal* (Kde bolo, tam bolo, 1980), *Über einen Vogel, der ein Geheimnis wusste* (O vtáčkovi, ktorý vedel tajomstvo, 1983), *Über das Mädchen, das ein Märchen suchte* (O dievčatku, ktoré šlo hľadať rozprávku, 1984) und andere zurück. Ihr schriftstellerisches Schaffen schließt der Mädchenroman *Niedrige Bewölkung* (Nízka oblačnosť, 1993) ab. Sie ist die meistübersetzte slowakische Kinderbuchautorin, doch ihre Werke sprechen auch Erwachsene an, besonders Eltern. Die jungen Leute sind unmittelbar Teil ihres literarischen Werks, nicht nur Objekte. Sie schafft eine Prosa voll Humor, Witz, Spiel, aber auch sensibler Wahrnehmung. Der besondere Beitrag ihrer Bücher liegt in den eigenwilligen Reaktionen und Bewertungen der Beziehungen innerhalb der Familie, der kompromisslosen Sichtweise und den expressiven Reaktionen der jungen Helden, typisch für das Alter, in dem sie die Welt der Kindheit verlassen und in die direkte Konfrontation mit der Welt der Erwachsenen eintreten. Sie verstand es, eine Wunderwelt voll Zärtlichkeit, Freundschaft, Treue und Verständnis zu schaffen. Dank seiner eigenwilligen Poetik und seines offensichtlichen künstlerischen Wertes fand ihr Werk einen schnellen Weg zu den Lesern in der Slowakei, in Europa und anderswo.

Ein rosaroter Wagen war angekommen, ein »Spartak«. Das bedeutete: Es war der erste August. Solange die Welt besteht und ich mich erinnern kann, also mindestens seit neun Jahren, trifft dieser Spartak am ersten August bei uns ein. Früher war er braun wie Schokolade, und jetzt ist er rosarot wie die Kleider von Gabka. So ein Auto habe ich nie wieder gesehen. Auch nicht so einen Jungen wie diesen Vladko, der mit dem Auto gekommen ist. Vladko liebt die Natur.

Wenn er aus dem Auto springt, breitet er die Arme aus, atmet tief und sagt: »Ich grüße euch, ihr Wälder und Berge, mit ganzer Seele grüße ich euch!«

Ganz so sagt er es nicht, aber so ähnlich. Jedenfalls schön. Ich kann nicht so schön daherreden. Das ärgert mich.

Schon als er klein war, hatte seine Mutter ihm beigebracht, die Natur zu lieben. Wenn sie spazierengingen, hieß es: »Na, was sagst du zu der Tanne, Vladko?«

»Guten Morgen, kleine Tanne«, sagte Vladko.

Oder: »Guten Morgen, ihr lieben Vögelchen.« Und dann zog er sein Taschentuch und winkte dem Habicht zu. Dem Djumbier sagte er gute Nacht, und der Sonne schickte er einen Kuß.

Ich erzählte das Julia.

»Du bist nur neidisch, weil er so gut erzogen ist«, sagte sie und lachte. »Und weil er klüger ist als du.«

Vielleicht hatte sie recht. Aber schließlich kam Vladko aus Bratislava. Und wenn ich erst einmal in Bratislava gewesen bin, dann bin ich bestimmt noch klüger als er. Und beneidet habe ich ihn eigentlich auch nicht. Ich hielt ihn eher für dumm.

Einmal redete er mit dem Eichhörnchen, das hoch oben in der Krone des Baumes saß. Da sagte ich: »Wenn du das Eichhörnchen beobachten willst, dann darfst du es nicht rufen. Versteck dich lieber und rühr dich nicht. Wenn du den Atem anhältst, kommt es vielleicht ganz nahe heran.«

Vladkos Mutter sah mich so böse an, daß ich lieber wegging. Als sie mich nicht mehr sehen konnte, warf ich einen Tannenzapfen hoch in den Baum. Das Eichhörnchen glitt bis zum Ende des Astes, sprang in den nächsten Baum, und weg war es. Ich hörte noch, wie seine Mutter sagte: »Verabschiede dich von dem schönen Eichhörnchen«, und Vladko rief: »Auf Wiedersehen, auf Wiedersehen!«

Schwachkopf! Aber eigentlich tat er mir leid.

Und dann passierte die Geschichte am Bach.

Ich hatte mir gerade am Bach ein Wasserrad gebaut, da stand

Vladko plötzlich neben mir und rief aus voller Kehle: »Guten Tag, lieber Bach!«

Es hat mir richtig leid getan, wie dieser Junge nach allen Seiten grüßte, ohne daß ihm jemand antwortete. Deshalb habe ich für den Bach geantwortet: »Guten Tag, Vladko!«

»Das galt doch nicht dir«, rief er empört. »Na warte, du kannst was erleben!« Er packte einen Felsbrocken und warf ihn direkt auf meine gerade fertige Wassermühle.

Mit drei Sprüngen war ich bei ihm. Aber da sah ich seine Mutter, die auf dem Felsen saß und aus Blumen einen Kranz flocht.

Ich ließ Vladko los und lief weg. Ich hörte noch, wie er sich über mich beschwerte.

Bis spät in den Abend war ich draußen. Ich jagte die Hühner und ärgerte das Schwein, und dann begann ich, am Marmanec, dem Felsen vor der Hütte, eine Bank zu zimmern. Aber ohne Abendessen schlafen zu gehen, dazu langte mein Mut nicht.

»Na, dir werd ich's zeigen!« schnaubte der Vater, als ich in die Küche kam. »Mit Felsbrocken verjagst du meine besten Gäste!«

»Wieso?« sagte ich empört. »Mit Felsbrocken? Ich?«

»Komm mit!« befahl Vater.

Ich mußte mit ihm aufs Zimmer elf gehen, um mich zu entschuldigen. Aber als wir ankamen, wurde ich trotzig. Das konnte ich mir erlauben, denn vor Gästen gibt Vater keine Ohrfeigen. Ich sagte also kein Sterbenswörtchen.

Vladkos Mutter versuchte mich zu überreden: »Na, was sagst du zu Vladko?«

Nichts sagte ich, denn ich war beleidigt. Und dann kann ich nichts sagen, auch wenn ich will. Aber ich wollte gar nicht. Vladkos Mutter ging zu den Koffern zurück und packte weiter ein. Vladko saß siegessicher auf seinem Bett, und sein Vater stand am Bett.

Das war nun wirklich eine ziemlich verflixte Geschichte.

Vater wußte nicht, was er mit mir anfangen sollte, aber im letzten Augenblick kam ihm eine gute Idee. Er wußte, daß ich mich bewegen konnte, auch wenn ich trotzte und nicht reden wollte. Er stieß mich an und sagte: »Gib Vladko die Hand! Wenn sich Jungens die Hand geben, haben sie sich wieder vertragen. Also auf gute Freundschaft!«

Ich machte drei steife Schritte und gab Vladko die Hand. Der Dummkopf überlegte es sich noch. Aber er wurde ebenfalls von seinem Vater angestoßen. Der wollte natürlich, dass das mit dem Einpacken aufhörte. Von diesem Augenblick an waren Vladko und ich also Freunde. Es war schon wirklich komisch.

Draußen auf dem Gang haute Vater mir eine runter. Aber das nahm ich ihm gar nicht übel.

So begannen die Jahre unserer Freundschaft. Am liebsten hatte ich Vladko in den elf Monaten des Jahres, wo ich ihn nicht sehen mußte.

Die ersten drei Tage nach seiner Ankunft ging mir Vladko furchtbar auf die Nerven. Genau wie im vorigen und im vorvorigen Jahr. Immerzu liebte er die Natur.

Und dann liebte er auch einen Hund, von dem ich eigentlich gar nichts erzählen wollte. Diesen Hund hatte ich eines Morgens halb verhungert vor der Hütte gefunden. Wir gaben ihm zu fressen, und dann wollte er nicht mehr weg. Strasch und Boj waren die ersten, die merkten, daß der Köter dumm war wie eine Henne. Deshalb erlaubten sie ihm auch alles. Er durfte sogar mit ihnen aus ihrer Schüssel fressen. Nachts schlief er an Strasch angekuschelt. Er war still und bescheiden und weder groß noch schön, noch klug.

Als dieser Hund am ersten August Vladko erblickte, sprang er um ihn herum. Und während Vladko noch die Berge und Wälder begrüßte, legte der Hund sich ihm zu Füßen. Die Schnauze legte er auf Vladkos Schuh, was bei einem Hund bedeutet, daß er diesem Menschen als Sklave ergeben ist.

Als Vladko aus seinem Begrüßungstaumel erwachte und den Hund zu seinen Füßen sah, wurde er blaß. Er wagte nicht, sich zu rühren. Ich piff dem Hund, damit nichts passierte. Denn die Gäste hätten ja wieder mit ihrem rosaroten Spartak abfahren können. Aber der Hund gehorchte nicht.

Vladko nahm seinen ganzen Mut zusammen und redete mit dem Hund. Ich sah, wie der Hund vor Glück fast zerfloß. Er gab ungeschickt die Pfote, wedelte mit dem Schwanz und versuchte, Vladko die Hand zu lecken. So was hatte ich in meinem ganzen Leben noch nicht gesehen.

(...)

Wir spielten auf der Wiese. Natürlich waren auch alle Hunde dabei. Die Hunde sollten Räuber sein, und wir wollten sie fangen. Aber das klappte nicht. Hunde sind nun mal keine Verbrechernaturen. Sie können sich nicht verstellen. Sobald wir sie zu jagen begannen, blieben sie stehen und warteten auf uns.

Darum erklärten wir den Hunden, daß wir die Räuber wären und sie die Gendarmen. Die Bernhardiner verstanden es, aber der kleine Köter lief Vladko ständig nach. Ich packte ihm bei den Pfoten und erklärte ihm noch einmal in strengem Ton, daß wir Räuber wären und daß sie uns deshalb fangen müßten, denn sie wollten ja wohl nicht von uns erschossen werden.

»Also, ihr verfolgt uns, verstanden?« schrie ich dem Hund ins Gesicht. »Auch wenn du Vladko anhimmelst. Das kannst du dir für später aufheben.«

Danach liefen wir mit schrecklichem Gebrüll weg.

Ich lief in das hohe Gras der Wiese, bis die Bernhardiner mich nicht mehr sehen konnten. Sie sprangen auf mich, warfen mich um, drückten mich auf die Erde, und ich war gefangen.

Als sie endlich aufhörten, mir in die Ohren zu blasen, hörte ich, wie Vladko weinerlich schimpfte. Er zeigte mir seinen Fuß. Ich sah Spuren von Zähnen. Aber es blutete nicht einmal.

»Dieses Mistvieh!« schrie er böse und zeigte auf den Köter.

Der stand neben ihm wie ein Klotz und machte ein Gesicht, als ob er sagen wollte: »Nein, wie ich ihn anbete, wie ich ihn liebe.«

»Reg dich nicht auf«, sagte ich zu Vladko. »Er hat dir ja nichts getan. Richtige Gendarmen hätten dich anders zugerichtet.«

Mit dem Spiel war es zu Ende. Vladkos Hund war zu Tode betrübt. Wie ein Nilpferd, das die Liebe seines Herrn verloren hat. Aber Vladko schimpfte jedenfalls nicht mehr mit ihm. Und er schlug ihn auch nicht. Im Grunde ist Vladko gar nicht so übel, dachte ich. Ein bißchen geschimpft hat er, aber sein Groll ist schon vergangen.

Das war jedoch ein Irrtum.

Nach dem Mittagessen ging Vladko hinaus, als ob er spaziergehen wollte. Der Hund ging zwei Meter hinter ihm. Er wedelte mit dem Schwanz, hob die Pfoten und vollführte alle möglichen Kunststücke. Beim Eiskeller drehte Vladko sich um.

»Na, was ist, du Taugenichts?« sagte er süß. »Warum kommst du nicht näher? Rate mal, was ich dir mitgebracht habe.«

Überglücklich lief der Hund zu ihm. Im gleichen Augenblick heulte er jammervoll auf, lief davon, stieß mit dem Kopf gegen den Eiskeller, fiel hin und wimmerte schrecklich. Er steckte den Kopf ins Gras, fuhr sich mit den Pfoten über die Augen und jammerte wie in Mensch.

Ich war sofort bei ihm. Ich sah, daß sein Kopf rot war. Aber nicht von Blut, sondern von – Paprika. Von unserem Paprika aus den Gewürzstreuern im Speisezimmer.

So hinterlistig rächte sich Vladko an dem Hund. So heimtückisch, wie es hundert Schlangen zusammen nicht gekonnt hätten.

Ich zog den Hund zum Bassin und legte ihn hin. Ich hatte Angst, daß er blind werden würde. Aber allmählich schwemmen die Tränen den Paprika aus seinen Augen. Langsam schlich der Hund zu mir.

Am Abend traf der Hund wieder auf Vladko. Er blieb stehen und blickte den Jungen aus fünf Meter Entfernung an. Vladko lockte ihn und zeigte ihm seine leeren Hände.

Weil der Bursche selbst keinen Charakter hatte, dachte er, andere hätten auch keinen. Vom Marmanec sah ich den beiden zu.

»Wenn der Köter ihm noch einmal die Hand leckt,« sagte ich zu Gabka, »dann verhaue ich ihn, daß er es bis zu seiner letzten Stunde nicht vergißt.«

»Verhaue ihn nicht«, bat Gabka.

Aber der Hund zeigte Charakter. Er rührte sich nicht, sondern sah nur traurig zu Vladko. Ich dachte, daß es ihn doch grausen

müsse vor so viel Verrat und Falschheit.

Vladko zuckte die Achseln und ging weg.

In dieser Nacht schlief der Hund nicht neben Strasch, und am Morgen kam er auch nicht an den Freßnapf. Auch am Abend kam er nicht, und da wurde mir klar, daß wir ihn nie wiedersehen würden.

Als die Wespen am Abend schliefen, nahm ich mit einem Tuch ein ganzes Nest auf und warf es durch das Fenster in Vladkos Zimmer. Guten Abend, liebe Wespen! Und gute Nacht!

Am Morgen waren alle zerstochen.

Aber dieses Mal sagte Vladko keinen Ton.

Übersetzt von Marianne Gärtner



Photo: Peter Procházka

Ivan Kupec GEDICHTE

Fortsetzung dieser dichterischen Suche, diesmal in den Traditionen der orientalischen Poesie, und verleiht gleichzeitig Befürchtungen um das Fortbestehen der Menschheit an der Schwelle des Atomzeitalters Ausdruck. 1963 gab er zwei Essaybände heraus. Das Buch *Die Unsterblichen* (Nesmrtelní, 1963) ist eine Sammlung von Essays über europäische Dichter, besonders aus der Zeit der Romantik; das zweite Buch, *Verteidigung der Poesie* (Obrana poézie, 1963), enthält polemische Essays zur slowakischen Poesie. Die Sammlungen *Das Ausziehen des Zorns* (Vyzliekanie z hnevov, 1965) und *Stunde mit dem Engel* (Hodina s anjelom, 1968) sind intime Aufzeichnungen des dichterischen Inneren und stellen eine Wertung der eigenen Lebenserfahrung dar. Eine Auswahl seiner Liebeslyrik erschien unter dem Titel *Verdunklung der Frau* (Zatmenie ženy, 1965). Nach einer erzwungenen langjährigen Unterbrechung meldete er sich mit den Sammlungen *Schattenspiel* (Tieňohra, 1988) und *Buch der Schatten* (Kniha tieňov, 1990) zurück, die ein lyrisches Dokument der inneren dichterischen Emigration in den Jahren der Normalisierung und des dichterischen Protestes gegen deren Praktiken bilden. Er übersetzte und gab

Kostproben orientalischer, chinesischer und deutscher Poesie heraus. Die bedeutendsten sind die Übersetzungen altchinesischer Poesie (Li Po, Tu Fu). Von 1950 bis 1954 wirkte er als Chefredakteur des Verlages Tatran, dann wechselte er zum Verlag Slovenský spisovateľ, wo er zunächst als Redakteur, später als Chefredakteur arbeitete (bis 1970). Seit 1974 war er Redakteur im Verlag Mladé letá. Für seine politischen Haltungen wurde er diskriminiert und konnte lange nicht publizieren. 1999 arbeitete das Tagebuch von Ivan Kupec heraus, das seine Kommentare zu den Jahren 1962 bis 1968 enthält. Es ist als Manuskript erhalten, das teilweise vom Dichter selbst zur Herausgabe vorbereitet wurde. Das Tagebuch enthält sehr verschiedene Texte unterschiedlicher Genres. In den Vordergrund treten objektivierende Aufzeichnungen zu Vorkommnissen, die sich im gesellschaftlichen und kulturellen Leben abspielten, besonders zu jenen, deren Akteur er selbst war. Faktographisch gesättigte Kommentare wechseln mit belletrisierenden Passagen, Ausschnitten konkreter dichterischer und prosaischer Texte, aber auch mit annähernd literaturgeschichtlichen Portraits.

DOCH GESCHICHTE UNS TRÄGT

*Geschichte trägt uns, trägt uns untilgbar.
Trägt uns für Schicksalsergebenheit und für eigene
Feigheit, mit Krücken, unter unsrer Achsel eingewachsen.*

*Geschichte trägt uns, Herolde der Resignation.
Auf Rettung von fremder Hand, fremde
Befreiungstat wartende ewige Rebellen.*

*Geschichte trägt uns, Schneckenhauskriecher,
glücklich gefangen im Schneckenirwana.
Nur still drin, regst ein Bröckchen, schon stürzt der Fels.*

*Ja, wir sind Schauspieler nur auf eigner Wiese,
aus dem Munde Macduffs die Perversitäten des Macbeth.
Doch Geschichte uns trägt. Doch Geschichte uns trägt.*

ERSTES GEDICHT DER SCHATTEN

*In der Heimat, aus der ich kam, warf der Vampir nur
keinen Schatten, und wohl die Jungfrau noch,
die im Oktober übern Friedhof ging.
Dieser Winkel ist ein Greis: aus Kletten trinkend
vor der Schwelle die schwarze Sonne. Das grüne Vlies der Tannen
längst schon jemand lähmte an der Wonne
dritten Geschlechtes, und ohne Schatten ist auch der Schlaf
armseliger,*

nicht nur der Tod. Der Tag, Fuchsaue in der Falle, langsam
herabsteigt von den Kronen der Dinge zu ihren Wurzeln
und Würzelchen. Leben, ausgebrannt. Sind Zeiten,
da gibt's keine Gegenwart, und selbstgefällige Vergangenheit

peitscht
kommendes Geschehen, bis es zu Phönixasche brennt.
Der erste Schatten trat aus beschnittenem Walde hervor,

beschwipst
vom Zimtduft der Dämmerung, es war ein Scharren
mit dem Rost des Hufs. Aus dem zweiten Schatten,

durchscheinend
von zu langem Warten, stieg Dunst auf, kam mir entgegen,
wie näherzukommen scheint der Schweifstern ungeliebt
am Heiligabend. (Verbarg sich hinter der
Andeutung eines Lächelns, der Geste eines Edelweiß
am Frauenbusen.)

Der dritte Schatten kam einfach, setzte sich
auf das Wolsfell beim Herd, suchte mit den Augen
etwas im gestapelten Holz und zählte es, sprach noch nicht,
um nur ja nichts einzuschüchtern (Hauchte ich dennoch ihm
in graue Hände das Entsetzen?) Und während es uns glückte,
uns zu kreuzen

mit freundschaftlichem Wort, barg die drei ersten der vierte
Schatten,

ein letzter. Ja, dieser war weiblichen Geschlechts,
das bemerkte ich
an der Verschwiegenheit, die bei aller Tugend gehört sein will
und dir alles gerade dadurch sagt, daß etwas sie verschweigt,
und ich beschwöre, diese Weile war wirklicher als das Leben,
wirklicher als das Urteil in der Hand des Henkers
fünf Minuten vor der Hinrichtung, wirklicher als der Tanz
des angebeteten Leibes.

Ja, wirklicher noch als das Brot,
das wir brachen für einen Hunger, kaum noch
menschlich.

Die Hautnähe der Seelen erwärmte uns. Der Stunden-
kuckuck

verträumte diese Nacht hinter den Fensterladen:
diese Wärme des Halbdunkels! Und die Welt war nur
ein Traum
vom Bernsteinzeitalter, die Berge von neuem Wiegen der Düfte,
rotbraune Rehe tranken am Wildbach, Schulter an Schulter
mit Menschen

und mit Zyklopen und Sternen und Ringelnattern,
die Sonne verdeckte noch kein Rauchhut,
der Weg gehörte dem Quendel und der nackten menschlichen
Ferse
und dem Kindermärchen, und Gräben gab's für den Vogeldurst.
Noch nicht sehr weit war der Mensch gekommen in
den Windungen des Hirns.

Die Zeit begnügte sich mit Sonnenuhren,
sauber war sauber und lebendig lebendig
und Raubgier war Raubgier im Namen der existentiellen
Substanz,

lebenserhaltend. Und der Tod kam einfach,
ohne modrige Grube,
gegraben dem Menschen und dem Ozean, der Furche
des Baums und dem Lächeln
des Grases: Kreuzotternzahn

war Harfe gegen die Lepra zukünftigen menschlichen
Verstandes.

(Und dabei hat uns die Geschichte bisher erst gestellt
in den ersten

Akt des Dramas.
Selbst das, was beendet, ist noch nicht abgeschlossen.)
Dann schlug die Morgendämmerung auf dem Hof
mit ihrem Taubenflügel. Ausnahmsweise
gewann sie die flüchtige Gestalt des kosmischen Urgesetzes.
Und wenn selbst Hamlet nicht gelang,
die Schande anderer mit seinem weiten Mantel zu verhüllen,
obwohl er noch nicht Feuer schlug aus dem Atom – unten,
auf dem Grunde des ersten Sonnenstrahls
sah ich Wesen und Stoffe ohne Masken, wie sie waren
und wie sie sind im Kreise dieses einzigen Lebens, das mir
geschenkt wurde.

BEGLAUBIGTE REKAPITULATION EINES GREISES

Es ist wirklich nicht viel,
worauf ich stolz sein könnte.
Arg Schlechtes tat ich gerade dort,
wo ich rechthgläubig handeln wollte,
wie ich am meisten Unrecht tat
denen, die mich wohl gerne hatten;
ich seh es ein, das rechtfertigt mich keineswegs.
Doch scheint's, als wär's für mich nun an der Zeit,
die Wechsel einzulösen und auch mich
sie schon erwarten im Schattenreich. Es warten
meine Ahnen, auf mich wartet meine Frau;
vor allem zu ihr komm gerne ich zurück,
denn ich war's doch, der einst sie eingeladen
zum Tanz des Lebens. Sie alle erwarten mich,
Gut also, bin vorbereitet; nicht Feind
noch Freund wird mir noch schaden.
Nur der Gedanke wärmt mich, daß der Nicht-Menschen-
Welt ich, gottweißwarum, niemals zu nahe trat.
Weder Hase noch Reh habe ich geschossen,
vierteilte nicht knabenhaft grausam eine
Katze, hab sie auch nicht vom Kirchturm geworfen,
neugierig, ob sie wirklich fällt auf alle ihre vier
Pforten. Nicht einen einzigen Baum hab ich gepflanzt,
hab dafür auch keinen umgebracht, noch ihn verstümmelt
nicht als Schößling, noch in seinem Mannesalter.
Selbst ein Haus hab ich mir nicht gebaut,
dafür auch keins verwüstet. Einen Garten
hab niemals ich gehabt und auch nach fremdem nie gelehzt.
Hatte eine Katze, nur einen einzigen Hund,
Beide hab mit der Familie ich beweint, als wären's
unsere Kinder.

Eigentlich ist es tatsächlich nicht viel,
worauf ich Grund hätte, stolz zu sein.

Übersetzt von Ursula Macht

Ján Johanides

PRIVACY

(Extract)

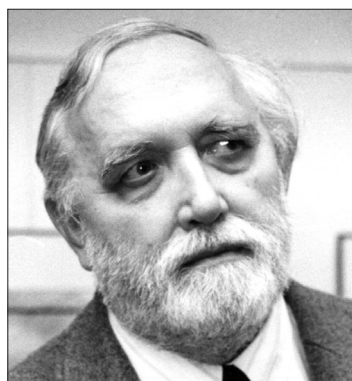


Photo: Peter Procházka

JÁN JOHANIDES (1934), prose writer, essayist. Similar to themes of other 1960's writers, Ján Johanides's themes in prose were about the conflict between personal territory, defined by the perception of a character, and a wider, geographic and social territory set by the author's view. Being the oldest from

a new prose generation (having a new view on literature) he was the first one to debut with a book, with a collection of five novellas *Privacy* (Súkromie, 1963). While Vincent Šikula in his *No Applause at Concerts* (Na koncertoch sa netlieska) refuses social acknowledgement, and in *Perhaps I'll Build Myself a Bungalow* (Možno si postavím bungalov) he fortifies his defined territory which gives him a clarity of perception, Johanides feels a strong contrary need to connect to the outside world and the outside perception of it and its interpretation in the works of French existentialists and authors of the *nouveau roman*. This, too, constitutes a solid part of his privacy as well as *Privacy*. His debut was followed by a compilation of prosaic and dramatic dialogues originally titled *Getting Acquainted* (Spoznávanie) which was, in the creative process, renamed to *The Substance of the Quarry* (Podstata kameňolomu, 1965). The first sentence of the compilation is very typical of Johanides: "I wanted to kill myself today but I chose not to commit suicide because I bought a nice

sweater." Interpretations of Johanides's prose often identify this statement with an overall line of thought surrounding the then popular modern literature. However, they also point to other characteristics of his texts, even foreshadow future ones. It is mainly his trivial, almost colloquial presentation of an important and unique fact. It is the disassembling of reality into its literary and factual components which is demonstrated by expressivity and shocking the reader by the character's eccentric view. The author retained this trait also in his future work. In the novella *No* (Nie, 1966), it was brought out even more with the shift towards absurd literature. It stayed present in Johanides's prose in the 1970's and 1980's, in which he also touched upon broader social context (*Undisclosed Crows* / Nepriznané vrany, 1978, *Bank Book Ballad* / Balada o vkladnej knižke, 1979), as well as later. Within Slovak prose, Johanides has always been a writer with a distinct signature style and with specific authorial traits which, with minor modifications, remain the same since his debut.

III

I woke up during twilight and in the empty room remained only an old man, as unknown to me then as the evening itself. His head, indistinct in the darkness, was facing me as he supported it on the table covered by newspapers. It seemed to me that his observant look was stolen by my dream.

He must have guessed that I was up, since he moved. He wiped his mouth with his little finger. And while getting up awfully slowly from his chair he seemed to be hunching his back more and more so that, once erect, he was only bending over his shadow right above the tablecloth, while his thick fingers eagerly gripped the edge of the table.

I got up. The old man was heading towards the night table. He didn't bend his legs in his knees, he only carefully slid them forward and I turned on the light. But the light could have stayed off; I didn't need it and neither did the old man, I guess, as he was blind. Of course, he sensed the presence of a stranger, but he had no strength to straighten his back and only turned his head up, as if wanting to check me out. His lower lip moved up, almost sticking out. It was shaking oddly. That irregular movement reminded me of a tactile move. I felt that his lip substituted for his eyes and I turned my gaze away from the sight of the toothless mouth.

His very crooked index finger gradually reached his protruding ear. He reached for the bushy hair that sprouted from inside. "Is it you, Vladko?" he asked silently. He smiled. I answered no and also smiled at him. "I'm new here," I said after a while and the old man's head began to shake. He opened his mouth, perhaps to speak, but the shaking attacked it as well, his gums collided and in his effort to help himself, he made short, but quite abrupt movements with his hands, as if dividing, or tearing something. His face contracted and again he stuck out his lower lip like a tentacle. He took a step towards me. Strangely, his legs now bent in their knees. He was offering me his hand. As I felt his leather-like hand, I took a look at his thin, frail hair. He added his left hand to my wrist and his runaway fingers were entering under my coat sleeve. The old man stood silently in a pose that looked as if he were expressing his condolences.

A man, about thirty-years old, entered the room. His slicked back black hair was reminiscent of a musician who played in the Štefánka Café. His round face was beaming. He approached the old man from the back and placed both hands on his eyes. "Guess who I am?" he said indulgently, the way one addresses children when one wants to enjoy them. The old man wheezed, bent over as if falling down, showed his gums and joyfully repeated: "Vladko, Vladko." At that moment a nurse entered the room, too, and asked me to come out into the hallway. The nurse stopped, hesitating as if she couldn't decide whether to talk to me while walking, or not. I asked her what the matter was. She looked at me with her shy, but focused eyes and then she lowered them, as if I reproached her for something. She kept rubbing her cheek while informing me that my wife got killed in a car accident near Modra. She was looking at a brass door handle. There was a drop of dry white varnish on the handle and I remembered the nurse saying: "The person is already waiting downstairs."

I followed the nurse, though I didn't know if she asked me to. We stopped in front of a small room where I took my clothes in the afternoon. An older woman dressed in mourning was passing by the door. She stopped the nurse. I understood from her words that she came to pick up her husband's clothes. The nurse was already unlocking the door when the woman in mourning asked her why her cheek was so red. It seemed to me that she had asked her and smiled at her only to make sure that the nurse wouldn't let her wait and deal with me first. At the same time I realized that the nurse's cheek was red because the nurse had rubbed it while telling me about my wife's death.

But the nurse turned to me, passed me my shirt, a knitted vest and a tie. The woman in mourning grabbed her sleeve and my fingers have met her wrist. The woman in mourning took a look at me with her small eyes that almost disappeared in her face. Her small, bent nose was covered with boils that reached her forehead, but didn't cross the first wrinkle. The nurse nervously ripped my suit from its hanger: "I'll stay here," she said, "the car is waiting for you."

I decided not to return to the room, but would change in the toilet, as the room was probably already filled with patients. I put

it all on with furious speed and felt as if thousands of people were laughing behind my back like an audience. I worked up a sweat during this simple act of dressing. I could even say that it had worn me down. I can't say why I took off the already knotted tie. I put it in my inner pocket and then smelled smoke. I guess somebody must have been secretly smoking in the toilets.

I couldn't get rid of the inane feeling that rows of laughing viewers, who have set up my life in advance as a sort of destiny, were standing behind me and now were entertaining themselves by watching me come to terms with it. There was laughter but I had had that feeling once already and it seemed funny to me then, as it did now. I experienced it during my Father's funeral, in the middle of the war. I was walking through the suburb, by the track, and stumbled. The people walking by smiled and told me to "watch out". I also got the strange feeling then as if those people had planned the death of my Father and my future life and as if their remark about "watching out" was an encouragement to me to finally become angry.

The nurse expressed her condolences to me and then went on with the woman in mourning. She said everything was arranged already.

The taxi was waiting for me near the entrance to the Metropoli movie theatre. The driver got out of his car as I approached it. "Is it you?" He asked, or only noted, as if he knew me. And there I realized that I didn't even know where Marta was, I forgot to ask about that, or couldn't remember what the nurse had told me. I had to, of course, phone "our hospital ward", but I found out that I didn't know the nurse's name. So I decided to return upstairs.

"I'm sorry, I have quite forgotten to tell you that," the nurse apologized. We've met in the hallway and I didn't have to look for her all over the place. "She's in Trnava... in the hospital. You should ask about the car accident at the reception. That will be sufficient."

I kept closing my eyes in the car. Not because I felt like sleeping, only in order not to see anything, and not to perceive the headlights passing by.

The receptionist in the hospital seemed to have been already waiting for me and wanted to have "the chore off his back as soon as possible". Without saying anything, he quite quickly took me to the morgue and as soon as I entered it, I noticed Marta. She was lying on a table covered up to her closed mouth with a sheet of plastic. A shock of hair reached down to her left eyebrow.

On a chair next to her head sat a policeman and behind him stood a small and bald doctor and next to her feet was that university student and young author whom I have met at home before this business trip. The young man had a bandage around his head and his eyes were filled with tears. "It was the heart," said the policeman; he got up, lifted the plastic cover, but quickly lowered it and covered the face of the deceased, too. I didn't see any blood. The doctor nodded. The policeman, a sergeant, I guess, approached me and expressed his condolences first. Then he continued: "It seems sort of... strange, but I have to do this. Do you know this person?" He turned to the youth and I assented. The sergeant then took out his notebook, asked for an ID and before he looked at it, said: "Nothing happened to the car." I told him that didn't interest me.

"We'll have to perform an autopsy," said the doctor after the sergeant's departure. "I think she had a stroke when the car left the road. The young man over here broke his head on the windshield, then he got out of the car and ran to the phone to call Modra." The doctor blew his nose, pressing his index finger discretely against the left nostril and blew it again. "When we arrived, she was gone." He looked at me. Our eyes met; his were brown, the colour of thin black coffee and seemed tired. We agreed that I could pick Marta up tomorrow evening after the autopsy and then he asked me if I informed the relatives. "She doesn't have any," I said. "Her parents died a long time ago." I knew that Marta had a cousin somewhere in the Spiš region,

but during the eleven years that I have lived with her she had never visited us and they never wrote to each other. "Was she quite alone when you married her?" The doctor asked again. "Yes," I said, "she was alone." The doctor got up, took his glasses from his work coat and wiped them hurriedly on his sleeve. "I'll leave you here..." he whispered. "I have to take a look upstairs," he sighed. "Please, let the receptionist know you're leaving." Then he expressed his condolences. For a while he held my hand in his. It was a soft and hot hand, as if he had a fever. He kept nodding his head and reminded me of the old man in our ward.

But just when I remained alone with the young man for a moment, the doctor returned and approached the young author. "The letter! Did you give him the letter?" He must have disturbed the university student, because the latter gazed at him with his puffed up, wide open, and uncomprehending eyes. "The letter that you kept telling me about, the one I was supposed to remind..." he repeated, but didn't finish.

"The letter..." the young man whispered and looked at me absent-minded. The door banged. The young man's mouth moved, spittle appeared on his lip, but he said nothing.

The doctor waited for a while and I don't know when he left as I was remembering all the beautiful times that I have lived through with Marta, though she has never suspected that. She had no idea that I admired her sincere and passionate search for happiness in this world even though she didn't like me and couldn't stand my eyes.

The young man's eyes were fixed on Marta as he stood uncomfortably with his hands hanging in the air. Suddenly, as if a spasm ran through his body, he rose on his feet and a desperate wail surged out of his throat; he ripped the plastic from the head of the deceased, kissed her hair with his eyes closed, infinitely gently and devotedly. His face, wild with pain, looked childlike and pure. But in the middle of this expression of love he suddenly stopped. He turned to me with horror, backed up to the wall and I thought that he would fall on it. He was lifting his hands, as if surrendering, and again he looked grown up, pressing against the wall. I heard the noise of his elbows against the wall and there was terror in his eyes. I looked at Marta's mouth and on him. Why did he stop? Because of my presence? He moved Marta's head a bit to the left with his caresses. There were dark shades around her closed eyes. It seemed now as if he suddenly betrayed her.

We left the hospital together late in the evening. It was drizzling. In the express train we kept quiet and in Bratislava I took the young man to the station restaurant and ordered two bowls of tripe soup, two small glasses of beer and a shot of rum for each of us.

After the fifth rum, the young man pressed my hand. "I want to tell you everything, everything," he whispered, but I didn't want him to.

"I beg you... I have to tell you all. I have to!" He said violently and loudly. He smiled innocently in the middle of suppressed weeping. He said that he didn't know if Marta really hated me so much, or loved me "somehow in a special way". Apparently he never understood her. She used to sit together with him often lost in thought, without saying anything. Occasionally he found her distressed and when he came she would calm down and it happened that she would fall asleep with her head on his chest. At those moments he would observe her and it seemed to him that she would change from her calm sleep into some sort of worry or even fear. She would press his hand or her mouth would move and once he had a notion of how a crown of white flowers around her head would suit her. That image suggesting her death scared him, he would wake her up and she would only smile then and whisper to him to leave her, for she wasn't sleeping, or even thinking, she was being happy. When they drove in the car for the first time, she had asked him if he knew why it was good to have a car. She didn't wait for an answer before telling him that when in the car a person feels like constantly escaping. When he

asked her why she would want to escape, she told him that he wouldn't understand, and he noted that she smiled in a good-natured way and immediately changed the topic. This didn't satisfy him and he kept on enquiring, but she was absent-minded that evening and asked him if he didn't feel good with her and why would he want to spoil everything. When they were saying goodbye to each other that evening, after their first drive together, she jokingly remarked that if she died first, she would always protect him. He stopped her mouth with his hand, he remembered that exactly, and then she asked, laughing, if he would even remember her when she was no longer there. He had an impression that she had a heart problem, since when they were having an argument about illnesses one day, she let it slip out, remarking that she had spent almost a year and a half in a hospital before getting married to me. I didn't know anything about it, but would have married her despite that.

Then he continued somewhat like this. He reflected if he should break up with Marta. When he reflected about it alone, it seemed to him immoral to steal someone's wife; he felt bad about it, but as soon as he met her, he had no courage to tell her if only because Marta repeated to him her fear that they would part just like that, for no reason, the way they have met. He admitted that he had considered leaving her for "not being able to get to know her", because he had no idea what she was thinking about and considered him an inexperienced boy, though, on the other hand, that was the most beautiful thing about their relationship, since he saw in her his mother. He wondered if Marta didn't behave to him in this "unfathomable" manner in order to "keep" him. But he finally denied that. Maybe she was as sincere with him as she could and what he had asked of her, that "confession from the depth of the soul" she just couldn't provide. Perhaps she didn't play any games with him, but he saw it as "eternal coming together and escaping".

In the evening he decided not to "break up" with her. In the car Marta was reproaching him for not "keeping his promise". He was supposed to bring her some story of his, one that he kept promising to bring for a long time. She was smiling while driving, teasing him. He warned her a bit nervously, but also jokingly, to pay more attention to her driving.

They stopped in Modra. They went to a restaurant and ordered coffee. The place was empty, there were only three men sitting there, looking like office workers returning from a business trip. They were drinking a bottle of wine. They were not drunk. He had an impression that they were satisfied with something, since they didn't seem to be either celebrating, or just having a bottle of wine. Marta excused herself and he reflected if he wasn't an egotist and forcing Marta to "admire" him. He remarked that something like that he would "immediately kill" in himself. He said he didn't know how he focused on the conversation of the three men sitting behind him. They talked about women and one of them was cursing them. He was a thin, skinny man with eyes behind thick glasses. The young man admitted to me that he would have loved to have "destroyed him with his words" for those statements. At that moment Marta returned and he still observed the man. He was very angry with him. Marta asked him what the matter was, but he only said: "Wait." Then he turned to her.

"Tell me about something," she apparently asked him and told him that the coffee made her feel bad. He considered that statement somehow too lofty and he was quiet, under the influence of her loftiness. "Well, tell me something! Do I have to beg you for it?" She smiled and so he began to talk and she adjusted his tie. At that moment he saw her face from close up. She seemed so superior to him and he said somehow absently: "What would happen if we parted?"

He immediately regretted that, took her by the hand and tried to resurrect in her face her former maternal interest in him, the one that seemed to him as her superiority. She kept quietly drinking soda water. He told her how he managed to overcome the "problem of parting", and said he would marry her if she got

a divorce.

They got into the car while he kept asking her questions. Marta concentrated on the driving. Suddenly she turned to him: "I have a letter in my bag, I have to take it to the hospital and give it to him," she smiled at him for a long time, sadly, as if betraying herself with something. "I have to explain something to him," she added and then she checked her hair. She was smiling in anticipation of the journey to come. "So we are not going to be together forever, are we?" she asked him and he tried to talk her out of it.

At that moment the car went into an ordinary skid. Marta closed her eyes. He remembered that. Then he felt the glass on his forehead.

He begged me to pardon him, saying, life didn't have any meaning for him any more, and so on.

I told him that he was wrong, that life had both meaning and significance. "Even now?" He asked, "When you are ill and have lost your...and have lost your..." He didn't finish, but I knew that he meant Marta. He almost shouted. He wasn't shaking with pity and sorrow, but with anger and I felt how close he was to hatred. He even began to swear at me, but I didn't pay any attention to it. I told him that what he was doing wasn't right and that he was betraying himself, since his hatred already suggested that he was interested in life. I asked him if his life stopped being meaningful to him because he lost Marta. He didn't answer me, but said that the letter in which she wanted to explain something to me was lost. He was looking at me as if he were saying this only to test me if I would get angry. I again offered him a cigarette and asked him if I did claim the letter when he brought the matter up. Of course, I didn't wait for an answer and suggested to him to get some sleep, that I would see him home. I told him that the pain would subside by tomorrow and he would see things differently. At first he resisted, but after he agreed, we left the station together with other travellers.

It was already in the morning and I trembled with cold. I was holding the student by his elbow and as we went I noticed a woman who was looking around and saying: "I don't know what's going on." A woman who walked with her agreed and adjusted her kerchief.

Then we set out for the Hlboká Road and the two women walked ahead of us. They probably also went to the student residences.

And as we climbed the hill and felt the first wide wave of dampness from the trees after the thaw and met girls hurrying to the city, somewhere above us, above the crowns of the trees, someone sang a few notes of a tune that mixed with our strides. Then the song died down and it seemed as if the singer watched us, hidden by the height, the branches and the misty day. And suddenly the melody sounded sharper and more penetrating. It was calming, though I couldn't understand it, since I don't know the words of the song and have never heard it before.

And I thought about everything that life brought me.

Everyone loves his wife for some more or else concrete reason, but there are some who love for less definite, or even an indefinite reason. And that reason may have been the fact of having seen her, having met her, that she simply existed.

And that "more definite reason", for which my love for her multiplied, if one could say it like that, was her glorious arrogance. That's what I would call her insistent desire to be happy. Maybe she had guessed from the very beginning that I could ensure her existence and would make no claims on her at all.

Glorious arrogance is what I call her desire for happiness because she dared to make from me a "spring board" to the aims that she hoped would make her happy. That arrogance—whatever we call it—I find interesting; I don't condemn it. It proves that Marta was very unhappy and alone. I tried to suggest with the little that I gave her during her life that things wouldn't make her happy. I don't know if she understood that.

Translated by Peter Petro

Vincent Šikula

IN MIDSUMMER

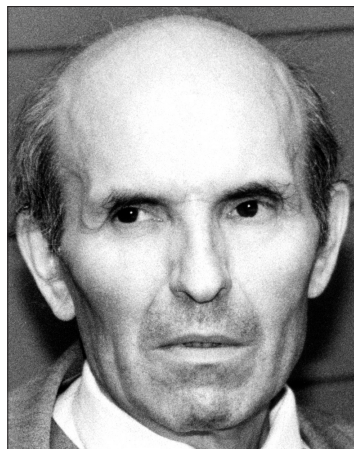


Photo: Peter Procházka

VINCENT ŠIKULA (1936–2001), prose writer, poet, children's books author. The atmosphere of the 1960's had set a fertile ground for the talent of writer Vincent

Šikula. During these years possibilities opened also for translated foreign-language literature. Through Czech translations, works by authors such as Joyce, Proust, Broch and Anderson quickly became the favorites of Slovak young writers. Besides this, there were the close Czecho-Slovak literary contacts, here. It was in Prague (in Naše vojsko publishing house), thanks to a Czech editor, translator and expert on Slovak literature, Emil Charous, that Šikula's book *No Applause at Concerts* (Na koncertoch sa netlieska, 1964) was published in the Czech Republic. At the same time he debuted in Slovakia with a collection of short stories *Perhaps I'll Build Myself a Bungalow* (Možno si postavím bungalov, 1964), featuring the 1960's cult short story *Mandula*. He lived in his home region and in Bratislava, where he had studied at the conservatory, played the horn in the folk ensemble *Lúčnica*, and lived during the last decades of his life. In the 1960's, however, he lived and wrote in Modra, near Bratislava. While in this microcosm, he received stimuli in the form of world

literature and friendships with fellow writers R. Sloboda and V. Bednár. All of Šikula's prose is based in this era (*Ornament*, 1991). In this decade he even wrote down concepts of works which would be published later, always writing drafts of the first pages right in the beginning. In 1965, he had his book for children *The Woodsman Has a Shaving Brush in His Hat* (Pán horár má za klobúkom mydleničku) published. And this range – stories about other people, texts with focus on the authorial subject, and prose with an innocent child-like view of the world (*With Rosarka / S Rozarkou*, 1966) – is present in all of this work. In the 1960's he also wrote poetry. He even wanted to debut with a collection of poems, however the book was not published due to the „predominance of religious motifs“. Even as a prose writer, Šikula remains emotion-oriented, poetic, often metaphorical. The relaxed creative atmosphere of this decade became the emotional core and value base for his entire work.

The sky was clear, birds' feathers were floating in the air, Uncle Bartolomej died.

They found him sitting beside a dry ditch, propped up against the trunk of an apple tree, with his head slumped onto his right shoulder. His eyes were open. At first those who passed by thought he was just resting there. Some people called to him, but they didn't stop, as they were all hurrying to the football match in the next village. On their way back they noticed a little crowd of people gathered at the edge of the road. Only then did it occur to them that Uncle Bartolomej, who was a great fan, had not been at the match.

He was a big brawny fellow. Try and imagine a man with rolled-up sleeves scooping up dough from a deep trough and kneading it on a wooden table until it is ready for the bread basket. A few minutes pass and the dough begins to rise. It's a real miracle, that process where all kinds of cavities, little chambers and empty spaces appear, which are not in fact bread, but which we take so much for granted that we can forgive the bread for them. I suppose that is what Uncle Bartolomej was like. He had a good-natured face, but he would fly into a rage any time, and at such moments he could even go so far as to kick his journeyman. Once, in a fit of rage, he grabbed the long-handled baker's shovel and threw it at an apprentice as if it were a javelin. The boy leapt into the air like the best of athletes and that made his master laugh. He was very temperamental. He liked to joke, but he turned serious very quickly. He did not go to church, he drank a lot; there were times when his mind was full of nothing but trivialities. It's true, he did look after his little family. He sent his son to college and he taught his daughter to resist worldly snares. He did not hit his wife; he didn't even swear at her, but he was unfaithful to her on a number of occasions. He would say that he did everything with the best of intentions, but that devils led him astray, because jolly people were always being led astray by some devilish man or woman.

The priest was very fond of him. Occasionally he came to see him at his bakery; he walked between the wooden racks, tapping

the crust of baked loaves with the knuckles of his right hand. He would try to persuade the master baker to live a respectable life.

The baker would laugh. "I must bake respectable bread. And, apart from you, no one cares how I live." He would then invite him into his room, where they played cards and drank several litres of wine.

"Ah, I've forgotten again," the priest would usually realise only when it was getting late. "I haven't prayed the breviary yet today."

"You keep rattling off the same old things," remarked Uncle Bartolomej. "Do you have to pray every day?"

"Every day," said the priest. "Never mind. I'll come here after the Sunday litany."

In spite of the fact that Uncle Bartolomej was interested in worldly pleasures, while the priest devoted himself mainly to the spiritual life, they got on very well together. If the priest couldn't come to the bakery, Uncle Bartolomej would go to the rectory. They always talked like equals. The priest often recalled the times when he was a seminary student (he used to like playing croquet) and how when he was a theologian (he had said that John Huss was a great man and a great saint), the Reverend, his spiritual adviser, had thrown him out of chapel. Uncle Bartolomej fought in the First World War and was captured by the Russians, where he became a legionnaire. He lived in a converted goods wagon. He travelled right across Siberia and so he knew where the town of Irkutsk lay. He'd got as far as Khabarovsk and had seen the White Guards shoot Czech and Hungarian musicians.

That Sunday – the mass was already over and Uncle Bartolomej had set out for the next village to see the football match – the priest had nowhere to go, so he sat in his front room, which was both his study and the place where he prayed, and he quietly said his prayers. It might be that he wanted to get this everyday duty over and done with as soon as possible, because every now and then his hand would wander to the pocket of his cassock and grope around for a few small coins. He was twice interrupted by the sexton bringing money for a sung mass. (Holy Mass for the family of Jozef and Mária Harenčar, sung). I've got it down. And

when the sexton came a second time, the priest repeated. Yes. It's in the book. The sexton left and only about ten minutes later the death knell rang out.

The priest opened the window and looked into the street.

"Who are they ringing for?" he asked a little boy about four years old, because he happened to be nearest; he was standing in the road and eating an unripe apple.

The boy didn't answer.

The priest gazed out over the village, where nothing in particular seemed to be going on. People were sitting on benches, each in front of their own cottage. Someone was watering cows at the village pump.

The sexton's wife came across the road. "Just imagine, Father, our baker has died."

"How come? I spoke to him only after lunch." He took off his glasses and stuck them in the pocket of his cassock. "You do mean Bartolomej?" he looked at the sexton's wife once more.

"Our baker."

"He's died?"

"They found him over there. Beside the cross. He must have had a heart attack."

The boy took another bite of his apple and then ran off.

The priest fell silent. You could see he was thinking. He was tapping on the window sill with the knuckles of his right hand. "He died an unprovided death!" he said.

"Poor man!" sighed the sexton's wife and crossed herself.

The priest closed the window.

Someone brought the news to the pub. Those who were playing cards stopped; at first they thought someone was having them on. However, when they had assured themselves that it was true, they began to ask for the details.

Two of the older men, one was called Marcel, the other Leopold, stood at the bar, silently drinking to Bartolomej – may he rest in peace. Then they withdrew to a corner, where they found an empty table and sat in silence for a long time.

"Have you heard the news?" asked a young man, a little worse for drink.

They both looked at him.

"Go away!" the one called Marcel retorted and the young man left them alone.

"So there's only the two of us now," said Leopold. Marcel nodded.

Then they talked about several events directly or indirectly connected with Bartolomej and they agreed that whatever way you looked at it, he had not been a bad man – on the contrary, he had been much better than people thought and therefore it wasn't fair of the Lord God to summon him to the next world all of a sudden like that, without allowing him to repent and be given the last rites.

The organist's head appeared around the door. His eyes ran over the people in the pub; he was clearly looking for someone.

"Did you know we won?" someone called out to the teacher from the long table where the jubilant football players were sitting.

The organist muttered something they could not catch and disappeared.

The local bandmaster came in to buy some cigarettes and also hurried off home. He didn't sleep at all that night, but sat at his old harmonium, smoking, while various melodies ran through his head, but none of them seemed sad enough. From time to time he got up and walked about the room, whistling quietly to himself. He found it very annoying that other people's musical ideas kept intruding on his own. He wrestled for a long time with a folk song that seemed ideal for the purpose. He sat down at his instrument and harmonized it quite nicely. But after he had played it through a couple of times, he once more began to feel dissatisfied. A song is a song and what he wanted to compose

was a funeral march. He rummaged through his papers until he found some earlier notes scribbled on one of them.

That would do. He pressed one pedal, then the other, he laid his hands on the keys and the melody flowed from under his fingers, forming what was admittedly a simple, but complete musical idea. By the morning the march was ready. An easy melody, easy instrumentation. He wondered whether it wasn't too rudimentary. But the main thing was that it served its purpose. The *trio* seemed a bit short to him. Never mind. At least the men would learn it quicker. The drum resounded in the pause – dudududum! And once again. He could call it "The Legionnaire's Farewell". Or: "Cemetery, Cemetery". No, we've already had that. "The Last Sigh"? That, too. Someone else should think up a title. The teacher. Or: "Tears and Sorrow". They'd had it all before.

He stepped on the pedal again and played the whole composition another time. He liked it, but he felt a little annoyed that he couldn't think of a name for it. "Bartolomej's"? As he had composed it for Bartolomej, it could be called after him: "Bartolomej's Funeral March."

Ready! He turned out the light and went to lie down.

The funeral was only three days later. The whole village gathered there and even a lot of curious onlookers came from the surrounding settlements.

The priest had a new black cope and the altar boys were wearing clean shirts. The organist excelled himself. He had composed a farewell, the likes of which the village had not yet heard. He mentioned everything: wife, children, bread, love of sport, his brother far away over the sea. Siberia, the converted railway wagon, Irkutsk, Khabarovsk.

My legionary comrades,
Marcel and Leopold by name,
To you too I say farewell...

Both men were standing just behind the priest; they had been drowning their sorrows and now wept out loud.

The organist finished singing. The bearers lifted the coffin and the funeral procession moved on its way. Right at the front an altar boy led the way. He was carrying a cross from which a wide black ribbon fluttered in the breeze. Behind him were the musicians, playing Bartolomej's Funeral March. When they finished, all that was to be heard was the shuffle of feet.

The organist sang the second verse of the psalm *Miserere mei Deus*. At the tail of the procession someone began praying. Only a few women joined in, as the men didn't want to disturb the solemnity of the procession even with prayer.

The organist was about to sing the third verse when the brass band struck up anew.

This was followed by an eight-measure intermezzo and then *Da capo al fine*. The *trio* began in the relative major key.

When the altar boy carrying the cross entered the cemetery, the grave digger hadn't yet finished his task. He'd wanted to make a proper job of it, but as ill luck would have it, about a wheelbarrowful of clayey soil had slipped back into the hole. He shovelled out as much as he could in what time he had and spread the rest out at the bottom. He could see the coffin bearers were already approaching, so he had to climb out of the grave.

After that everything went much as at other funerals. The priest began chanting the Lord's Prayer and everyone joined in. The organist cleared his throat a couple of times and then sang: In the grave you... From somewhere in the distance, maybe from the cemetery gate, the brass band could be heard as it began playing the same song, but a fourth higher and somewhat faster. The organist frowned and stopped singing.

The bearers blinked at each other, stepped up to the coffin and began lowering it carefully into the grave.

The women wept. The priest wiped the perspiration off his forehead with a handkerchief. It occurred to him that he should say a few words to the grieving family, and in fact to all those gathered there. Not that it was the custom. He felt obliged to because of the fact that here was a man who had died without the last rites. But somehow he couldn't concentrate. The brass band had already finished playing and he still didn't know how to begin. The organist bent over towards him and whispered something in his ear. It was nothing inspiring, but it came just at the right moment for the priest.

"Dear believers," he addressed the gathering, "we all knew our Bartolomej here. We know he was not a good Catholic, but we also know that he was a good baker. He didn't go to church, he wasn't interested in divine services, my brothers, but in divine service only that half hour that we spend from time to time, or even every day, in God's temple? The Scriptures tell us that the word of God is like a seed of mustard. What if that word took root in our deceased brother when he was still a child? It grew,

branched out and filled his whole life. His life was like our lives. In it there were joys, laughter, as well as misfortune, suffering and all kinds of injustice, and he, like any one of us, had to accept all the good Lord put in his way. He was in the war and his guardian angel protected him. He had to protect him, because who would have baked bread for us here in Vrbinka? Look, his bakery has been closed for only two days and we have had to look elsewhere for our bread. So we can see what an important role Bartolomej here played among us. I think if the Lord God came to our village and asked our sorrowful gathering to vote on whether Bartolomej's soul should be damned, he would not find one person who would vote in favour. Or do you, my brothers, think that the Lord God is worse than the inhabitants of Vrbinka?" He had nothing more to say. He breathed in deeply and added: "Amen".

People began to disperse. The musicians struck up, playing Kmoch's Sokol march.

Translated by Heather Trebatická

Peter Jaroš

Making FACES

(Extract)



Photo: Archive

PETER JAROŠ (1940), prose writer, playwright, script writer. His first literary works were two short novels, *Afternoon on the Terrace* (Popoludnie na terase, 1963) and *Make Me a Sea* (Urob mi more, 1964) about people living in town. In his novels *Consternation* (Zdesenie, 1965), *Scales* (Váhy, 1966) and a novella in two parts *Journey to Immobility* (Putovanie k nehybnosti, 1967), he showed his inclination towards the philosophy of existentialism and the style of the anti-novel. He wrote about his youthful adventures in the books *Minuet* (Menuet, 1967) and *Return with a Statue* (Návrat so sochou, 1967), *Gory Stories* (Krvaviny, 1970), in his prose memoirs for young people *When You Catch Up With the Dog* (Až dobehneš psa, 1971) and the novella in two parts *Couch Grass* (Pýr, 1971), also in his novel *The Thrice Smiling Darling* (Trojúsmevový miláčik, 1973) as well as in the books of short stories *Skein* (Pradeno,

1975), *The Body in the Herbarium* (Telo v herbári, 1979) and *A Wonderful Trip* (Parádny výlet, 1982). In these he often makes use of elements of absurdity, slapstick comedy, the detective story and horror. The story *Making Faces* (Grimasy) is taken from *Gory Stories*. In his long novel *The Thousand-Year-Old Bee* (Tisícročná včela, 1972), he depicts the lives of Slovaks from the end of the 19th century until after the foundation of the Czechoslovak Republic (1918). *Mute Ear, Deaf Eye* (Nemé ucho, hluché oko, 1984) is a loose sequel to this novel. In the novels *Love Touch* (Lásky hmat, 1988), *Dogs Marry* (Psy sa ženía, 1990) and *The Donated Noose* (Milodar slučka, 1991) he portrays a crisis in human relations. He writes radio plays and is the author of film scripts (*Pacho, the Outlaw from Hybe* – Pacho, hybský zbojník, 1973; *The Thousand-Year-Old Bee* – Tisícročná včela, 1983).

I now have a stick to lean on and I am walking along a dusty path. I have reconciled myself to the chaos of the physical world, although I have not yet managed to become completely indifferent to it, and that is why I am walking. I don't even know where I am going and I am dying not to let it interest me. I am not trying to reach any particular goal, although I often used to say that any goal was better than none. Now I am just walking... Yes, I have tried to learn and I have read the Bible, Homer, Socrates, Aristotle, Indian epics and the Upanishads. Kant, Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx, Lenin, Engels, Bakunin, Mao Tse-tung, Lukács, Lev Tolstoy, de Sade, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, Janko Kráľ. Makovicky, Schopenhauer, Husserl, Freud, Kafka, Heidegger, Jaspers, Camus, Sartre, Thomas Aquinas, Spenser, Mickiewicz, Soloviev, Herder, Pushkin, Griboyedov, Belinsky, Škarvan, Masaryk, Teige, Croce,

Bucharin, Bergson, Kosmas, Radhakrishnan, Joyce, Khlebnikov... But I'm probably a fool, because I have stopped asking: who am I? why am I? and where am I going?... I have stopped thinking these questions are important, because I haven't found a satisfactory answer to them either in books or in myself. It's enough for me to know that I am and that I am walking along with a gnarled stick in my hand. The road is long enough for me not to reach its end. I don't know whether it is sensible or silly, but the quality of my actions doesn't interest me. Nor do I ask: what do I know? Although, as some people claim, a question like that is more thoroughly sceptical than the statement: I know that I know nothing....

As I go along, I make faces and amuse myself imagining what I must look like. I let the corners of my mouth drop and I have the impression I look like a miller's-thumb, but when I also

narrow my eyes, I immediately become a fox. I open my mouth wide, I stick out my tongue and I am a panting dog. I open my eyes, lower my neck and I moo like a cow.... No, this is not an attempt at metempsychosis, I am just trying to make myself look the way I sometimes see myself.... However, I don't stop walking, I tread quietly on the soft dust, stirring it up with the soles of my shoes.... And although I don't ask: what do I know? and although I don't claim: I know that I know nothing! nevertheless, there are times when I cannot rid myself of the suspicion: I am a fool! and that one thing sometimes spoils the pleasure I get from my own grimaces....

Even though natural religion, the religion of the law and the religion of the spirit, have tried to get the better of me ever since I was little, I forget fairly quickly, and that is a good thing... Of course, even things I have forgotten often come back to me, but not for long.... I am always saved by these grimaces, which I can't even see, because I have no mirror, I just imagine them....

I have no idea what went before the legendary history of humankind, what went before archeology, alchemy, chemistry, astrology and astronomy, or where mythology, poetry, philosophy or science are leading, but I have discovered that grimaces can be made with your whole body or a part of it... I simply have to crouch and hop on both feet to be a sparrow. It's a rather exaggerated grimace, perhaps, but it's good enough. Playing at being charitable looks less forced. It's enough to take a piece of bread to the square and feed the pigeons, who could manage without it anyway.

At times it has been possible to use the rights of the state to abolish the rights of the individual, or to benefit a dictator by oppression, but it was probably not of much service to the order of the world, which is said to derive from Cain. Not even of such service as my latest face, "the Philanthropist," which was my only companion on at least one quiet evening when the mist was so low it almost touched my head. I lie under a tree on a tuft of sweet-smelling straw and I tell myself: I'll take off my shoes, let my feet rest; then I will get up barefoot and before I fall asleep, I'll taste those strawberries nearby... But I don't do anything; my unreliability no longer grieves me. Laziness is the only aspect of my character on which I can always rely.

I am thinking, I only think when I make faces, and at that moment I am not myself and I'm not too happy about it. What I feel even more sorry about is that my thinking lags so far behind my intuition, which does me the favor of visiting me only on exceptional occasions... I'm probably fated to remain a fool, although fate is not exactly what I believe in....

But in the morning, when I wake up and have a drink of water, I take my stick, breathe in the damp air and move on once more. I walk, supporting myself with my stick and making faces until I meet someone. At such times I have to restrain myself and take an equal part in the meeting....

I see a hay wagon standing in a sloping meadow of cut grass. On either side of it there are about fifteen cocks of dry hay. The cows have been unyoked and are tied to the shaft. They are waving their tails, shaking their heads, driving off the bluebottles and gad flies. The farmer, a robust-looking man, thrusts his long fork into a pile of hay and swings it into the wagon over the hay rack. The handle creaks and cracks in his hands, but it doesn't break. The pole to weigh down the hay is lying a little way off. I sum up the situation at a glance: the farmer can't cart away the hay all at once by himself, and so I go towards him. He stops loading when he catches sight of me, sticks the fork in the ground in front of him and stands there, legs apart.

"Where now, where to?" he asks me before I have a chance to greet him. He is still smiling when he pushes his hat higher up his forehead with his index finger.

"To the river, fishing, good morning," I say. In fact we are not unlike: we both have pants, unbuttoned shirts, tanned chests and hats on our heads. Only I have a coat slung over my shoulder and a gnarled stick in my hand.

"It's going to be hot and sticky," says the farmer, "and there may be a shower before evening," he looks up and his face immediately seems to reflect the blue of the sky.

"I see you're getting the hay in," I keep up the conversation.

"Aaa, it's already dry," he points to the hay. "it's started to snap."

I look at the hay, too. Most of the haycocks are all heath grass, but two above the wagon are bristly fescue: they come from the very top of the meadow, where it is driest. In such places the sun burns the sparse grass yellow. However, I can also discern two haycocks of bur-reed that must have grown at the lower end of the meadow, near the ditch. It is long and sharp, it has turned brown in the sun and it'll be for the sheep.

"I'll help you," I offer. He hesitates a moment, rests his arms on the handle of the fork and looks at the cows, which have begun to ruminate. Saliva is dripping from their mouths and they are taking no notice of us.

"As you like," he says finally. I quickly throw aside my stick and put my coat down beside it. I roll up the sleeves of my shirt and wait. He is staring at me, but kindly, he's weighing me up.

"You could get up into the wagon," he says, "it needs pressing down..."

I nod and scramble up into the cart from the shaft end. I wade into the hay, pushing it down. The farmer begins to throw whole forkfuls in my direction. He sticks the fork into a haycock and lifts half of it at one time, without so much as a groan. He just breathes out, blowing away the dust that has settled under his nose. The hay is dry and flies all over the place. I have my work cut out to keep up with him as I spread out the hay and press it down well. I shove it under the front and rear poles, push it out into the chains at the sides, but it is soon on a level with the hay rack. Now I begin to arrange the first layer from the front. One forkful to the right, the second to the left, the third in the middle, I cross them over so they hold together.... When I glance down, I see there are three more haycocks in the meadow. There'll be enough for another layer....

Now the wagon is full, the meadow empty. The farmer uses his rake to tidy up the wagon from all sides and he hands me the pole to keep the hay in place. We pull it really tight. He then throws the hay fork and rake up to me and I stick them firmly in the hay, so they won't get lost on the way, and I can jump down. I take a critical look at the cart. It seems a bit fat, I've put a bit too much on the sides. Otherwise...

"As if you'd been doing it all your life," the farmer remarks with a smile.

"You learn all kinds of things in your life...."

"Let's have a smoke."

We sit down side by side on the grassy stubble, at a distance from the wagon. The farmer pulls out his cigarettes, offers me one and immediately lights it for me. I have been sweating, and the dust and specks of hay are beginning to prick my skin. But I feel fine. I blow the black snot out of my nose, squeezing it between two fingers and I feel even better.

"On holiday?" the farmer asks me.

"Yes, sort of," I say.

"Not too many come here yet," he says, meaning tourists. "There are more fish here, too...."

"I don't know, I haven't tried catching them here."

"Where's your fishing line?" he inquires, turning towards me.

"I haven't got one, I can manage with my hands." He nods his head approvingly. I watch him as he unhurriedly presses his cigarette stub into the soil with his sinewy hand. He looks

around at the cows and gets up.

"I must hitch them up," he says. I follow him over to the wagon and hold the yoke for him. The cows are quiet, they don't twist and turn, even though the insects keep worrying them. The farmer takes another look around the cart and then retrieves his knapsack from the shaft.

"Here you are, you helped me," he says and hands me a large bit of fat and a slice of bread wrapped in a greasy piece of paper.

"Thank you!"

"Enjoy it!" he says and cracks his whip. The cows strain at the creaking yoke and the wagon moves forward.

"Don't you need me to hold on to it?" I ask.

"No, the path goes uphill here," he replies. "Goodbye!" he calls out and then he doesn't look around again until much later.

I remain standing where I am for a while, watching the wagon move away. Then I bend down, pick up my stick and sling my coat over my shoulder. I feel sadder than I did in the morning, but I then think of the water and the fish. I step out...

I am alone once more. Once more I occupy myself by making faces. I pull out my lips, slick out my teeth and maybe I look as if I am smiling. When I sniff, I must move my mouth and so I smack my lips at the same time. I walk on and it is like groping my way. Do you know the four Vedas? Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda and Atharvaveda. The most important of all is Rigveda. The Indo-Europeans brought these songs to India from their previous home as their most precious treasure. Someone called on people or ordered them to collect them, in order to preserve them. They did it when in their new homeland they came into contact with a large number of worshippers of other gods. That's what they say. This suddenly struck a chord with my recollection of the farmer. The farmer, his cows, his wagon, his hay. Did it happen long ago? Did it happen at all? Am I not repeating to myself an old fairytale? When I walk along, I make faces, I imagine and then all kinds of things occur to me. Have I invented a fairytale farmer, or did I really meet him? I've got nothing to point to, nothing to prove it, even my own conscience has often betrayed me...!

Like Epicurus, I tell myself: don't worry about your funeral, and so I walk on to the waterside. I don't worry about things that are finite. But even so, the water is cold, especially at altitudes like these, and in that water I will throttle a fish. I will catch it by its fins, pull it out on to the bank and hit its head on a rock. Or I'll break its spine. I can't say to the fish: "Don't be afraid, nothing terrible awaits you when you are no longer alive," or: "Death does not concern us, because when we are, death is not, and when death is, we are not," because the "fish doesn't understand. The fish is dumb, it suffers, if it suffers..."

Something bumps against the small of my back. I fumble around for my coat pocket and discover a lump. I pull it out and, goodness me, it's the fat and slice of bread. I feel pleased in spite of myself; I bless the farmer for his gift, because it is now the only proof not only of his kindness, but also of his existence. I hunt around among the odds and ends in my pants pocket and I pull out a knife. A cheap pocket knife, but sharp. I am not, or at least I think I am not, an egoist, a pleasure-seeker or a cynic, but the moment has come when I can think only of myself. I sit down on my coat in the grass and begin to eat. I nibble at the fat, the bread, I chew, masticate, smack my lips. My free moment, my moment for taking in food. I wallow in the intense enjoyment it gives me, as if it were the goal of a blissful life. I relish the pleasure so much, that in the end I feel ashamed. If Epicurus were here, he would tell me: "Ugh, you wretch! Happiness in life cannot be found in constant drinking and nightly reveling, nor in intercourse with boys and women, nor in eating fish and other things offered by a rich table, but sober

judgement, which seeks reason; for every choice and for every refusal and repudiates deceptive suppositions, which fill the soul with the utmost chaos." I am even more ashamed when I realize that just a moment before I had longed for fresh fish far more than anything else. In fact I'm horrified, shivers run down my back, at moments when I.... I am he who wants nothing, neither a meaning, nor an aim, who does not want to be either good or bad, who doesn't want to stay anywhere or get anywhere, and a moment ago I had wanted nothing more than to get to the water and to the fish.... This confirms once again that, although I desire nothing in my mind, in fact I long for everything I want to give up, even a good rest beside the cool waters. But what can be done, I have already betrayed myself so often, that all that remains is for me to quickly forget. It really is impossible to live with contradictions like these, especially if one is afraid to like one's own life, and so I don't throw away the fat, but I finish eating it and I don't even relinquish the idea of resting at the waterside.

The valley above me runs into a ravine. The valley below me descends to a river. There are the marshy places, there are the soft damp spots overgrown with dock leaves. There the willows have grown strong and their supple canes criss-cross each other in all directions. Only there does the ground squelch under your soles and only there can drunken consciousness, a part of mystical consciousness, find a cool place to rest. And maybe just there it is possible to achieve with James that divine physical rapture. I focus my gaze on that place, I shout out loud (and insanely), I just can't wait...

But first, what torment it is to enter this oasis... And perhaps it only seems an oasis. Happiness demands suffering as its condition. I am setting out on a journey, I am delirious. I would like to get from the unreal to the real, from the darkness to the light, from death to immortality... As if in my imagination I were already reaching for the absolute...

And here is a little beetle! He is traveling in the opposite direction from me. I bend over him, I tell him: come with me, because I want to have a companion. He trots on stubbornly. I turn him around, poke him with my thumb, but he traces a half circle and returns the same way. He doesn't want to! I have to lift him up with a handful of earth and shove him in my pocket. He may bite his way through the material to my thigh, but by then we will already be beside the water, among the dock leaves.

The absolute? I am taken aback. Not long ago I didn't want anything, and now I want everything. Is it really only possible to long for extremes? I am forgetting, however, because I want to, I am forgetting the beetle in my pocket. Is it really so easy, only thirty steps and I will be beside the water? Look at my grimaces... I make the journey more difficult by crawling, I tear my trousers, dirty my shirt, graze my palms and knees until they bleed. What does it matter, after all, I am going to the water and there I will wash. Who knows, maybe the water has the power to heal!

The dock leaf hides the sun, but cannot stop it shining. When it waves in the breeze, it fans my face. When it dips, bent by the wind, it strokes me. The ground is soft, the water rises. A person longs for nothing more than for himself...

Here is the bank already! The reflection in the water can be seen, its coolness felt, its fragrance smelled. On the bank is a dead fish with a dead eye. I crawl over to it as to a mirror. I want to see myself in it, my grimace... I bend over it, searching for an image, and I see nothing more, only death.... My head drops, the fish eye penetrates mine. What will it be like to breathe one's last?

Translated by Heather Trebatická

Vlado Bednár

STRANGE PEARS WITH A STRANGE TASTE

(Extract)



Photo: Archive

VLADO BEDNÁR (1941–1984), prose writer, author of children's books. *Walking to an Unfamiliar Town Guided by Sense* (Do neznámeho mesta kráča podľa citu) is the name of Bednár's short story published in the Czech magazine Signál 64, whose editor was Emil

Charous, an expert on Slovak literature. That same year in 1964, the satire-oriented prose writer, humorist and ironist Vlado Bednár debuted with a book. With its critical view of Slovakia of that time, *Move Out of My Way* (Uhni z cesty) was a daring book, almost a practical joke. After completing his studies of journalism at the Philosophical Faculty at Comenius University, he worked as editor in several magazines for youth. Here he came into contact with the written word in its live form, with the busy life of young people and bohemian life. In a short period of time during the 1960's he published books with a distinct authorial view: *Strange Pears With a Strange Taste* (Divné hrušky s divnou chuťou, 1966) is a critical generational view of the world, and *Windmills* (Veterné mlyny, 1967), too, roots for youth and courage. He also wrote a book for teenagers *Stop Ticking Me Off* (Nebrnkaj mi na city, 1967). It is interesting that besides the female writers already established in children's literature, at this time also male writers start to appear in the genre. Their view of the world of adults and teenagers is boyish, and bold, disrupting the idyllic,

sometimes education-oriented effect of these books. *Adventures of Three Smart Alecks* (Dobrodružství troch mudrlantov, 1974) is a book of stories for younger children. Vlado Bednár forever remained a disobedient boy, rebelling against convention and against conforming to circumstances. He was friends with woodsmen, shepherds, tourists, climbers and mushroom pickers and he remained that way up until his tragic death. The 1960's gave his work a positive charge that lasted through the 1970's and 1980's. His creative effort peaked in the novel *Egg in a Barn* (Vajce v stodole, 1978); in the story he escapes from Bratislava to the country. It is not an escape in the true sense of the word, it is about the return to nature, to human nature, to freedom. Vlado Bednár brought satire and irony, until then exclusively appearing in magazine articles, into Slovak prose. He harmonized them with a deeper glance at the world, and made them equal to lyrical and reflexive elements, which started appearing considerably in Slovak prose of the 1960's and thus contributed to the broadening of the genre and to the enrichment of Slovak literature.

I often read and heard about pain, about how it feels and so on. There is apparently a lot of pain in the world. That it could be sudden, silent and swift, like a whip lash and similar comparisons. The pain is swift, that is always repeated: he suddenly felt pain, he felt hurt, he felt the stabbing, the pain flooded his body.

I didn't feel a thing, let alone a stabbing; my blood just somehow began to vanish from my body, from my head and my arms, disappearing somewhere inside of me. There was simply no stabbing. At least that's how I explained it to myself; a bit later, I felt like I had no more blood left in my body, it all bunched up in a ball around my heart. The worst thing about it was that I really couldn't breathe for a while. That's interesting. Interesting, as I was focusing on my self, my feelings, and not at all on what had caused it. Little Gita must have noticed the vanishing of my blood, she took me by the hand and her hand was incredibly hot and sweaty. Or maybe my hands were dry and cold, I can't tell now.

I experienced it once before, but then it wasn't as bad. Marcel, a Moravian, who used to sleep in the bunk below me, fell out of the troop transporter right on his face. The blood was pouring out of his nose and mouth and I felt sick. But not as bad as now. She touched me, took me by the hand with her sweaty hand and I began to perceive things around me again and I felt a bit of vertigo. My first reflex was protective, I tried to smile at her and managed a great grimace, as my jaw refused to cooperate, being completely, terribly stuck. Frozen jaw, interestingly enough, began to thaw. And I didn't even realize how, but I began to babble some nonsense like: "Smile, because only those who smile are happy and you have to smile and sing and live

cheerfully; and he who makes a sour face..." anything that my head could think of rolled off my tongue. That helped me, just that, nothing else.

"But it's been three months since she and I... The last time I came home on leave from the military service. That's when it all got screwed up... you know about that. Since then, we would meet only by chance... Why should it be me to go there now? Why me..."

„Milan!“

Everything I said wasn't true, I wanted to light a cigarette and forgot that I had one going already, in my left hand. I began to pay close attention to everything, everything that Little Gita was saying. It was easy for her, she's known about it since this morning, she went to their apartment, she was over it already, and now she was on my case, and didn't give me any rest; why exactly me?

"Tell them your Mom had broken her arm or leg, leg is better, invent something, anything! And why couldn't you tell them the truth? Are you embarrassed by it?"

It's good that at least she told me about it, this Little Gita, a bearable chick. You are a good girl, Little Gita, though I've never particularly liked you, but it's really great that nobody told me in a creepy, corpse-like voice: „Dear beloved,“ or something.

"I'll go get that bouquet, we'll buy one together, that should be enough; and then we'll talk about money. You just go and don't think too much about it. And don't be late."

"It's a bit too much for me."

"Come on, you are a man!"

* * *

“Come on, you’re a man, you’re a man!” As if a man had no right to cry in a corner. Mrs. Lizoň was waiting only for me; I signed the receipt and put the envelope in my pocket. Then I took the money out again, counted it, and put it away again. I realized that I counted it without finding out how much there was; was I really losing it? Everyone in the office was back at work, they were joking and a festive mood ruled. My chin began to shake in front of the boss, I took out a hundred-crown bill and gave it to him.

Half an hour earlier we were all sitting there together, waiting for the money, talking. Mrs. Lizoň was ten minutes late, we were impatient and Mrs. Gertrude, the one with the ponderous laughter was sitting next to me, painting her nails red. „I know,“ she winked at me and chirped: „Clean money for clean hands, right?“ Yes, and then Peclinovský and Leško started about the party that afternoon at Luxor. I know I was counting because I had to invite them all out for wine drinking; it was my first payday since I had returned from the military service, there were twelve of us, but many would go home to their families right away and, say, six might stay. They say Mr. Vozák likes to drink, I wondered how much would that cost me, so that’s why I counted. And then they paged me to go down to the reception, saying: “You have a visitor!” I wondered if that was some kind of practical joke.

It was no joke, Little Gita stood there. My God, I even remember that a collar stood out of her blue spring coat wrinkled on the right side, she smoked like a Turk, always only *Marica* filters and I smoked the *Partisans*, or *Bystrice*. I remember precisely how she stood there and how out of breath I was from running down the stairs and how I asked her if something had happened; otherwise, why would she come? And she was silent for a moment and then said in a formal voice: “Something had happened.” I remember everything.

Here, everyone calls our boss Lollipop, but only behind his back. He constantly grooms his hair and they say he wears a hair net at home, and now he helplessly played with my hundred-crown note in his hand. “You know, Sir, this money is for the wine,” I told him about my Mother’s broken leg, so what was he doing playing with that bill, was it not enough?

“But comrade Polgár, dear Milan, what am I supposed to do with it? It isn’t done like that.”

“So then send someone out to get some wine and that’ll do it. I really have to see my Mother.”

“Maybe we could postpone it? What do you think if we postpone? We can’t have a party without you.”

His helplessness helped me a bit; I can speak calmly now, as if nothing had happened. “Nothing’s going on!” Macháček used to roar in the hall during the combat alert and then rushed down the stairs with his machine gun, shouting, “Nothing’s going on!” and ran as his mess tin fell apart and banged on the tiles. Yes. In the stairwell, I leaned my head against the cold iron banister. Somebody was shaking it while climbing the stairs. I recovered, thinking: “Don’t make any scenes, man,” and ran downstairs, happy that someone was shaking the banister. I was glad nobody caught me in the hall, near the banister, as I silently mourned.

* * *

I knew this wasn’t black colour, but the sales clerk in the shop, she kept insisting it was black and anyway, I wouldn’t get black anywhere else in the city. I hate to spend a long time shopping; I take the first thing they put in my hands. I find it embarrassing to wait for an hour by the counter and search for things, examining their quality and so on. In front of the store, I checked the tie, taking it out of its wrapping, since I couldn’t believe it was black. Of course, it wasn’t; in the daylight, its repulsive

greenness looked poisonous and hideous. Those neon lights in the store! And even more the sales clerk, the one who told me “Dear Sir,” she did put one over me. Well, may Allah give her light slippers, I cursed her; I could have ripped her apart, but I didn’t go back, I’m not like that. It would have been ridiculous to go back there and buy another tie. Other stores aren’t opened yet; I will have to wear the piggish green, since they tricked me.

“Out of the question!” said Little Gita who was already waiting for me at the corner as if we were on a real date, except that she was carrying a bunch of greenery wrapped in white paper. She didn’t like my tie, she kept protesting, she was ready to return to the store, the practical soul.

“What difference does it make to Alena whether I wear green or black? It’s all the same.”

“But listen Milan, you can’t go there like that!” We headed to Little Gita’s boyfriend who had a black tie, he had everything, and he could lend it to me, if he were at home. Hurry doesn’t go well with a black suit; interesting: whenever I wear black it always somehow works out that I have to hurry, people stare at us, but who cares? We ran through the little square where stone boys pursue equally stone geese; it’s supposed to be a fountain, but for the last two years it turned into a garbage container for cigarette boxes and tickets from public transport. I felt like tying the green tie on one of the stone pursuer’s neck; it could have been a heck of a picture. I suddenly realized that from the department store to here I forgot to think about dear Alena, to think about Alena with intensity, to concentrate on her.

* * *

“Listen, what does one do during a funeral? I’ve never been to a funeral in my life.”

“Well, people sing and so on... And they pray, what else would they do? But mostly sing.”

* * *

In a taxi I felt like a member of the golden youth. It was a Tatra 603 limo, I wore a fancy black suit with a vest; I was relaxing in the back seat, though at first I felt a bit unsure of myself. Driving around in a cab isn’t too shabby. I don’t always take a taxi; this was only my second time. Tatra 603. I spent most of the time looking at the taximeter, how furiously the crowns added up, even when we stopped and we had to stop on five crossroads.

We quite settled down in there, I only didn’t know if one could smoke; there was an ashtray, but no, just to be safe, we turned to memories. But only very carefully; maybe Little Gita was afraid, too, that it might be too sad. Who knows if her memories have such a big subtext, she might not know of many events. A whole bunch of them: once, behind the Modra range we saw a fantastic deer and everything around that, the hike to get there, the whole day, the rain, how we were drenched and how I spent two weeks in sick bed as the chill turned to a tonsillitis and my Mother told me to get the tonsils finally taken out. That was when Alena came to our house for the first and the last time. The memories are always for a single person only. Even if I explained for two days, still I couldn’t explain that rain precisely and that was only a short excerpt. I’m sure Little Gita has a bunch of memories that she doesn’t want to and can’t express.

We turned onto a dirt road up the valley. The driver speeds up, trying to get there fast. How much should I tip him? In front, a few people in black appeared, and then they were on the side of the car and suddenly behind us. They ogled the car, as they had to make way in a dusty grass. It occurred to me that Válek, the motocross champion, must have been quite a guy to handle such bumpy roads.

"Over there is her mother, the one in that hat. You see her? And the man in the back, now you can't see him, is her dad. You see him? The one far in the back. Can you see him?"

I didn't notice anyone, we passed by very quickly, I would love to have my own car, or at least a motorbike.

"The one in the very back? I see him now."

We had to wait for them in front of the cemetery. I should have tipped him more than two crowns; I had no idea if I was supposed to introduce myself to her parents.

"Of course you have to introduce yourself to them! We are carrying the bouquet with us, we'll take part in the whole funeral, they must know who we are!"

Lucky Little Gita was here; she knew how to deal with everything, what should and what shouldn't be done. I was pacing in front of the gate to and fro, smoking like a seven-headed dragon and when I passed the gate I could see inside. Some people on the right to the entrance were digging holes; those were graves. I had to smile, though I shouldn't have. A panel used in the city to advertise events when attached to a pole, covered one of the holes. On the panel was a drawing of a trumpet and a sign: "Come to the morning dance in the PKO," and something else in small letters. Funny, a grave covered by a panel like this; it had never occurred to me to go to the PKO dance in the morning. "What if a Dixieland band played at my funeral? Yes, the Dixieland band called the Traditional will play at my funeral and no more discussion! And there will be

drinking. And also dancing, on some flat surface, and those who cry will be thrown out of my funeral!"

"That's what you are saying now!" "I'm not kidding. My funeral will be accompanied by the Dixieland band."

I took off my coat and carried it on my arm. They were all in black and my coat was light and I felt like I was scarring them like a ghost wearing a white bedspread, when I had only this one day and didn't have time to borrow anything. Nothing was going on yet, but the following didn't have to happen: from around the corner, a crowd of young girls from the residences rushed towards us. I knew them all; they were Alena's fellow students. They recognized me and stared at me. As if I had no right to come here, or something. As if each of my socks was of a different colour, or something. As if my fly was opened, or something. They were whispering. I approached Alena's mother. I've never seen her before. She didn't look like Alena at all. Though I've been dating Alena for a very long time, I've never seen her till now. Little Gita had to badger me ten times and tell me over and over what to say, but I didn't listen to her. The two didn't resemble each other at all; who knows if Alena would become so fat later on. I mumbled something, offering condolences, but I didn't know how to do it and so was glad when she finally offered me her hand and I had to keep looking at her black lace that was sawn into her décolleté, covering it up to the neck, and her neck was so maternally white with freckles as is usual with women.

Translated by Peter Petro

Poem is a Unification of Man with the Secret

Interview with Milan Rúfus, by Dana Podracká

MILAN RÚFUS (born in 1928), poet, essayist, author of children's books, translator. The work of Milan Rúfus is one of the most expressive poetic phenomena in Slovak literature. It has achieved a unique unity of life and poetry. Rúfus tries to change the indifferent world to a world of humanity. He is a poet of unusual strenght who never accepted the regime of the communist totality. In his poetry and essays, he has reflected first of all the moral crisis of today's man against the background of the crisis in today's civilization.

DANA PODRACKÁ: Your collection of poems *Fidelity* (*Vernost*) came out last year. You have my respect. "One who is unfaithful in small matters, will also be unfaithful in the great ones". / Lk 16,10 / We encounter infidelity in great matters quite often; in politics and in relationships. Infidelity in small matters, however, is not so important to us. What are the smallest kinds of infidelity that actually count?

MILAN RÚFUS: I think it will be best if we start with – coming back; to the quote from Vladimír Holan – the quote which served as a base in my understanding of fidelity.

"And even though at times I had visions without revelations, I was so faithful that I became a witness."

Holan defines poem as a kind of revelation in this passage. I can only attest to that. He comes to know art through intuition.

A poem made solely from words reminds me of Potiphar's wife who was left only with Joseph's cape – Joseph himself, escaped her. Holan admits that he, too, sometimes created poetry only as an act of will. But he was so faithful to his desire for the secret that in the end he, at least, became its witness. And this is also a way to write a good poem.

This Holan-esque passage surprised me in a strange way. As if the

poet had said it for and to me. I accepted the principle of fidelity not only in connection with poetry but also in life. It has one flaw, though: fidelity to mistakes and the consequent fanaticism.

DANA PODRACKÁ: I consider you to be a mystic. What about you? Do you feel you the mystic inside you?

MILAN RÚFUS: I am a human being. In a very interesting book *Denatured Animals*, the French writer Vercors regards man's need for myth to be the essential characteristic that separates humans from animals. And, again, I am a human being.

DANA PODRACKÁ: I read *St. John of the Cross* again, not so long ago. When reading certain parts I thought of you. I thought of your spiritual song, your climb on Mt. Carmel, your dark night, and your live fire of love. Saints resemble each other in their union with God. Is poem a sign of this union?

MILAN RÚFUS: Poem is a unification of man with the Secret and it calls this Secret different names. One of them is God.

DANA PODRACKÁ: You say: to be simple. Does not God, himself, use the words of simplicity and place them into a soul pure enough to accept them?

MILAN RÚFUS: God's words are simple and effective. It is a language without words. The inviolability of the link between

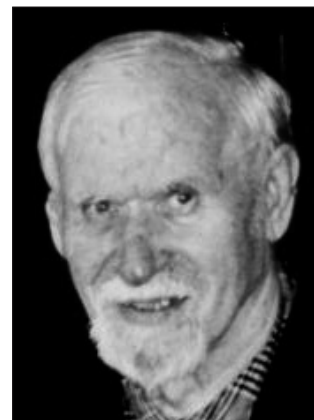


Photo: Milan Richter

cause and consequence is the language of God's righteousness, for instance.

DANA PODRACKÁ: *Let's go back to Fidelity (Vernost'). Three times Holan and the Bible once – as a motto. Do you have your own dark nights with Holan as he had with Hamlet?*

MILAN RÚFUS: How did I come into contact with Holan and Czech poetry altogether? Sometimes even the ugliest hen lays a beautiful egg.

I finished my studies at the Department of the Slovak language in 1952. Those were the peaking years of Stalinism. I was offered an assistant's position in this department and I accepted it. However they made me secretary of the department. It was as it had been in guilds, when the youngest apprentice had to help the master's wife wash diapers. Bureaucracy was the master at that time. Memo after memo. Plans were being set for the semester, for the year, for five years, even ten. I was desperate. Then I was saved by an offer of a two-year research stay for the study of Czech literature from the Ministry of Education. I took it immediately. I concentrated on Czech poetry which has always been better than their prose. That was it. And since I was born in the community of Lutherans in Northern Slovakia in times when they used the Bible of Kralice at mass, I was quite familiar with the language. Twice a year I was entitled to a study stay in Prague. If Hemingway had called his stays in Paris a moveable feast then Prague was such a feast for me. Failing to notice Holan was like failing to notice Mt. Gerlach in the High Tatras. But I never had the courage to stop by Kampa and ring his doorbell. I have never seen him in person but I can still sense him.

There is also something else that links our lives. I have my Zuzanka and he had his Kateřina – a daughter with Down's Syndrome. She lived for twenty-four years.

This, too, is a part of my Holan-esque *Fidelity*.

DANA PODRACKÁ: *I love this part from Holan: "I lived for man and his drama. There where a dual being is waiting and alone." In post-modernism, the opinion that a poet is a multiple personality, started to appear. Is it so?*

MILAN RÚFUS: A poet encompasses all human beings. Good and bad. Sometimes they bring him joy, sometimes sorrow, love or hatred. And within himself the poet has to pay for this hatred.

DANA PODRACKÁ: *Does not the fact that Nietzsche's prophecy: God is dead, is starting to fulfill, sadden you?*

MILAN RÚFUS: I have always thought Nietzsche to be a bit harsh and it seems as if he took pleasure in this harshness. History was my minor in college. I was intrigued by the characteristics of

societies in times when history decided to send them to the junkyard. The loss of myth was the first syndrome of their upcoming departure. And then there was the related hypertrophy of sex.

DANA PODRACKÁ: *It is said that God loved the Jews the most because, out of all the nations, they felt His presence the most. It is an attribute of a mystic experience. Do you feel God's presence sometimes? Like Pascal in his Night of Fire.*

MILAN RÚFUS: I talk to Him as if He was my neighbor. Not just thank you and be praised. God is not conceited, wallowing in pleasure when praised. There are so many controversial things on Earth that it seems that they are its essence. And so I say to Him: "Did it have to be? Couldn't it be any other way, Lord?"

DANA PODRACKÁ: *What is your view on the new role of woman in the society?*

MILAN RÚFUS: The patulent tree of Christianity planted into the Judaic base has its roots in the soil of the Near East and it has accepted its traditions in this matter. –Taceat mulier in ecclesia. Let the woman be quiet in an assembly. I saw this in the Italian countryside near Naples. A man and a woman went to work in the field. He was walking first with a cigarette in his mouth, holding a stick. She went behind him hunched under the heavy sack of tools and food. My Italian colleague explained it this way: Here in the south a man can be idle all day long but he cannot loaf around at night." What to do with this...? We have to forget it and move closer to humanity.

DANA PODRACKÁ: *Could we say that your relationship to Zuzanka is Love, which hurts in order to bring love back?*

MILAN RÚFUS: It could be described by these words. I will answer with a poem.

And Zuzanka, again

And again, it is here.
It is here again and anew.

Tell me, little girl,
are there words still,
which I have not said?
Are there such words of love,
withheld by your and my
difficult fate?

There are no more such words,
and will not be.
Because only love
can rebel against destiny.

With just its touch,
the bull inside softens.

And unpretty things
Will become pretty.

Translated by Saskia Hudecová

TRANSLATING MILAN RÚFUS

When it was first suggested to me that I might like to translate Slovakia's most important living poet, Milan Rúfus, I hesitated for a moment. I had by then published some twenty volumes of Czech poetry, but only one of a Slovak poet (*The Ground beneath Our Feet: Selected poems by Miroslav Válek*; Bloodaxe Books, 1996). Moreover, some experts might say that Válek's poetry is more in the Czech tradition (the Mikulášek school) than in the Slovak one. I had, over the years, translated a handful of Slovak poems – but that was different from immersing oneself in the work of a poet for a representative volume. And as soon as I looked more closely at Rúfus's work I was gripped by its power and challenged by its complexity. I had no problem with the language. The difficulty about translating Milan Rúfus's poetry lies in its multi-layered nature. Beneath the textual meaning there is always a mysterious densely-textured level – sometimes of personal rather than ecclesiastical religiosity, sometimes a half-uttered belief in the moral mission of the poet. Every translator of poetry knows that such stratified poetry is

infinitely more difficult to translate – especially into a "sober" language such as English. He must try to provide a faithful rendering of the "surface layer", the actual text of the poem, yet with a choice of words or phrases that contain, or attempt to contain, the deeper meanings and allusions of the Slovak original. Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers in America have produced a fine bilingual edition (*And That's the Truth, 2006*). A bilingual edition is the ideal form for translated poetry – and not only because we are living in an age in which – "transparency" is being demanded in many aspects of our lives. I do not, however, believe that the presence of the original text – a possible crib for the reader not fluent in the target language – absolves the translator from recreating the original poem in its full multiple-layered depth.

Ewald Osers

EWALD OSERS (b. 1917) belongs to the leading translators of world poetry (Seifert, Holub, Skácel, Kunze, etc.). Out of more than 60 Rúfus's poems in *And That's the Truth* he translated approximately one half, the rest being translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith. Ewald Osers was awarded the Hviezdoslav Prize for translation of Slovak literature in 2007.

Playfullness Is No Enemy of Serious Message

Interview with Viliam Turčány, by Helena Dvořáková

On February 24, Viliam Turčány celebrated his eightieth birthday. And he is still the same, exuding his creative energies, belief and hope that the beauty of the word has a bearing on the course of the universe. In him, a boy-like playfulness comes hand in hand with an almost scientific consistency. Meeting him is an almost out-of-this-world experience.



Photo: Peter Procházka

HELENA DVOŘÁKOVÁ: *As a man of letters, you enter a world that is truly divine – is that world still any good for today's people whose lifestyle seems to have drifted away from it?*

VILIAM TURČÁNY: It pleases me to begin with the adjective „divine”, in an obvious reference to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Victor Hugo, the greatest of French poets, criticized the greatest of Italian poets for his lack of modesty precisely for that adjective, for that attribute heralding his own work, which, however, Dante himself called only a Comedy. According to its early 18th century French translator Artaud de Montord, it was only the 29th edition of Dante's *opus magnum*, in 1516, that appeared entitled „Divine Comedy”, almost two centuries after it had been completed and its author dead. Needless to say, the nice attribute is fully deserved, not only for that work, and not only for Dante. In 16th century, the grantees of the title were several.

HELENA DVOŘÁKOVÁ: *Such as?*

VILIAM TURČÁNY: Michelangelo, who happened to be a great poet in its own right, as witnessed by the Slovak translation of his poetry *Som ako mesiac* (I am Like a Moon) published by Slovenský spisovateľ in 1975, and the immense interest in it. Yet, at the time of Michelangelo, another claimant of that title was the man representing the new, emerging spiritual power of journalism, Pietro Aretino. This self-styled „secretary of the world” made himself a name far and wide. His favor was highly sought after at both principal and royal courts. The French king François I sent him a necklace of gold, and the very emperor Charles V had him at his side in Pescara. Aretino even had the nerve to request something – I no longer remember what it was, but surely some of his art – from Michelangelo, urging him that, if he, Michelangelo, was divine, then Pietro Aretino must be no less than that.

HELENA DVOŘÁKOVÁ: *Is this world of „divinities” still reachable today? Through your books, perhaps?*

VILIAM TURČÁNY: Through what are „partly” my books. Such as my poetical rendering of the *Book of Job* that was published by Tatran last year, the reprinted translation of Dante's *Inferno* illustrated by Marek Ormandík published by the Dante Alighieri Association in Bratislava, or Constantine the Philosopher's *Proglas* (aka St. Cyril's Prologue), the most ancient Slovak and Slavonic poem, a true gem of European poetry, that appeared in the publishing houses HERBA and Perfekt. As for my own poetry, the prospective reader would find it more difficult as these volumes are out of print. This could perhaps be a good beginning for the reader, but surely not the only way. You don't even need books, especially today! I recall to have learnt the entire four hundred lines of *Edison*, Vítězslav Nezval's masterpiece, by heart, from a notebook, which was first used by a fellow-student at the Trnava gymnasium Jožko Watzka to rewrite the whole poem and the entire volume *Básne noci*. What is important, then, is to learn to know the literary works by the true giants of the past that could

be helpful even to fresh authors, not only readers. That is the principle of Classicism, and mine. Other may benefit from it, too.

HELENA DVOŘÁKOVÁ: *Poetry has been your life – what were the benefits? Joy? Knowledge? Happiness? What work made you most happy?*

VILIAM TURČÁNY: My benefits from poetry were more than plentiful. Yet, my greatest pleasure was to work on Dante's *Divine Comedy*. At a time most unfavorable for anything spiritual, I was able to express things that would be unpublishable, if found in my own poetry. Translating this „last miracle of the world's poetry”, to borrow from the Italian Nobel prize winner Eugenio Montale, took „only” 27 years of pleasure. Yes, I was happy that Jozef Felix (felix, as surely clear to the reader, means „happy” in Latin) chose me as his colleague. Together, we translated the first two volumes, *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, and, after his death, I was left to translate the third volume, *Paradiso*, alone. In fact, I wasn't alone, as my dear dad was then already my companion, who tried his best to take care of my house and my living in Bratislava, and who, when the translation was completed at Christmas 1983, passed away to Eternity at Twelfth Night 1984.

HELENA DVOŘÁKOVÁ: *Do biblical stories get prettier in a poetical setting?*

VILIAM TURČÁNY: Surely, they are beautiful by themselves, and the goal of the Ecumenical translation was to make precisely that happen. To show that, in their fresh Slovak beauty, they belong to the treasures of world poetry, just like Dante, Goethe, Shakespeare. The Tatran publishing house engaged two poets for this translation: Rúfus for *Psalms* and *Jeremiah*, and me for the *Song of Solomon* and the *Book of Job*.

HELENA DVOŘÁKOVÁ: *Do poets change with life marching on? You still seem to possess an almost boyish playfulness. Is that the privilege of the poets? Does experience make work easier or worse?*

VILIAM TURČÁNY: I don't translate any more, instead, I have been lately interpreting my previous translations, in particular the Philosopher's *Proglas* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Yet, I would quote two great poets: „Though I was not born, / to see things thrice and always differently,” Boris Pasternak wrote once, and Milan Rúfus, borrowing from these lines, carries on in his preface to my poetry: „Nor was Viliam Turčány born for that.” That boyish fondness of play has been my staple since the surrealist manifesto of 22 March 1944 all the way to my inauguration speech at the University of Trnava of 2 May 2005. Receiving the honorary title, I quoted the first stanza of the surrealist anthem. Yet, playfulness is no enemy of serious message. If the world could only be saved by beauty, as Dostoevsky had it, a similar note can be found in that stanza:

S tými, čo v hrách času krásy milujú, ktorí srdcom krásu asimilujú: ako jedno telo sme tu, búravý nás nerozmetú, trochu krásy priniesť svetú, nech už všetci prijímú ju – na to som tu, na to sme TU.

With those who love in the games of time, who assimilate beauty by their hearts: we are one here, the storms will not scatter us through, to bring a little beauty to the world, let all accept it – that is what I am here for, what we are here for.

Viliam Turčány

Born 24 February 1928 in Suchá nad Parnou. Grammar school in Trnava, then School of Humanities of the Comenius University. Worked in the Slovak Academy of Sciences, as lecturer of Slovak literature at the University of Naples. A multi-talented man of letters, poet, translator and literary scholar. Translator, with Jozef Felix, of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the *Book of Job*, *Proglas*, and Ovid. Translator, commentator and discoverer of the treasures from the history of European poetry. His own published poetry includes the volumes: *Jarky v kraji*, *Rada a Dar*, *Oheň z Neho*, among others.

Translated by Luben Urbánek

The interview was originally published on 29 February 2008 in the *Pravda* daily.

Viliam Turčány

POEMS

A SONG OF PLEADING

You had the name of an angel
who drove our forbears from paradise
and through you he is sent down to me
and joined to the earth.

Once his lips would order
to rise from the regions of the earth
even sinners who had repented
despite the many things they'd done.

Let us – close to you also in name –
this archangel will remember
when the last trump will sound

If I was evil – if for a moment
angelically pure, graceful
I was able to love beauty.

At Anchor (1972)

AT WINE

From when I was very young, so young
– just pour! –
one song through my head has run
and runs even more.

What do I prefer? – Oh, which do I prefer?
– Just drink! –
How the vineyard cools in summer,
in winter turns cheeks pink.

This which waits for me with all its might
– down all the way
which I would drink, which would drink me out of sight
from day to day!

A song through my head has run,
that it will wait
that it will wait for me even when waiting is done,
so accurate!

At Anchor (1972)

THE MISSION OF THE WANDERING MINSTREL

A wandering minstrel comes
to greet his native land.
Let his hearth and home
give him everything with an open hand!

Peace and honey, song above the hives of bees,
which into every heart stray,
though the land be waste, the land be gloomy
the curse won't lift any other way.

The wind which from songs has blown to me
has filled the groves with light and grace,
the orchards with winegrowers who gladly
turn to all a cheerful face –

and on Apple – rolls and rolls,
leave it for the pilgrim to eat!
A wandering minstrel calls
and lays lovely days at your feet.

At Anchor (1972)

DANTE'S BIRTHPLACE

Only by his statue and his family home,
only in the bright brilliance of a Florentine day,
only then did I understand “dolce lome”.

At last the gate opened for me
and where a house and memorial stood
I entered the famous city.

To him it was my first footsteps led;
“È questa casa di Dante,” I asked and stared
at a Florentine who smiled “Where indeed.”

Here somewhere he wet the ground with his tears
when his lady denied him greeting.
Here everywhere I drew up strength against my fears

and embraced his work on all sides
so that a welcome in our home it will get
so for him all our gates will be opened wide

and spread abroad will be his sweet light.

I Am Also a Bridge (1977)

Translated by James Sutherland-Smith

Karol D. Horváth

Bloody Mary

(Extract)



Photo: Archive

KAROL D. HORVÁTH (1961), prose writer, playwright, dramaturge. After graduation from the Philosophical Faculty of Šafárik University in Prešov, Horváth exchanged several occupations, working as a shepherd, construction worker, elementary school teacher, secretary at a local municipal office, producer of a puppet theatre, copywriter in advertisement agency, and visiting dramaturge in several theatres. Currently he works in Slovak Radio. He has written several plays and

adaptations. In 2004 Horváth won the contest Short Story 2004 with a short story *Perfect Pitch* (Absolútny sluch). In 2005 he published two collections of short stories titled *Karol D Horváth* and *Karol D₂ Horváth*. The author entered the Slovak literary scene like a fresh, neo-avantgarde wind with the aim to entertain. And he fulfils this goal successfully through stories that could hardly happen in real life, yet are funny, ironic, grotesque, and often absurd.

“How long you working here?” the guest asked the barman. He was sitting on a stool, his arms resting on the bar. They were the only two in the pub. The barman was propping himself up on his elbow and gazing across the room at the dark window opposite.

“Until two,” he replied.

“Have one on me,” said the guest.

“Thanks. I don’t drink while I’m working.”

“Sure. But all the other pubs shut an hour ago. If anyone wanted to come, they’d be here by now.”

“Okay, then. Tequila.”

“What’ve you got?”

“Orita and Olmeca.”

“Olmeca. Silver for me.”

The barman poured a silver and a golden tequila and cut thick slices of lemon and orange. The guest lifted his glass. “I’m Martin.”

The barman smiled, “Imagine that. I’m Martin, too.”

The guest shook some salt onto his left thumb, licked it, took a bite of lemon and drank. “I wasn’t asking you how long you’d be open, but how long you’ve been working here,” he said.

“This is my third week,” the barman replied.

From the street came the sound of the tower clock striking briefly. It was a quarter to one. The guest sat up and stared into his empty glass. A minute later he said, “Let’s have one more.”

The barman brought the chopping board nearer the guest. “The next one’ll be on me,” he said. “I don’t know what’s up today. At this time we’re usually at least half full.”

“Full moon. It’s a full moon today,” the guest said.

“So what?”

“You’re not from these parts, are you?”

“No. How d’you know? You’re a local? I haven’t seen you before.”

“In this town when there’s a full moon they close all the pubs at eleven.”

They drank and the barman poured another round. “It’s on me now,” he said. “That must be some mumbo jumbo. Why should a full moon make them close?”

“Didn’t the owner tell you?”

“I’m the owner. That is... I’ve taken it on a lease.”

“Ah. How much do you pay? If it isn’t a secret.”

“Hm... I must say, surprisingly little.”

“I see. So little that you doubt whether it’s worth his while leasing it out?”

The barman gave a nervous smile. “Have you come to collect

protection money? I thought I could avoid that in this hole,” he said.

The guest fixed his eyes on the barman. “You’re talking rot. Do I look like an arsonist?” he asked.

“Sorry. I don’t know anyone here yet. Just a joke. Didn’t come off.”

“It wasn’t a joke. Never mind. I’m just interested. Three years ago I was standing where you are now.”

“You had the lease?” The barman was genuinely surprised.

“Yes. I had a job in the capital and I saved a bit. So I told myself I could stand on my own two feet.”

“Well I never! And why aren’t you still here? Didn’t it go well?”

“I’d’ve had to have been an absolute moron for it not to.”

The barman stared at his guest. His whole body hinted at the unasked question.

“The full moon,” said his guest after a while.

“The full moon? What’s a full moon got to do with business? And anyway. After all, that’s... only once a month, I guess.”

“Once every twenty-eight days.”

“Okay. So that still leaves twenty-seven days for business.” The barman poured another round without asking.

“Charge that to me,” said the guest.

The barman’s interest was aroused. “Is there some problem here I don’t know about?”

The guest did not respond.

“A secret? You don’t want to talk about it? You can’t?”

The guest said nothing and just stared into his glass.

“I’ll pay you,” said the barman.

“Leave off! You’d do better if you went and looked out of the window.”

“What?”

“Go over to the window and look out into the street.”

The barman cautiously came out from behind the bar and walked towards the nearest window. Halfway there, he stopped and turned to look at the guest. The latter hadn’t budged. He was sitting with his back to him and staring into his glass. “Don’t worry, I won’t take anything,” he said.

The barman was surprised. He wanted to ask something else, but then thought the better of it. He went over to the window. The wind was blowing leaves along the moonlit street.

“What can you see?”

“Nothing. What should I see?”

“Can you see any people?”

“No. So what? It’s midnight, they’re all asleep. They have to get up early to go to work tomorrow.”

“And yesterday they didn’t have to?”

The barman looked over his shoulder. The guest hadn’t moved. “You must know how it is. There are days like that. Sometimes business just couldn’t be better and it’s not even pay day, a bank holiday or anything. At other times it’s quite the opposite. There’s no logic to it,” he told the guest to his back.

"Take another look. Can you see any lights?" asked the guest. The barman looked through the window once more. "That's interesting... There are no lights on anywhere. Not even the street lights," he said after a while.

"You see," said the guest.

The barman stared into the street again. "Hm. If the light wasn't on in here, I'd have thought there was a power cut," he said, going back to the bar.

They drank. "Do you do mixed drinks?" asked the guest.

"Of course. Shall I mix you something?"

"Can you make a Bloody Mary?"

"Yes."

"A real Bloody Mary?"

"Well... What do you mean? Tomato juice, vodka, black pepper, salt, Tabasco, lemon juice, Worcestershire sauce. That's a real Bloody Mary, isn't it?"

"That's just it. It isn't."

"I don't get you. I can put Absolut vodka in it for you instead of the ordinary. Or Fyodor, or..."

The guest looked the barman in the eye. It made him feel uneasy. "Do you want to know why I don't work here any more?" he said.

"Of course I do!"

The guest pulled a cigarette case from his pocket and picked out a cigarette. The barman lit it for him. "I had a bit of cash and I needed to get away from the city," said the guest, exhaling smoke.

"You were in trouble?"

"That's neither here nor there. I was simply attracted by the bargain and I was in business for almost a month. Had to work pretty hard. But I could've lived cosily here for at least two or three years. Small town, hills and forests all around... Nothing to take me by surprise. But then the full moon came."

"Ah. Not a living soul in the pub."

"Exactly. Not a soul."

"Did you ask anyone about it?"

"Of course I did."

"And?"

"Nothing. No one told me anything. They just gave me strange looks. So I waited for the next one."

"The next full moon?"

"Are you going to keep interrupting me?"

"Sorry."

"Exactly the same happened. Except that at midnight a guest appeared. Just one. I was actually glad to see him. You know what it's like. The only people who come into a pub late at night are the ones who've been drinking elsewhere. They've spent nearly all their cash and they come to you just to round off with small beers. And they're the most trouble at closing time. But then I'd been all alone in the pub for several hours, so I was glad when at least someone appeared. The guy had hardly sat down before he asked me whether I could make a real Bloody Mary. That threw me a bit. Like it did you. I'd mixed all kinds of shit, but I never suspected my Bloody Mary wasn't the real thing. I used to make a Gypsy in the Desert, Screaming Orgasm and Concrete Estate. Once I mixed equal amounts of gin, rum and plum brandy with Coke and grenadine. But I was caught out when it came to a real Bloody Mary. So that guy explained it to me. He said that a real Bloody Mary wasn't made from tomato juice, but..."

"But?"

"...blood."

"What?!"

"You heard. Blood. He said he'd give me a thousand crowns for one drink. So I made it for him."

"Where did you get blood from at midnight?"

"Where do you suppose? Think."

"You're kidding!"

"Just what I thought. The guy put a thousand crown note down on the bar. On this very spot," the guest tapped the thick wooden board with the knuckle of his middle finger.

"How much juice do you usually put in a Bloody Mary?"

"A decilitre."

"Exactly. So I thought to myself that, after all, a decilitre of blood wouldn't kill me. A joke's a joke and a thousand's a thousand. Do you know what was the hardest thing?"

"What?"

"How to get a decilitre of blood out of myself. Then I remembered I'd got a used plastic syringe in the storeroom. You know how it is? People often have something like that at hand. You never know when it might come in useful. For blowing into the carburetor, for instance."

"I know. I once spent three hours telling myself I could do with something like that. I've got one in the storeroom, too. Among the tools," the barman said.

"I went to get it, gave it a thorough wash and left it to soak for five minutes in vodka. All that time I expected the man to burst out laughing and say it was only a stupid joke. Or that a herd of drunken pricks would come bursting through the doors hollering something about a bet. But no. The guy just sat and watched me."

"You made it for him?"

"What else could I do? When you give blood, they take a lot more than that. I drew out two half decilitres and mixed him the drink."

"And he drank it?"

"You bet he did. He even paid for another."

"Wow! For another thousand?"

"No. The next Bloody Mary was for two."

"Wow! Three thousand for two drinks?!"

"In cash."

"And then?"

"Nothing. The man got up and by one he'd left. When I woke up next morning, the first thing I did was look in my purse. The money was there."

"Look here, you're having me on."

"Do I look the type?"

"We'll... No."

"You see. Then it was the usual slog. Couple of times I tried to ask someone discreetly. But the moment I mentioned the full moon, they all pretended to be deaf. So I waited for the next one."

"Wow... That's the best yarn I've ever heard, I can tell you."

"That was only the beginning. The next full moon it happened all over again. I opened at five as usual and no one set foot in the pub until midnight. When the tower clock struck the hour, two men came in. They looked okay. They sat more or less opposite where you are now and ordered two drinks. Apart from that they didn't say a word. They put three thousand on the bar. I mixed the drinks, they drank them and ordered another round."

"Wait a minute! For the next two they gave you... Six?"

"No. You can't count. Twelve."

"Twelve thousand?!"

"Of course. The first Bloody Mary was for a thousand. The second for double that and each one after that for twice as much again. Altogether it was fifteen thousand for four decilitres of blood."

"Wow! That's good business!"

"I thought so too. The clock struck one, these guys got up and walked out without a word. Twenty-eight days later three of them appeared. They poured salt on sixty-three bits of paper on the bar and I gave them over half a litre of blood. I felt the effect of that quite a bit."

"I'm sorry, but I don't believe you now," said the barman. However, he bent over the bar and watched his guest's mouth carefully, so as not to miss a word.

"You needn't."

"Just a moment," said the barman, picking up his calculator. "So the first time it was two decilitres and three thousand. The second time four decilitres and fifteen, the third six and sixty-three. That makes, that makes... One litre and two decilitres of blood and eighty-one thousand! That's what I call business! What about those guys? Were they perverts, or what? So why did you leave this place?"

"They weren't perverts. And I didn't leave," said the guest.

Translated by Heather Trebatická

Peter Pišťanek

RIVERS OF BABYLON

(Leseprobe)



Photo: Author's Archive

PETER PIŠŤANEK (1960) Ein Prosa-Autor, dem es zu Beginn der 1990er Jahre mit großem Erfolg gelang, einen neuen Typus an belletristischer Literatur in der Slowakei durchzusetzen. Bis zur Wende war er in verschiedenen Arbeiterberufen tätig, danach in einer Werbeagentur, zur Zeit ist er Chefredakteur der Internet-Zeitschrift „inZine“. Er lebt in Devínska Nová Ves bei Bratislava und schöpft die Motive seiner Prosa aus dieser Umgebung an der Peripherie einer Großstadt. Seine Publikationstätigkeit begann er Ende der 1980er Jahre in der Kulturzeitschrift *Slovenské pohľady*. Durch sein Buchdebüt *Rivers of Babylon* (1991) rief er sowohl bei den Lesern als auch bei den

Kritikern ein außergewöhnlich großes Interesse hervor. Pišťanek beschreibt darin mit expressiver Sprache und durch den Einsatz verschiedener Stilebenen das für die slowakische Literatur ungewöhnliche Milieu der Bratislaver Halbwelt, die er mit größeren und kleineren Gauner sowie mit etlichen Prostituierten ausstattet. Der einzige Ehrgeiz der von ihm dargestellten Menschen besteht darin, sich das Leben so angenehm wie möglich zu gestalten, und zwar auf Kosten der anderen, die sie belügen, ausnutzen oder vernichten. Irgendwo im Hintergrund des Geschehens spielen sich die revolutionären gesellschaftlichen Veränderungen des Jahres 1989 ab. Pišťaneks Erzählen zeichnet sich durch Geradlinigkeit und einen raschen Handlungsablauf ab, distanziert, lakonisch, doch erfasst er den Stand der Dinge sehr treffend. Sein zweites Buch, *Der junge Dôňč* (Mladý Dôňč, 1993) enthält die drei Novellen *Der Debütant*, *Der junge Dôňč und Musik* (Debutant, Mladý Dôňč a Muzika). In der Titelgeschichte treffen wir auf das Porträt der bizarren und mit schwarzem Humor gezeichneten Degeneration der Familie Dôňč, die nicht nur durch den bei allen Familienmitgliedern grassierenden Alkoholismus verursacht wurde, sondern auch durch dessen Begleitumstände – das völlige Desinteresse und fehlende Bewusstsein für alles, was sich außerhalb des eigenen Territoriums abspielt. Auch die Novelle *Musik* stellt trotz ihrer grotesken Bearbeitung eine präzise soziologische Sonde in das Leben der Normalisierungszeit der 1970er Jahre dar. Im Stil der sog. „abgesunkenen Genres“ gab Pišťanek auch die

Fortsetzung seines Erstlingsromans unter dem Titel *Rivers of Babylon 2 oder Das Dorf aus Holz* (Rivers of Babylon 2 alebo Drevená dedina, 1994) heraus. Es folgten der Erzählungsband *Mit Messer und Axt* (Sekerou a nožom, 1999, zus. mit Dušan Taragel) sowie zwei Bände mit Mikro-Erzählungen *Märchen über Vlado* (Skazky o Vladovi, 1995) und *Neue Märchen über Vlado* (Nové skazky o Vladovi, 1998). Den Abschluss der Trilogie über die „Karriere“ des Heizers Fredy gab er 1999 heraus, sie heißt *Rivers of Babylon 3: Fredys Ende* (Rivers of Babylon 3: Fredyho koniec). Als Mitglied einer Autoren-Gruppe (einschließlich D. Taragel) war er an der Erstausgabe des *Roger Krowiak* (2003) beteiligt. Im selben Jahr erschienen seine *Rezepte aus dem Familienarchiv oder Alles, was ich kann, brachte mir Opa bei* (Recepty z rodinného archívu alebo Všetko čo viem ma naučil môj dedo). Gemeinsam mit Opa Pišťanek erleben wir darin das vergangene Jahrhundert. Die Atmosphäre der Zeit, die aus jeder Zeile atmet, ist viel eindrücklicher als sie Geschichtsbücher vermitteln können. Ein weiterer Titel, *Traktorfahrer und Nervensäger* (Traktoristi a buzeranti, 2003) versammelt eine Auswahl publizistischer Arbeiten. Die Veröffentlichung aus den Tiefen duftender Cognackeller – *Das Feuer des Weins* (Živý oheň z vína, 2006) – ist der aktuellste Beitrag des Autors im Bereich untraditioneller Gastronomie-Führer. Witziges und spannungsreiches Erzählen verbindet er mit Wissenswertern aus der Geschichte des Cognacs.

Der Heizer wacht morgens mit einem solchen Hass in der Seele auf, dass es ihm den Appetit verschlägt. Er räkel sich auf der Holzbank, kratzt sich die juckende Haut, die über seinen hervorstehenden Rippen spannt, und schaut sich stumpsinnig um. Er versucht nicht, über die Quelle des Hasses nachzudenken. Der Kesselraum ist dunkel, mit stockfleckigen und abgeschlagenen Wänden. Die ausgekühlten Kessel zeichnen sich im Dunkel ab. Der Wind pfeift darin.

Schließlich steht der Heizer auf. Er legt unter dem Kessel für das Nutzwasser nach. Lange schaut er in die Flammen. Der rote Schein, der aus dem offenen Maul des Kessels strahlt, löscht in ihm den Morgenzorn und bringt ihn zurück ins Leben.

Die langen Jahre des Heizens im Hotel Ambassador haben dem Heizer die Vorstellung vom Sinn des Lebens genommen. Der Lebensstil wurde in seinem Bewusstsein auf den Unterhalt des Feuers unter den Kesseln und auf kleine Reparaturen an der Heizungsanlage reduziert.

Der Heizer lebt ohne irgendwelche nennenswerten menschlichen Kontakte. Frühere Empfindungen und Emotionen, von denen seine damaligen Beziehungen zu Menschen, Tieren, Dingen und Meinungen bestimmt waren, wurden durch die lange Isolation deformiert. Der Sinn der Welt beschränkt sich für ihn auf den Sinn des Kesselraums. Das Hotel Ambassador und alle anderen an seinen Kesselraum angeschlossenen Räumlichkeiten zu beheizen, ist alles, was ihn interessiert. Infolge dieser freiwilligen Abtötung verfällt der Heizer manchmal

in schwer zu bändigende Wutausbrüche. Sie stellen sich fast regelmäßig ein. Sie sind immer der Höhepunkt eines bestimmten Zeitabschnitts, in dem sich der Heizer angestrengt bemüht, die in verschiedene Ecken seiner unkomplizierten Seele auseinander gestobene unruhige Gedankenherde wie ein Schäferhund zusammen zu treiben. Jedes Mal, wenn die Gedanken Junge werfen und seine Seele mit rauen Katzenschnitten lecken, sitzt er gebrochen am zerschrammten und wackligen Tisch im Kesselraum, den Kopf in den Händen, als ob er Angst hätte, dass der gärende Strom der unvollkommenen, verstümmelten und fiebrigen Gedanken ihm die Knochenwände auseinander drücken würde. Die Gedanken paaren sich, werfen Blasen und drücken dem Heizer die Augen aus dem Schädel heraus. Ein starker unauslöschlicher Hass stellt sich gleich danach ein. Dass es ihm den Atem verschlägt und plötzlich schwarz vor Augen wird.

Dieser Zorn ist dem alten Heizer zur Pein geworden. Er ist richtungslos. Der Heizer kann ihn genauso gut auch auf sich beziehen, was er öfters mal macht. Wenn ihn der Zorn packt und er sich abreagieren muss, gibt er sich eine Ohrfeige, dass es ihm vor den Augen blitzt. Oder er schlägt mit aller Wucht mit seinen kraftlos gewordenen Fingern auf die scharfe Tischkante. Der heftige Schmerz kommt mit einiger Verzögerung. Das Warten darauf bringt den Heizer immer zu Verstand und zur Reue. Er setzt sich demütig wieder hin und wartet seine Dosis der schmerzhaften Verzückung ab. Der Schmerz explodiert in der

Mitte des Schädels, sobald die Reize unfehlbar und unbarmherzig die Nervenbahnen seines ausgedörrten Körpers passiert haben. Er ist heftig und eisig und zwingt ihn, die schmerzenden Finger so tief wie möglich in den Mund zu stecken. Dort, in der Wärme des fiebrigen Atems, lässt der Schmerz nach. Er zergeht in den Schädelknochen und löst sich im Gallert der Gehirnmasse auf. Und mit ihm auch der Hass. Der Heizer bekommt Hunger und entschließt sich, ihn mit einer Scheibe Brot, einem Stück Speck und einer aufgedunsenen lila Zwiebel zu stillen.

Für Donath fängt die Heizsaison schon im Spätsommer an. Etwas in der Luft treibt den Alten von der knarrenden ungehobelten Holzbank herunter. In der ganzen Stadt ahnt noch niemand, dass der Dämon des Untergangs¹¹ Verfalls

sein Werk schon angefangen hat. Die Menschen sind leicht bekleidet, die Schwimmbäder bersten vor Besuchern, die Verkäufer von gekühlten Getränken und Eis haben alle Hände voll zu tun. Aber in Donaths Augen erscheint ein ergebnes Einverständnis mit dem Stand der Dinge. Er sieht, was andere nicht sehen. Eine schmutzigere Farbnuance der Platanenblätter vor dem Hotel, einen krepiernten Käfer am Rasenrand, Veränderungen im Verhalten der bettelnden Vögel, die um die Müllcontainer im Hinterhof hüpfen.

Donath durchmisst mit schnellen Schritten den Kesselraum.

Morgens ist es schon neblig und der Himmel bekommt immer öfter die Farbe eines Ambosses. Der Herbst klopft an die Blechtür. Erst jetzt sehen es alle, aber Donath ist schon länger aus dem Dösen des Sommersentiments aufgewacht. Er hat seinen ausgebrannten Körper gezwungen, steife, lang gewohnte Bewegungen auszuführen. Die ganze Anlage muss für den Winter vorbereitet werden. Dann isst er nicht einmal. Abgemagert arbeitet er oder er steht in der Tür und gibt einen muhenden, tiefen Ton von sich, mit dem er trefflich ausdrücken will, dass er voll in Anspruch genommen ist, wobei er sich mit seinem schiefen, steifen Zeigefinger in die Brust sticht. Umgehend erklärt er allen, dem ganzen Personal: Er, Donath, sei arbeitsam. Jetzt müsse er nur noch das Wasser erhitzen. Der Verbrauch sei hoch. Die Gäste baden viel, man müsse ihnen entgegenkommen. Donath habe nichts dagegen. Im Winter werde aber unter allen Kesseln gefeuert. Sechs Kessel sind es. Er, Donath, könne es beweisen. Er schlägt die Hacken zusammen wie ein alter Kellner. Hereinspaziert, wer es nicht glauben mag. Alle scheinen es zu glauben. Jeder beeilt sich, seiner Arbeit nachzukommen. Aus den offenen Abzügen der Waschküche strömt dichter Dampf heraus, der angenehm nach Seife riecht. Die erhitzten Zigeunerinnen rauchen im Hof, sie haben nur Kittelschürzen an. Sie lachen über Donath, jagen kreischend zwischen den Schlackehaufen durch den Hof. Zuweilen heben sie die Kittelschöße hoch und zeigen ihm, dass sie nackt sind. Fick die Jungfrau Maria in den Arsch, schreien sie. Wer sollte es denn in der Hitze aushalten? Aber Donath interessiert sich für die Zigeunerinnen nur, wenn sie ihm zuhören. Sechs Kessel. Donath zählt sie mit geschlossenen Augen auf. Die Eins, die Zwei und so weiter. Die Vier ist außer Betrieb. Donath könne nachlegen. Verboten! Sicherheitsgründe. Risiko! Donath kaut das Wort genüsslich wieder; spürt, wie es ihm Wichtigkeit verleiht. Und den undefinierbaren Reiz der Menschen, die tagtäglich dem Tod ins Auge blicken. Risiko. Es werde hier mit Kohle geheizt. Alle anderen Kesselhäuser in der Gegend seien auf Heizöl oder Gas umgestellt. Dieser, behauptet Donath, sei klassisch. Ein weiteres Wort. Klassisch. Wie viel Bedeutung und abstrakter Reiz in einem einzigen Wort!



In Donaths Kesselraum scheint die Zeit stehen geblieben. Im Winter röhren hier hungrig die glühenden Mäuler der Feuerstellen. Im Dunkel, hie und da beleuchtet vom nervösen Aufblitzen der Feuer, glänzen unruhig die aufgeschaukelten Haufen fetter Steinkohle. Der Kesselraum beheizt fast die ganze Straßenseite, vom Hotel Ambassador bis zur Kreuzung. Dort gibt

es lauter Läden. Haushaltswaren, Drogerieartikel, Autoersatzteile und Lederwaren. Insgesamt hat der alte Heizer die Feuer unter fünf Kesseln zu unterhalten. Einer funktioniere nicht. Die Winter seien hier streng. Die Kessel müssen stündlich mit der schwarzen Nahrung gefüttert werden. Tag und Nacht. Ununterbrochen. Donath störe es nicht. Von seiner Frau habe er sich vor langem scheiden lassen, ein Zuhause habe er nicht, und er habe keine Lust, in Ledigenheimen zu wohnen. Er arbeite hier seit unzähligen Jahren. Zum Wohnen habe man ihm ein Kabuff hinter dem Kesselraum zugeteilt, aber antreffen könne man ihn dort nicht. Meist halte er sich im Kesselraum auf. Dort schlafe er auch, auf der Sitzbank am harten, zerschrammten, alten Tisch. Die Kohle hole er aus dem Kohlenkeller, transportiere sie in der Schubkarre und schütte sie von oben in die lärmenden Kessel. Die Asche schaufle er in Blechfässer, bespritze sie mit Wasser aus dem Schlauch und fahre sie mit einem Spezialaufzug auf den Hof. Den ganzen Winter über häufen sich dort grauschwarze Aschehügel auf. Im Frühjahr komme ein Laster und bringe die Asche in mehreren Fuhren in die nahe Ziegelei.

Donath arbeite ganz allein. Früher wechselten sie sich zu viert in Schichten ab. Aber jetzt, in der Zeit des Heizöls und des Gases, wolle sich niemand mehr mit fetter und schwerer Steinkohle schmutzig machen. Der Kesselraum sei veraltet, es gebe viel zu tun. Donath habe schon vor längerem seinem Vorgesetzten, dem Direktor des Hotels Ambassador, mitgeteilt, dass er müde und erschöpft sei, dass er diesen Sommer noch durcharbeite, aber für den Winter solle man sich einen neuen suchen. Er, Donath, habe etwas anderes vor. Der Direktor redete auf ihn ein, er solle weiter bleiben, aber der Alte wollte davon nichts mehr hören. Schon vor sieben Jahren hätte er das Rentenalter erreicht, er wolle noch ein wenig das Leben genießen, relaxen, sich erholen.

Donath hat die Kessel kontrolliert und sitzt jetzt im Untergrund. Er wartet auf jemanden, der ihn ablöst. Niemand kommt. Donath heize in diesem Hotel seit fünfzig Jahren. Die Arbeit sei schwer und anspruchsvoll, aber er beklage sich nicht. Es mache ihm Spaß, und so weiter. Es stimme, dass er schon lange in Rente sein sollte. Aber er heize noch immer. Er werde geachtet. Einen anderen würden sie nicht finden. In letzter Zeit aber sei er müde. Manchmal betrinke er sich, manchmal tue ihm der Kopf weh. Aber er, Donath, beklage sich nicht, das gehöre dazu, so sei das Leben.

Es sei erst Ende August, aber in den Straßen wehe der Wind. Es sei an der Zeit, den Kesselraum instand zu setzen. Gemach, nur nicht übertreiben. Nach dem dreißigsten Lebensjahr habe zu Hause ein jeder Spinnweben. Er sei allein, er wohne hier. Er arbeite am Stück, ununterbrochen. Früher haben sie sich zu viert abgewechselt. Nur Donath sei noch am Leben. Die Jahre flögen dahin, die Zeit kenne kein Gebot. Die Herrschaften da oben, im Büro, richteten es bis heute so auf, als ob im Kesselraum weiterhin alle arbeiten würden. Zwei Löhne und alle Kollektivprämien beziehe er, Donath. Auch für den sozialistischen Wettbewerb. Er wetteifere gegen sich selbst. Er sei sich selbst das Kollektiv. Zwei Löhne bleiben oben, im Büro. Die Herrschaften teilen sie unter sich auf.

Donath kenne jede Schraube. Er sei von der alten Schule. Noch vor kurzem hätte ihn jeder in den Tod getrieben, der versucht hätte, ihm die Arbeit zu nehmen. Aber die Jahre werden nicht weniger. Der Mensch bleibe nicht derselbe. Jahr für Jahr habe er denen da oben mit seinem Weggang gedroht, aber er meinte es nie ernst. Das Alter habe ihn erwischt. Und die Liebe. Eine Liebe auf die alten Tage. Eines Tages werden es die da oben erfahren müssen. Er, Donath, könne sich gut vorstellen, wie sie vor Wut schäumen werden. Wer wird dann heizen? Das sei die Frage. Donath geht herum und fegt.

Der Direktor kommt mit dem Hoteljuristen herein. Der Direktor ist dumm.

Sein Schwiegervater hat ihm geholfen. Er hat ihm das Studium an der Hotelfachschule ermöglicht und ihn dann ins Hotel Ambassador gesetzt. Ohne den Juristen bindet er sich nicht einmal die Schuhe zu. Der Jurist ist jetzt voll bitterer Vorwürfe.

Er habe gehört, dass Donath weggehen wolle. Er, der Jurist, qualifiziere es als Verrat. Ob es ihm denn nicht leid täte, alles stehen und liegen zu lassen? Sie haben Donath ein schönes Kabäuschen gegeben. Er musste nur das Wasser rausschöpfen. Auch ein Radio hätten sie ihm gegeben. Ein schönes. Fürs Essen gebe er keine Krone aus. Hinter seinem Rücken, dem des Juristen, verpflege er sich in der Hotelküche, aber er, der Jurist, wisse alles. Er wisse von nichts, drücke beide Augen zu. Warmes Essen, ein Kabäuschen, Radio, zwei Löhne, das sei nicht schlecht. Wahrlich, nicht jeder habe so ein Glück.

Auch der Direktor sagt etwas. Er guckt weder Donath noch den Juristen an. Mit leiser Stimme bemerkt er, diesen Leuten wolle er ein guter und strenger Vorgesetzter sein. Vielleicht sehen nicht alle ein, dass er das, was er tue, nur zu seinem Vorteil tut. Aber er mache da keine Unterschiede. Wo würden wir denn hinkommen, wenn jeder Unterschiede machen würde? Eine planmäßige und zielstrebige Arbeit mit den Menschen trage doch eines Tages Früchte. Heute habe ich es begriffen, sagt der Direktor, morgen werden es auch andere begreifen. Übermorgen wird es auch der Allerdümmste begreifen. Nach seiner, des Direktors Meinung, müsse man sich immer höhere Ziele setzen, sich nicht zufrieden geben. Nicht mit Worten, sondern mit ehrlicher Arbeit. Immer höher. Die Losung des Tages. Selbstverständlich, nicht zuletzt. Ohne leere Phrasen und große Worte!

Donath nickt. Er habe hier eine kennen gelernt. Ein alter Mensch brauche Liebe. Alle kennen sie – sie spüle in der Küche Geschirr. Etelka Tothova. Sie wollen heiraten und in ihr Häuschen auf dem Land ziehen. Nichts Besonderes: vier Wände, ein Dach, hie und da ein Fenster, eine Tür – so sei es eben. Keinerlei Schnickschnack. Vor dem Haus ein Birnbaum, hinterm Haus ein Schwein.

Dem Juristen sei es klar. Aber Donath wäre ein Schuft, wenn er sich nicht bemühte, jemanden für seine Stelle zu finden, einen Jungen und Doofen. Schließlich habe das Hotel Ambassador ihn, Donath, fünfzig Jahre lang ernährt. Einen Ersatz für sich zu suchen, wäre das Geringste, das Donath für das Hotel tun könne. Er solle den Neuen anlernen und in alle Geheimnisse einweihen. Und dann, nix für ungut. Zum Winter sei er frei!

Ohne eine Antwort abzuwarten, verlassen ihn beide.

Donath sei nicht dagegen. Er, Donath, sei nicht so sehr auf Sex aus, ruft er den Gehenden hinterher. Er habe keine Haare mehr, keine Zähne, er sehe schlecht, und seine Hände würden zittern. Ihm, Donath, reiche ein wenig Liebe, ein wenig Unterhaltung. Noch etwas das Leben genießen! Andere, die lassen es sich gut gehen! Die Leute besitzen ja heute alles Mögliche. Aktentaschen, Brillen, sie kaufen sich, was ihnen gerade so einfällt. Und er, Donath? Ein Radio und ein Kabäuschen, aus dem er jedes Mal das Wasser schöpfen müsse, wenn er sich hinlegen und ein wenig weicher schlafen wolle. Er, Donath, sei anspruchsvoller geworden. Was ihm früher genügte, genüge ihm heute nicht mehr. Die Russen werden demnächst auf den Mars fliegen und er sei immer noch hier. Im Winter ewig bei den Kesseln! Davon wissen die beiden nichts, die von da oben. Der Hoteldirektor sei ein unfähiger Dummkopf. Ganze Tage verbringe er mit kindischen Vergnügungen. Und der Advokat laufe sich die Sohlen ab und jage seinen eigenen Geschäften hinterher.

Alle ein, zwei Stunden müsse in jedes röhrende Maul nachgelegt werden. Außerdem müssen die Ventile repariert, die Radiatoren entlüftet und kleine Defekte behoben werden. Der Heizer müsse zugleich auch die Heizungsanlage warten. Im Sommer sei es besser. Da müsse nur Wasser erhitzt und Dampf für Küche und Sauna erzeugt werden. Er, Donath, könne spazieren gehen. Aber er gehe nicht weit. Er bleibe in Hotelnähe. Er beobachte das Gewimmel der Autos auf dem bewachten Parkplatz vor dem Hotel Ambassador, dann gehe er in die Selbstbedienung und kaufe sich ein paar Bier. Stets eile er zurück, in den Kesselraum. Er mache das Radio an und singe mit den Sängern. Oder er gehe in den Hof und flachse mit den

Zigeunerinnen aus der Waschküche. Sein Leben gehe vorbei, er wisse gar nicht wie.

Der Direktor sitzt im Büro zwischen allerlei Trödel, den er aus dem Hotel herbeigeschleppt hat, und spricht laut mit sich selbst. Es geht ihm nicht in den Kopf, dass der alte Donath jederzeit gehen könnte. Er war überzeugt gewesen, dass der Heizer nach fünfzig Jahren zum Inventar des Hotels gehören würde. Er, der Direktor, habe sich immer nach allen Kräften bemüht, der Pflicht auszuweichen, auch nur eine Aufgabe lösen zu müssen, aber er hätte nicht im Traum daran gedacht, dass er einmal diese würde lösen müssen. Der Jurist habe ihm schon gesagt, dass man niemanden gegen seinen Willen halten könne. Dafür gebe es, leider Gottes, Paragraphen.

Paragraphen! Erinnert sich der Direktor, und mit der fetten Hand schmeißt er den Aschenbecher an die Wand. Es gefällt ihm nicht, dass die Hotelleitung des Ambassador in diesem Maß von Donaths Willkür abhängt. Wenn er einen Ersatz auftreibe, treibe er ihn auf. Wenn er keinen auftreibe, treibe er keinen auf. Der Direktor stimmt ein trauriges Liedchen an. Wozu habe er sich überhaupt darum gerissen, in die Stadt zu kommen? Ach, am liebsten würde er sich zu Hause auf einen Baumstumpf setzen und vor sich hinstarren! Scheißleben!

Der überhebliche Dorfmetzger Kiss sitzt im Wohnzimmer und raucht mit einem genüsslich zugekniffenen Auge, als die Brautwerber eintreffen. Der junge Racz und sein Onkel Endre. Sie galoppieren lärmend in den Hof von Kiss, steigen von den Pferden ab, die mit ihren riesigen Hufen das Gras und die Hühner unruhig im Hof zerstampfen, und treten beherzt ein. Racz ist bleich, sein rasiertes Gesicht mit dem bläulichen Schimmer und den auf die Schnelle behandelten Schnittwunden verleiht ihm einen würdevoll wichtigen Ausdruck.

Kiss hört die Ankommenden ruhig an. Er nickt mit dem Kopf, als ob er etwas hören würde, was er lange schon kennt. Dann räuspert er sich. Er, Kiss, sei sozusagen ein gemachter Mann. Man könne Geld machen. Es ist unglaublich, was die Leute heutzutage alles fressen. Nichts ektelt sie an. Also, der junge Racz möchte seine, Kiss' Tochter zur Frau?

Racz spürt, dass er antworten sollte. Ja, so ist es. Er möchte. Er, Racz, liebe sie, und sie liebe ihn auch. Er, Racz, habe seinen Militärdienst abgeleistet, sei gut beieinander. Er habe ein kleines Vermögen. Er sei nicht reich, aber auch nicht arm. Ein Schwein, eine Kuh, ein Pferd, frisch beschlagen, gut unterm Sattel, am Wagen und vorm Pflug.

Endre unterbricht ihn. Er macht Kiss eindringlich darauf aufmerksam, dass der Junge ihm ein gehorsamer Schwiegersohn sein werde. Er sei nun mal so erzogen; bei ihnen hätte es für alles eine Ohrfeige gesetzt. Seine Eltern seien am Mammon erstickt.

Kiss erinnert sich. Ja, das sei ein trauriger Vorfall gewesen. Ein großes Begräbnis.

Racz könne es nicht bestätigen. Er sei zu der Zeit bei der Armee gewesen, sagt er. Bei den Kanonieren. Ein kleines Dorf zwischen Prag und Benesov. Drei Militärabteilungen. Zwei- und dreißig, neunundachtzig, neunundfünfzig, dreiundsechzig, siebzehn, sechsundvierzig. Ein guter Wehrdienst. Er, Racz, habe seine Pflichten erfüllt und habe seine Ruhe gehabt. Am Begräbnis habe er nicht teilgenommen. Er habe sich in den falschen Zug gesetzt und in As haben ihn die Zöllner rausgejagt.

Und was sei mit dem Mammon, interessiert sich Kiss, mit dem Geld der Eltern? Wo sei es?

Es sei irgendwo im Haus versteckt, meint Onkel Endre. Sie haben das Geld nicht auf der Bank gehabt. Sie hatten zu niemandem und nichts Vertrauen.

Er, Racz, habe eine zweijährige Landwirtschaftsschule abgeschlossen. Alle sollen sich mal seine zwei riesigen Pranken anschauen. Für die ist keine Arbeit zu schwer!

Ob denn gesucht wurde, fragt Kiss, und holt eine Flasche Selbstgebrannten hervor.

Endre ist überzeugt, dass das Geld im Haus versteckt sei. Solange es nicht gefunden wurde, liege es dort sicher wie auf einer Schweizer Bank.

Kiss schüttelt den Kopf. Er wisse, dass das ganze Haus auseinander genommen worden sei, und man habe nichts gefunden.

Aber Endre verliert die Hoffnung nicht. Vielleicht sei es im Keller einbetoniert, im Fundament. Da haben sie noch nicht nachgeschaut. Aber jetzt, wenn er, Endre, darüber nachdenke, werde ihm immer klarer, dass das Geld mit Sicherheit dort sei!

Kiss schüttelt den Kopf. Er, Kiss, habe jedoch etwas anderes gehört: das Geld sei gefunden worden, aber die Verwandtschaft hätte es schnell unter sich aufgeteilt, während Racz noch kreuz und quer in der Republik herumirrte.

Endre regt sich auf. So eine gottlose Lüge habe er noch nie gehört. Kiss solle ihm sagen, wer solche wüsten Geschichten im Dorf verbreite, und er, Endre, werde ihm höchstpersönlich das Maul stopfen.

Kiss schenkt ein. Nachdem Endre zwei Stamperl Selbstgebrannten gekippt hat, wird ihm warm, und er beruhigt sich.

Der Bursche sei kein Dummkopf, sagt er. Geraderaus und einfach, das ja. Er rede nicht viel. Aber er sei ganz helle, bei Gott!

Racz spürt, dass er auch etwas sagen sollte. Er, Racz, habe auch ein schönes Stück Acker. Er brauche Frauenhände. Fürs Waschen, Kochen, Herzen. Fürs Schweinefüttern.

Kiss versteht alles. Liebe sei Liebe, Gesundheit wiederum, zum Beispiel, Gesundheit. Aber Geld sei Geld! Er könne Racz raten, er sei älter und ein Mann von Welt. Ohne Bares sei Racz erledigt. Aus und vorbei. Er, Kiss, sei seit vielen Jahren Metzger. Er kenne sich aus. Alles haben sie mit dem abgepackten Fleisch versaut, die Säcke! Das sei das Ende des Metzgerhandwerks. Er, Kiss, könne sich über Racz nur wundern. Warum hocke er überhaupt noch in der LPG? Wenn er, Kiss, im Alter von Racz wäre, nichts auf der Welt würde ihn hier festhalten! In der Stadt liege das Geld auf der Straße, man müsse es nur aufheben. Er solle doch in die Stadt gehen und dort Geld machen! Erzika werde auf ihn warten, wenn sie ihn wirklich liebe. Um die Tiere und um das Stück Acker werde er, Kiss, sich solange kümmern. Er sei ihm doch wie sein eigener Sohn. Und er solle nicht zögern, sondern sich endlich in die Stadt aufmachen. Wozu denn unnötig Zeit verlieren.

Racz möchte vor der Abreise Erzika sehen, aber Kiss sieht darin keinen Sinn. Wozu denn, er wisse doch, wie sie aussehe! Er schenkt zum letzten Mal Selbstgebrannten ein. Danach geleitet er die Brautwerber vors Haus.

Racz reitet gesenkten Kopfes tiefraurig auf dem donnernden Pferd davon. Aus dem Augenwinkel bemerkt er, wie sich die Gardine von Erzikas Zimmer bewegt.

Noch am selben Tag treibt er das Schwein, die Kuh und das Pferd in den Stall von Kiss. Er schwört, binnen kurzem, sobald als möglich zurück zu kehren.

Im Morgengrauen geht Racz zum Zug.

Ich habe gehört, dass du fortgehst, sagt der überhebliche Feri Bartalos mit einem falschen Lächeln, sein größter Feind noch aus der Schulzeit und einer von Erzikas Verehrern. Nur wegen Racz und noch im Dunkeln ist er auf einem schäumenden hohen Ross mit mächtigem Hintern zum Bahnhof geritten, und jetzt tänzelt er mit dem Pferd mitten auf dem Bahnsteig. Er lacht wild, seine weißen Zähne blitzen in der Sonne, die über der Einöde aufgeht. Racz sitzt auf einer gusseisernen Bank im schlecht sitzenden Konfirmandenanzug, den Koffer neben den Füßen.

Fährst du denn wirklich in die Stadt? schreit Feri, weil ihn Racz nicht beachtet. Das Pferd bockt unter ihm und wiehert. Dann fahr doch!

Racz hebt ruhig den Kopf und hört auf, die Fingernägel seiner rechten Hand zu betrachten. Wenn er, Racz, zurückkomme, sagt er gelassen, und erfahre es, Bartalos wisse schon was, werde er ihn verprügeln. Oder er bringe ihn vielleicht auch um. Erzika

werde seine, Racz' Kinder gebären, das solle sich Bartalos hinter die Ohren schreiben.

Oho, lacht der überhebliche Feri Bartalos, als ob er einen guten Witz hörte. Er gibt dem riesigen, schwerfälligen Pferd ungestüm die Sporen. Auf dem Bahnsteig bleibt nur ein Haufen dampfender Pferdeäpfel nach ihm zurück.



Die ganze Habe von Racz findet in einem Koffer Platz, den er auf dem mit Bier bekleckerten und vollgespieenen Fußboden voller Kippen und Abfällen abstellt. Zerschlagen von der mehrstündigen Zugfahrt bestellt er ein Bier und einen Kurzen. Er betrachtet sich im Spiegel, der die Wand hinter der Theke bildet.

Er ist klein und mager, aber so knochig und kantig, dass er stämmig wirkt. Der schlecht sitzende Anzug, zerknittert und glänzend am Hintern und an den Schenkeln, ein dunkles Gesicht, der kurz geschorene Schädel und die großen durchsichtigen Ohren erinnern an einen amnestierten Sträfling.

Racz überlegt, was er unternehmen solle. In der Stadt gebe es viel Arbeit, egal, welche Richtung er einschlage. Er könne in der Fabrik, der Werkstatt, bei der Eisenbahn arbeiten. Das Wesentliche für ihn sei, so viel als möglich zu verdienen. Nur so werde er bald zurück kehren und Erzika Kiss heiraten können. Racz werde nicht untergehen. Die Stadt sei riesengroß, es gebe jede Menge Arbeitsgelegenheiten.

Racz holt eine Zeitung hervor und fängt an, die Anzeigen zu studieren. Mit dem Fingernagel unterstreicht er interessante Angebote.

Suchst du Arbeit? Wird Racz von einem Alten im schmutzigen Blaumann freundlich gefragt, der bis jetzt mit seinem zahnlosen Mund gegen zwei Brötchen und eine ausgetrocknete, mit Zigarettenrauch vollgesogene Bulette angekämpft hatte.

Racz ist verschlossen, er lässt sich nicht gern mit Unbekannten in Gespräche ein. Klar, sagt er schließlich unwillig und hebt das Schnapsglas zum Mund.

Der Alte lacht mit dem zahnlosen Mund, hebt ebenfalls seinen Bierkrug und deutet ein Anstoßen an. Bist du gerade angekommen? Bohrt er weiter.

Gerade, antwortet Racz mürrisch. Er hasst Fragen. Er setzt das Schnapsglas auf dem Tresen ab und stellt sich an. Er kauft sich eine Bulette mit Brötchen und noch ein Bier.

Hast du Hunger? bohrt der Alte weiter und lacht ihn gönnerhaft an.

Racz nickt kauend. Was geht es denn den alten Sack an, ob er, Racz, hungrig ist?

Ich bin übrigens der Donath, verfickte Scheiße, sagt der lachende Alte und streckt ihm seine riesige schwielige Hand mit der porentiefen Schwärze entgegen.

Ich nicht, möchte Racz antworten, und er würde es auch tun, wenn er zu Hause wäre, in der Dorfkneipe. Aber er ist in einer fremden Stadt, in einer fremden Welt. Racz, sagt er nachlässig und drückt unwillig die ihm gereichte Hand.

Du hast Hände, als ob du damit Rinder erschlagen könntest, lobt ihn der Alte.

Racz zuckt mit den Schultern und widmet sich wieder seiner Bulette.

Ich weiß von einem guten Job, sagt der Alte nach einer Weile.

Ja? fragt Racz gelangweilt, aber er spitzt die Ohren.

Du würdest zwei Löhne bekommen, fährt Donath fort, eine leichte Arbeit!

Racz hustet ab, ein Bulettenkrümel ist ihm in den Hals geraten. Er leckt seinen Mund ab, dann hebt er langsam den Krug und spült das Essen mit Bier hinunter. Was für eine Arbeit? beginnt er zu bohren.

Donath geht mit einem geheimnisvollen Lächeln zum Tresen und lässt Racz ohne Antwort sitzen.

Was für eine Arbeit? wiederholt Racz, als der Alte zwei Bier bringt.

Als Heizer im Hotel arbeiten, sagt Donath.

Übersetzt von Zuzana Finger

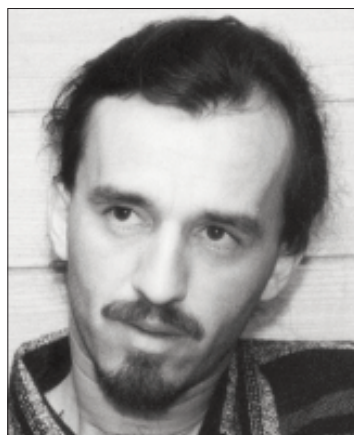


Photo: Peter Procházka

ANDRIJAN TURAN (1962), poet, prose writer, member of the Barbarian generation. This is the generation that appeared in the eighties and began a programmatic and problematic return to the poetics

Andrijan Turan

POEMS

of the original French *poetes maudits* that inspired surrealists, including the Slovak *nadrealists*. Turan, just like the other Barbarians began to publish in magazines and in 1987 appeared his first book *Echo in All Languages* (Ozvena vo všetkých jazykoch). In his second collection *Snowderness* (Sneha, 1993) Turan presents a world that alternates between the nightmarish beauty and unlikely tenderness. In the following four collections we note a marked change towards the more reflective and less impulsive poetry typical of the Barbarians. One could even speak of

lessening of the Barbarian tendency. These are the collections: *The Night Piano Rental* (Nočná požičovňa klavírov, 1990), *Midnight Honey* (Popolnočný med, 1997), *Snake Cradle* (Kolíska z hadov, 1998) and *The Second Rainbow* (Druhá dúha, 1999). Finally, in 2006, Turan published his first prose book entitled *The Migration of Birds* (Sťahovanie vtákov, 2006). This is a book with many connections to his already published poems when we look at the abiding themes, such as the evocation of childhood and the reflective and erotic elements that are so prominent in his poetry.

SECOND RAINBOW AFTER THE DELUGE

As the soil surrenders its screen
The songbirds fly from their roost
Their hunger permanent like snow.

Horizon is heavy with haze.
Hundred in chorus crookedly cackle
At the Cain-like congregation of crows.

From stinging coarseness of soil
Sparkles the wistful solitude of snowdrops.
Above it, the hesitation of bees
And fluffy lustiness of little flies.

The young and the old care most
About the friendship of flowers.
They eagerly smell
The first scent of coltsfoot
Their gaze upwards is encouraged
By the teasing freedom of predatory birds.

But we don't see their unrest
Nor hear their tearful tunes
Because we pluck the bouquets
That will burn in crematoria
And cut with saw century-old spruce trees
Where they nested from time immemorial.

We release poisons without remorse.
Mother Earth sees that,
Crowned by the eagle eyes.
Their direct fall
Into ashes of accursed generation
Will remain a forgotten memento of evil
men.

The second rainbow after the deluge
Writes the first story
Of how from water, earth, and sun
Grew Custodians of vision
Who cure with kindness.

THE OTHER

I.

You won't hide from the snake.
Even if you do,
Then only at midnight
Of St. John's Eve
In a valley where the moonlight
With two birches
Ingrown through the heart of a star
Without cross
Illuminates all the signs of the zodiac

II.

He stood in front of a rock
And words burned in his mouth.

III.

Don't read his name.
Axeanoxyas.

RISING FROM THE BED

I.

Dead calm
I see a vision.
A narrow road,

Just for two,
Broken glass in the ditch,
Shard marked by lips,
Burning confetti.
This way, please.

II.

You are on the way to your lover
To determine the coordinates of love.
Behind the glass of the train
Is a facial amulet.
You can't sleep
Just so you could in the morning
See on the platform
A clear grain of salt
In the middle of eyelashes
And someone's dazzlingly curt
Good-bye.

III.

None of us know
How birds shake off their shadows
When they quickly reach altitude.
The snow blackens below their
wings.
He too wakes up alarmed.

IV.

Coffins are full of statues.

V.

Some wine is left in the glass.
Darkness does matter.

Translated by Peter Petro



Photo: Author's Archive

ELENA HIDVÉGHYOVÁ-YUNG (1970), a poet and translator. She studied at the Philosophical Faculty of Comenius University in Bratislava. After completing her studies, she worked at the Department of Oriental Studies at the Slovak Academy of Sciences, where she worked with modern Chinese Decadent literature in parallel with European Decadence and its specific conception of woman as a femme fatale. Since 1997 she has been working as a court interpreter of Chinese.

Elena Hidvéghyová-Yung

POEMS

At the same time she has been translating old as well as modern Chinese literature (Liu Xie, Gao Xingjian, Yu Hua, Shen Congwen and others).

Hidvéghyová-Yung debuted with a collection of poems *To My Great Grandsister* (Prasestre, 2006), which was awarded a prize in the M. Dobrovičová literary competition, in the category of spiritually oriented poetry. She also received an acknowledgement in the readers' poll of the Book Review, a nomination for the Literary Fund Prize for original Slovak literature in 2006, and a nomination for a prize at the Biblotéka 2007 book fair. Her debut was praised by critics for its mature style and expressional distinctiveness in the context of contemporary Slovak poetry. The poems from this collection are characteristic with melancholy, slight dreaminess, and a tendency towards allegory

and symbols inspired by biblical images and Slovak folktales.

The Orient is another theme specific for Hidvéghyová-Yung, since she had spent several years living and studying in China, though her focus is not on its primary exotic. She captures the Orient through the delicate optics of a woman, who not only experiences painful feelings of alienation in this faraway culture but also the difficult and dramatic moments of returning from and going back to China.

Her second collection of poems, which will be published in 2008, centers on one basic motif: the love between man and woman – the intimacy of marriage, the desire for harmony, and, at the same time, the painful realization that this ideal can never be permanent.

LEGEND OF LILITH

You walk on a street flooded with sun;
before you, after you, the dark.
Your neon eyes, like will-o'-the-wisps
in a murky forest, glow afar.

You hold a moon in your right hand,
in the other an unknown man's head –
people are looking round after you
in dumb astonishment, but each
who looks will, crown to ankles,
turn to stone.

At the crossroads, finally
alone, you drop to the ground,
lay the man's head in your lap,
and its eyes open. Painfully
it gazes: Even thus you are beautiful,
it says and suddenly begins to sing
a mournful song,

but you do not hear; you are talking
to the moon.

NIGHTMARE

Home again years later: but
no one has come to welcome you. You leave
the buzzing airport hall
alone – on your feet pendulums,
in your empty hands two suitcases
full of desert sand and the sounds of the sea.

At your house door
you realise: the locks are new. You ring
your sister, but her number's changed. Only
the neighbours intimate
that your nearest will be coming next year
– they have forgotten, though you wrote
in the self-same beautiful hand.

You gaze through the window into your room:
your things, whatever
ought to be waiting for you, they sold off
to the bazaar

and suddenly a neighbour's child comes out
to offer you a glass
of vinegar.

LAWS OF ROMANCE

Just you and I. A secret meeting
in the town's nicest cafe; delicious music,
my perfume and a tight black dress with lace.

Your eyes burn through me. I say something,
but you do not hear and suddenly,
urgently grip my hands in yours:

I want you, in an altered voice you say,
and wait for my answer. Yes, your atelier
is just a step away... but I see suddenly
your pale wife at the other end of town –
just now she's doing the weekend shopping
and I know too well

that the most romantic flowers grow
where the grey ash of the everyday does not settle,
of the common, practical-banal life.

ROAD

You've married badly.

You ask if all life long
you must eat Lenten pap, and why
your nights and mornings cannot breathe
the delicate scent of cinnamon...

I've known all from the moment
our eyes met. At least
once a week you desire me, secretly –
but I cannot. Yes,
I am unbending and you ask me why

it must be so. All I know is this:
in dreamless nights, when I catch my soul on film
in all its hues and details,
and I spread the pictures on the table like cards,
one remains in my hand – the pale princess
in a high, impregnable tower.

Such is my road.

FATE

In a city of vice and unshackled loves, we two
live our blameless life;
each in a different structure of family clan
with the smells of young, encircled
with barbed wire

and full of desire, which we secretly burn into script –

such is our fate: all life long to touch
and give ourselves one to the other
only in poems

and dreams.

SIXTH COMMANDMENT

I was not able to sustain my guard:

one fragrant summer afternoon
that man spread out his invisible nets
on our threshold. Without permission

he stole me. Nights long I think of him
and next me my good husband lies. Suspecting nothing.
But I am desperate
and powerless: a beautiful woman
in the best years, with senses awakened,
gifted with strength, which changes me to a primate
scattering scent, deprived of reason and will.

Father, that strength is from you;
fertile

and lethal. I am afraid.
To keep your sixth commandment
is the hardest of all –

forgive us, please.

Translated by John Minahane

The Place that the Fates Brought Me to Was Slovakia

Interview with John Minahane, by Inka Martinová

JOHN MINAHANE was born near Baltimore, in the south-west of Ireland, in 1950. English was his original spoken language, though he studied the Irish language as a school subject from the age of 5. His first published work, a short story, appeared when he was 18, but he wrote poetry and prose fiction only in short bursts at long intervals, being mainly occupied with Irish, European and world history. These two interests came together in the ancient literature of the Irish language and the peculiar Christian culture bound up with it. Minahane's main work on this topic, which includes translations of many of the ancient poems (*The Christian Druids: On the Filid or Philosopher-poets of Ireland*), was published in Dublin in 1993. A review of a 17th century controversy between poets of the North and South of Ireland (*The Contention of the Poets: An Essay in Irish Intellectual History*) followed in 2000.

Minahane came to live in Slovakia in 1996. Over the past few years he has translated many poems and prose pieces by Slovak writers of the past and present, from Ivan Krasko to Ivan Kolenič. His largest undertaking was a selection of the poems and literary essays of Ladislav Novomeský (*Slovak Spring*, 2004). The long biographical essay included with this selection sets Novomeský in his European context (though it is intended as notes on the life of the poet, not as a substitute for an adequate biography).

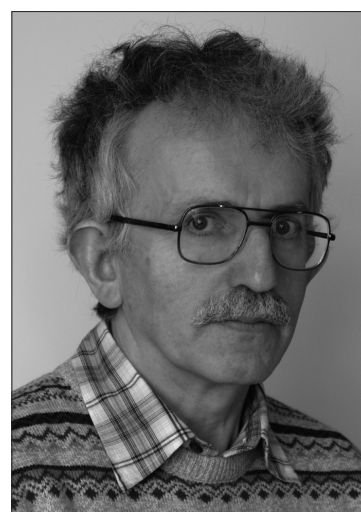


Photo: Author's Archive

INKA MARTINOVÁ: *What wind has brought an Irishman dealing with history and Irish literature to Slovakia?*

JOHN MINAHANE: A time came when I felt the need to make a radical change in my life, and that could most conveniently be done by going abroad as a teacher of English. At first I intended to go somewhere in Western Europe and afterwards to Prague, but the place that the fates brought me to was Slovakia.

INKA MARTINOVÁ: *How did you learn the Slovak language so well in such a short time that you speak fluently, write essays in Slovak and translate all literary genres?*

JOHN MINAHANE: Well, now, I wouldn't exaggerate! I consider myself a poor speaker – I'm never happy with the way I speak, even in English or Irish, and certainly not in Slovak. But I do think I'm a good reader. My Slovak teacher, though to this day she doesn't know it, is Mrs Steinerová of Venturská Street. All the key works of Slovak poetry, prose fiction, criticism, history and so on, sooner or later turn up on her shelves. With what I found in her antikvariát and the other four or five that I know, plus the libraries, I gradually put together some sort of picture of Slovak literature and culture.

INKA MARTINOVÁ: *Being yourself a poet, a prose writer and an essayist, which genre is closest to your heart when translating?*

JOHN MINAHANE: I respect all these forms of literature and I try to do my best for whichever one I have to hand. But I think everything ought to have a breath of poetry. The spirit moves in language, and in the language of the translated work too there ought to be something stirred, and stirring. I try to be the medium through which the spirit of the work can cross from one language to another. Poems, because of the intensity they have when they're real poems, those give me the most satisfaction when I feel that I've done my medium's job well.

INKA MARTINOVÁ: *You have translated a selection of poems by Ladislav Novomeský, accompanied by a biographical essay, to "set Novomeský in his European context". Why this author?*

JOHN MINAHANE: In Slovak literature, at least the way I see it, the poets are head and shoulders above everyone else. And Slovakia in the 20th century had five or six poets of which any country might be proud. Four of them started writing in the 1920s, which is a time that I've always found rivetingly interesting. It's fascinating to see how Europe responds to the great cultural catastrophe of the First World War. And I think someone trying to track the Slovak development could do worse than study those poets. The four I've mentioned – I mean Smrek, Lukáč, Beniák, Novomeský – are not just masters of language, they're significant public figures. In political terms, between them they comprised more or less the spectrum of Slovak possibilities. Smrek was a great Czechophile and an absolutely uncompromising anti-communist; Lukáč also put his hopes in the First Republic, but he took a more flexible attitude to the politics of fallen mankind; Beniák was an autonomist, a champion of the Slovak state, and secretary of the Interior Ministry during the war; and Novomeský of course was a communist, postwar Commissar for Education and Culture. But they all formed part of a literary community, they met in the cafes and wine-cellars, they published one another, and it was understood that whoever had influence at a given moment should try to take care of the others. And that's something remarkable, something one doesn't find in the Czech lands, not to mention further west. It's impressive testimony of the Slovak will to survival.

Anyhow, I wanted to read all these writers and get some idea of what they were saying. And at first I found that, while Smrek and Lukáč were accessible, Novomeský was simply baffling. I couldn't grasp the association of thoughts. The voice was somehow immensely attractive, I caught the separate bits of what it said, but I couldn't make a whole of them.

The first Novomeský poem that I put into English was the one beginning, *Time flies / like indistinguishable birds* (Čas letí / jak vtáci nedozierni). I couldn't understand it, but I translated it anyway. Years later, when I included that poem in my selection, I hardly changed my original version at all, because the problem wasn't in the words. I'd been told that this man was a communist

poet, and there were naive thoughts, like the one about the woman in Moscow dreaming about a bigger slice of bread, which a communist poet might have put differently, less naively. But the attitudes that I knew as communist attitudes weren't here at all. I sent my translation to friends, poets and poetry-lovers in Dublin, and they said the same: "It's very interesting, but I don't follow it!"

I cracked my head on this poem and other Novomeský poems for about three years, till finally I found Štefan Drug's literary biography, *Hallo, Human Being* (Dobrý deň, človek), which I consider the one and only guide to Novomeský, the book that any serious enquirer absolutely has to read. It's a piece of scholarly legerdemain. Drug wrote it in a tone of responsible orthodoxy, so presumably Husák's censors were happy, and yet he brings in everything an enquirer most needs, everything that points to where Novomeský came from and what kind of poet he was. And he actually was a kind of medium for the European cultural crisis. The currents of that crisis go coursing through his poems in astonishing ways. When he can't deal artistically with their force you can see him struggling, sometimes you can practically see him drowning.

Novomeský believed that communism was what the fates dictated, there was sufficient reason for its coming. In his working life he was a communist journalist, a servant of the fates. It was his duty. His poetry also is about the fates, but it isn't in their service. There's disloyalty to the fates (I know that each new fate / must be borne with a bitter jest – *Colours on the Palette*). Or maybe even more than disloyalty, maybe it's rebellion, because Novomeský came to see the poet in the modern world as a kind of Prometheus.

In that 'Time flies' poem (where I take it that the indistinguishable birds are the moments disappearing into the past) the world is heading towards some great change, some fundamental break, and so is Novomeský, and in that break the poet in him will disappear. He seems intent on – resigned to – going with the current. And yet far from trumpeting some sort of rhetoric about a great liberation, his poem reveals him in turmoil, in doubt, in pain.

Maybe that poem is a bit overloaded, maybe the ideas in it are bursting it apart. But I find it strange that leading Slovak literary critics to this day can characterise Novomeský by saying that he brought the verse-propaganda called 'proletarian poetry' into Slovakia. There is no 'proletarian poetry' in any of his books, and when they were published Marxist critics noticed that and said so. (Milan Hamada's idea in the 1960s, that he was writing existential poetry of an original kind, is a lot nearer the mark.)

Anyhow, when once I'd got onto Novomeský's wavelength, for various reasons connected with my own life and background, he became very important. For a few years he was right at the centre of my ideas about poetry and about Europe, and I couldn't rest until I had produced my book. As regards setting him in his European context – yes, I set out to do that, but I have to admit that my essay of 80-odd pages is in many ways more like notes for that project than the project actually achieved. When I showed Dr Drug my book he said, "Oh, you hurried with it, you rushed it!", and I could feel his reproach and disappointment. He was saying: Novomeský is someone you have to spend years, several more years with, really to know him, and he's worth it! And I'm sure that's so. But it's how I am; if I do these projects at all, I have to do them quickly. I hope my essay will help someone, some time or other, to write the biography Novomeský deserves. I have no doubt that a riveting book could be written of four or five hundred pages, quite as compelling as the best biographies of the better-known European poets, his contemporaries.

INKA MARTINOVÁ: *Are there other authors who deserve, in your view, to be set in European context? Would you try to accomplish the task?*

JOHN MINAHANE: Slovak writers should accomplish the task, then maybe I can translate some of their books or essays! Novomeský was special, very special, and I don't think that lightning of inspiration will strike twice. But let's take Válek.

I don't find either the man or the poetry too attractive, but I wouldn't deny that both man and poetry are striking. Why doesn't somebody go and make a European of him? But then there's the question of how one could see Válek rightly and where one could find help, who would offer guidance. Where's the 'Hallo, human being' for him? I know only one short piece of writing which brings Válek alive, and that's one of those essays (they're called dialogues, but they're more essays) which Vladimír Mináč did near the end of his life, when it seems he really caught the thinking-bug and decided to think as freely and recklessly as he could for as long as was left to him. He pictures Válek the public man as a gambler, an illusionist hoping every minute that he still wouldn't be seen through. It might be right or it might be wrong, I don't know, but it's a live picture. Anything else that I've read about Válek tends simply not to see one or other side of what he wrote or what he did.

Then there's Rúfus, a remarkable poet. I think he too was fitted by nature to be a significant public man, like those early poets I mentioned, but at the time he came on the scene, the 1950s, there was no question of that. I may be mistaken, but I feel that after his tremendous first collection, *Till We Ripen* (Až dozrieme, 1956), there's a discernible retreat in his poetry: the prophet withdraws to the mountains and takes to speaking in parables. A great deal is obscure to me. Where can one find a guide to Rúfus? One of the problems, it seems to me, is that Slovakia's most gifted literary critics are absorbed in the work of maintaining

cultural continuity, defending literary values, including respect for 20th century authors, and so on. They write carefully and somewhat selectively, so as not to give ammunition to the fashionable bigots. It's a work of survival: I acknowledge its importance, and I know it's an abiding theme in this culture, and the work will surely be done well. And yet it may be that, as one of Vilikovsky's characters has it, if you spend too long at surviving there might not be time for anything else.

INKA MARTINOVÁ: *What are your creative plans as an author and translator for the future?*

JOHN MINAHANE: I have two main projects, each concerning a different country. One is an edition of the poems of an Irish poet of the 17th century, with English translation; I am also including some other poems from the war of the 1640s, which was one of our crucial conflicts. I've been working on that and associated things for a number of years, and now the basic work is done and the ordering and arranging is almost done – almost! Besides that, I have taken on a translation of a selection from Rúfus. I'm not the one who has picked the flowers, but then I don't feel I know the poet well enough to do this properly. The selection in question lays emphasis on Rúfus's recent work, and I agree that that should be known in English. This will certainly be the most difficult and demanding task of translating Slovak literature that I do in the near future.

INKA MARTINOVÁ: *Thank you for sharing your intriguing and inspiring thoughts with us.*

THE PUBLISHER'S POINT OF VIEW

Donald Rayfield, editor of the publishing house Garnett Press, London

Peter Pišťanek
Rivers of Babylon 1
Garnett Press, London 2007
Translated by Peter Petro

The Garnett Press of which I am editor (and carry out virtually all other functions) is a very small publishing house, working under the aegis of Queen Mary University of London: primarily, we have published academic works in the field of Russian and Georgian, which would be too unrewarding for commercial publishers, or otherwise inaccessible for scholars, such as a gigantic *Comprehensive Georgian-English Dictionary*. But Peter Pišťanek has changed our direction. The reason is pure accident. As external examiner for a thesis by Rajendra Chitnis on modern Slovak and Russian prose, I diligently read the texts discussed by the future doctor of philosophy. For the first time in this role, I found myself rolling helplessly on the floor with laughter, for the work was *Rivers of Babylon (1)*. I then borrowed the third novel, and with difficulty obtained from a Prague second-hand bookshop the second. I began telephoning and writing to publishers: all showed initial interest, and one commissioned sample translations, but none would commit themselves. In frustration at their cowardice and stupidity,

I contacted Peter Pišťanek through his friend and translator Peter Petro, offering to publish it, but warning him that we were very small and would not be as successful as a larger company in getting the novel the publicity and distribution it deserved. Peter Pišťanek, however, gave his consent.

We were lucky in securing William Boyd's interest: he read a pre-publication copy and gave us an enthusiastic blurb for the dust-jacket. We hope to have translations of the two sequels, *The Wooden Village* and *The End of Freddy* published by the end of this year, and at the same time to reprint *Rivers of Babylon 1*.

If you go into a Spanish or German bookshop, most of the fiction on sale will be translated from other languages. In a British (or American) bookshop, only 5-10% will be translated. Gradually the British are becoming less insular: a number of Scandinavian novelists are widely read, and some Czech novelists – partly because of the intermingling of politicians and writers typified by Havel, partly because of the cinematic appeal of Hrabal – are well known. More recently, Hungarian writers such as Magda Szabó and Antal Szerb are acquiring British readers, because of the brilliant translations by Len Rix. Of Slovak fiction writers, perhaps only Vilikovsky is so far known: we hope that after Pišťanek, it may be the turn of such major (if very different)

writers as Ján Johanides.

Selling a hitherto little-known Slovak author in Britain has its problems. The few independent booksellers in London still exercise their judgement and make recommendations to their readers, and Amazon.co.uk offers a marketplace to small publishers. But the giant chains of bookshops compel their managers to stock what is talked about on television, and forbid them to stock work by writers they have never heard of, translated from languages they don't know, published by publishers not owned by mega-conglomerates. But I am sure that the innate quality of *Rivers of Babylon* and the quality of the translation we have from Peter Petro will overcome these barriers.

At least half the success of a translated novel depends on the translator. It is not enough to be a speaker of English with a Slovak dictionary. We had the good fortune to work with Peter Petro, who shares the same Bratislava background as the author, and can cope not just with the phrases of Hungarian, Roma and Pressburger German that crop up, but with all the topical and local references. *Rivers of Babylon* has been entered for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize for 2008: already it has made it into the 'long list' of 17 (out of nearly 100 submitted). We watch with bated breath (the short list will be announced by the beginning of March, and the winner in May).

"A tremendous novel: powered by an uncompromising ferocious energy and exhibiting a brutally dark sense of humour that is both ruthless and exhilarating. An amazing find."

WILLIAM BOYD

THE UNIVERSAL ARTISTIC MESSAGE

Zuzana Malinovská-Šalamonová, *Philosophical Faculty of the University of Prešov*

Janko Jesenský

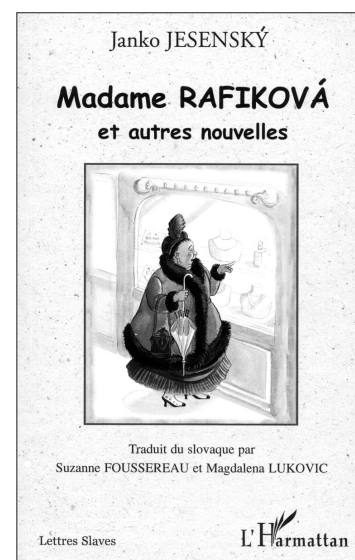
Mrs Rafiková and Other Stories / Madame Rafiková et autres nouvelles

Translated to French by Suzanne Fousseureau and Magdalena Lukovic.

L'Harmattan 2007, Lettres slaves

The Paris-based publisher L'Harmattan that specializes in publishing Slavic literatures has prepared yet another novelty in 2007 for French-speaking readers. The translation, by Suzanne Fousseureau and Magdalena Lukovic, of a series of novellas by one of the major classic Slovak writers Janko Jesenský (1874–1945). Worthy is the very idea of publishing short fiction pieces by an author who has made his name for vivid representations of the bourgeois lifestyle at the turn of 19th and 20th centuries, mocking the parochialism, hypocrisy, snobbism and pretense of all those for whom appearance is dearer than the true living. Additional acknowledgment goes to the Centre for Information on Literature that financially supported the publication of these “scenes from the life provincial”, to borrow from Balzac. I think that getting to know each other is imperative in the social, political and cultural contexts of the new and variable Europe, a goal the publishing of „minor“ literature can have its own share in achieving it. More, the French translation of the work by a Slovak author whose artistic message is universal and survivingly topical, can contribute to sustaining cultural diversity and plurality in this world of rapidly progressing globalization. How, then, to communicate to the reader with background in French culture, at the beginning of the third millennium, the pictures of a Central European small town of the late 19th century? How to grasp Jesenský's art of the short cut, his sense of detail that serves to capture the essence as *pars pro toto*, hitting the nail exactly on its head? How to translate his unique sense of humor? How to deal with the author's patina of language, which, even the Slovak reader of today would find rather olde-worlde? How can the original culture be transferred to the target culture – as this translation, as any, involves a cultural transfer, in addition to the linguistic transcoding – to keep its original identity, while honoring diversity? What if a certain artifact of the original culture is absent or seen differently in the target culture? The French reader of today might not find exactly amusing the imitation of the Budapest-style *modi vivendi* or the characteristic manner of speech of Slovak petty bourgeois of more than hundred years ago. Nor does he or she necessarily know that one such Mrs. Rafiková has been, for generations of Slovak readers, a nearly “archetypal” character, symbol or signifier, just like, say, Molière's Harpagon would be

for the French. Indeed, the reader is not bound to know anything of this, a fact of which both lady translators were well aware, and which they had to struggle with in their hard and largely unrewarding work. And struggle they did well. I have no idea how a translating twosome does its job (although find it very interesting, hoping to be able to get a glimpse of the “laboratory”). They certainly have an experience with translating Slovak literary fiction, for instance, as compilers and translators of *Antológia slovenských noviel*, L'Harmattan, 2001). It is equally clear that the result of their creative efforts – as translating is creative work and art – is admirable. They managed a thorough insight into Jesenský's fiction, understanding the original as a whole, uncovering its inner contents, clarifying the meanings, on the cultural level, not missing various allusions either. For the most part, they mastered the details, as well, even able to decode words and phrases that are archaic or idiosyncratic and make them sound appropriately French, in keeping with both the original and the targeted context. Here are, *ad illustrandum*, several of their solutions: „*panade*“ is an apt substitution for the Slovak „*demikát*“, „*le long tuyau d'une pipe*“ is an accurate account of the Slovak „*pipasár*“, just as „*grappe de pompon*“ corresponds with „*kvasť*“, and „*imbécile*“ with Slovak „*mamlas*“, although *gourde*, *cruche*, *abruti* could also do. It is a good choice of the translators not to hang on too closely to the original's plentiful use of diminutives (used there, often in the art of *les précieuses*, to mock the excessively unnatural ways of the smalltown characters), so, for instance „*ručníček*“, *paličku*, *pančušky*“ are rendered „*mouchoir*“, *canne*, *chaussettes*“. A similarly good choice – although the opposite may also be true – is to keep the original Slovak proper names, including those that are obviously used characteristically (Táráv, Rafiková) or mockingly (Čuray, Čurida). As names are often used emblematically in fiction, the transfer of their implied meanings should be somehow dealt with in the translation, too. Though a common point of controversy for the translator, particularly when trying to arrive at a single solution, encompassing both the semantic and euphonic contents of a phrase, a solution is always at hand. An excellent example of this is the notorious practice of Blahoslav Hečko in his translations from the French: the peak of his art, the hallmark translation of *Zvonodrozdovo* has Chevallier's original ideas further and excellently played on by Hečko, thus adding more to the already glorious original, while remaining remarkably true to the intention of the author of *Clochemerle*. No less easy is the translation of interjections. At times, these are dropped by Jesenský's translators: such as the characteristically Slovak and onomatopoeic,



though bookish „laľa“: „*Buď na vzduchu a slnči, omladneš ako, laľa, tamten brezový hájik, veru! – Profite de l'air et du soleil, redeviens jeune, comme ce bouquet de bouleaux. C'est vrai*“, which is perhaps only overlooked here, as elsewhere their solution is excellent, such as rendering „*Laľa, veď je to akási pani*“ French as „*Bigre! Mais c'est une dame*“. Other solutions are less than excellent: e.g. the Slovak *pst*, i.e. hush, is, at one point, left untouched, although the translation would benefit by the French „*chut*“, the more so that the French *pst* or *psitt*, and the synonyms *hé*, *hep*, have an entirely different meaning. Still, that must be an instance of wavering attention rather than ignorance: as shown by, e.g. translating the sentence „*Starý, kde je Milka?*“ by means of a very apt use of an interjection as, „*Hé, toi, où est Milka?*“, or their solution replacing the Slovak interjection *ach* by an appropriate verbal phrase as in „*sachez que c'est une personne hors de commun*“, in place of the original „*ach, to vám je zvláštna osôbka*“. Some inaccuracies and minor mistakes could be found: „*starý žltkavý miestami vyplnžený jágerský muf*“ translates as „*manchon de chasseur, rpé par endroit*“, thus dropping the first two adjectives of the original that denote „age“ and „color“, „*s'il y avait quelque chose de doux*“ would, in its context, qualify rather as „*quelque chose de sucré*“; also, I doubt the French reader's familiarity with the obviously Central European shortening of Budapest for „*Pest*“, and several other instances. However, these remarks should be seen as ideas to be discussed further rather than mere criticism; there is absolutely no reason to doubt, let alone downplay, the work and the achievement of the translators. On the contrary, I believe the translation of *Madame Rafiková et autres nouvelles* can, without any serious reservation, pass for a very close and natural equivalent of the message contained in the original language. I wish to acknowledge Suzanne Fousseureau and Magdalene Lukovic in my admiration for their work. I hope that the French *Pani Rafiková* will find its readers, not only in France.

Translated by Euben Urbánek

SLOBODA'S NOVEL REASON IN SERBIAN

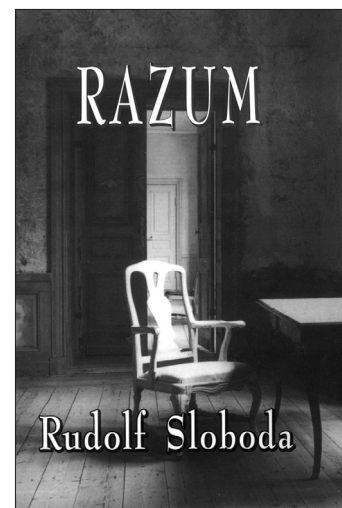
Michal Babiak, *Philosophical Faculty of Comenius University*

Rudolf Sloboda
Reason / Razum
Novi Sad, Agora, 2007
Translated by Zdenka Valent-Belić,
Bratislav Belić

There is a substantial deficit in the Serbian and Croatian translation of Slovak literature. Thanks to the pro-western literary orientation of the former Yugoslavian countries even before 1989, a number of their prominent authors were translated and positively accepted in the Slovak literary community. Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian, Bosnian, Montenegrin and Macedonian writers were perceived in Slovakia as a window to the world, as writers with a firmly rooted intellectual independence not subject to demand of the society, or its expectations. The then Czechoslovak literature was interesting for the former Yugoslavian context only in terms of dissent and manifestation of the freedom of speech. It is no surprise that only the works of authors such as Kundera, Havel and Mňačko (rather sporadically) were published and played there. Since the 1980's there has been an increase in the interest in Slovak poetry. Even though currently Serbian and Croatian literature is present in Slovakia, the numbers are also starting to be in favor of Slovak literature there. The Centre for Information on Literature has contributed to this substantially by supporting the publication and promotion of books by Slovak writers in the former Yugoslavian countries. This led Michal Harpán, an expert on Slovak and Yugoslavian literature, and professor at the University in Banská Bystrica and University

in Novi Sad, to translate the greatest of Pavel Vilikovský's novels *A Horse in the Upstairs*, *A Blind Man in Vráble* (Kôň na poschodí, Slepec vo Vrábľoch), *The Cruel Engine Driver* (Krutý strojvodca) and *The Last Horse of Pompei* (Posledný kôň Pompejí). Harpán's significant translating feat is followed up on by his former student from Novi Sad, Zdenka Valent-Belić, who together with her husband Bratislav Belić translated Hrušovský's novel *Man with a Prothesis* (Muž s protézou) and Rudolf Sloboda's *Reason* (Rozum). *Reason* was published by the Agora publishing house last year, with the support of Centre for Information on Literature (Bratislava) and the Ministry of Education and Culture of Vojvodina (Novi Sad).

In the afterword, the translators and publisher inform the Serbian reader that it is a controversial cult novel, written in a difficult era of the 1980's and had to overcome many obstacles on its way to be published (1982). The Belićs further caution that it was an era unfavorable towards existentialist themes and works which "reveal a personal search for purpose amidst a seemingly unchangeable everydayness". In his latest literary analysis, Viliam Marčok places Sloboda's novel in context of a "gradual regeneration of courage for alternative views" in the setting of dissident prose and the definite upcoming of postmodernism. Marčok cites that it is a work dominated by "the drama of a person who persistently fights for the right to his view on life (*Reason*), but surrounded by people who do not understand, he cannot defend the truth of his experience, grows away from it and gives up his fight". The interpretation of the novel's finale – giving up the fight – can be dealt with in a mobile point, as was noted



by Peter Zajac in 1983: "And so I would not say, that his protagonist fails, it is rather just one round which he does not win. The words 'killed man' at the end do not mean physical death but the fact that the protagonist does not succeed in being human at this moment." On the backdrop of this observation the ending of the novel in its Serbian translation comes off as too clear. The translators used the words *dead man* (mrtav čovek) for the syntagm *killed man* (zabitý človek), which (regardless of the complexity of the semantic interference) leaves little room for the interpretative ambiguity emphasized by Peter Zajac.

The introduction of Sloboda in the Serbian cultural context is an important feat. We hope that the enthusiasm apparent with the Belićs does not fade away and that along with the future activities of Michal Harpán it brings more Slovak literature into the cultural sphere of the former Yugoslavian countries.

Translated by Saskia Hudecová

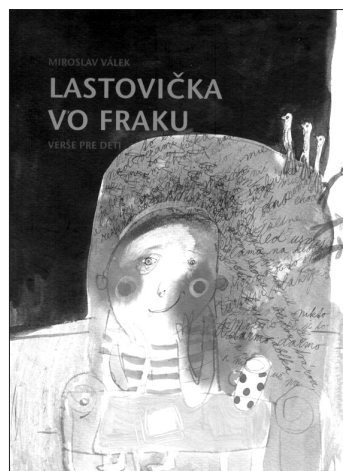
Miroslav Válek

Lastovička vo fraku
(Swallow in Tails)

Bratislava, Kalligram 2006

When they first appeared, these poems by Miroslav Válek marked a departure in the understanding of children's literature. This is the first complete edition. The collection has been enlarged by the heretofore unpublished poems and selected poems for the adults from the collections entitled: *Matches*, *Touches*, and *Attraction*. The illustrations by Marek Ormandík augment the charm and esthetic juggling with the verse. They don't seem an addition, but an integral part of the work. A playful, non-didactic approach to the child readers was symptomatic of Válek's work. It was the author's intention to enhance children's imagination. Verses hide allegories and other forms of entertainment. It is

demanding to consider a child reader an equal partner. It means the author has to look at the world through the eyes of children. Child's



vision and soul are pure and they have a need to discover. Miroslav Válek made his debut in the children's literature with his *Magic under the Table*. He came with inventiveness. He relaxed the verse, lightened up the bookish style and molded it into a spoken form. Through child's play he introduced the relationship of adults with children which did not go only one-way. He always respects children's fantasy and their experience from it. Without a fairytale element, the fantasy would not work. While he relaxes the classical verse structure, he at the same time suggests invention with a humorous understanding of the text. The collection *The Great Travel Fever for Little Travelers* is composed of eight poems about different kinds of transportation. Its genre and theme make it the most colourful of the collections. It plays with the child. It coats the reality in fantasy and poetry. The spoken style brings along suggestive metaphors that become more intense for the adult reader as well. Válek's work for children is in opposition to the heretofore closed poetic

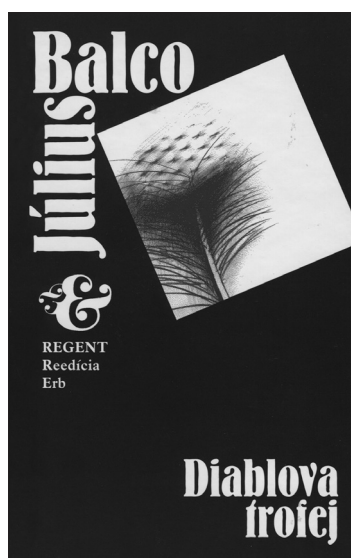
tradition that followed didactic aims rather than worried about the quality. I was won over by Válek in my childhood by his poem *Panpulons*, and came to the collection *Off to Neverland* as an adult. I understood it as an adult, but could see it from a child's point of view as well. I gladly accepted the illogical, and welcomed the unreal as a colourful enhancement of a reality gone pale. In the fairytale land the unreal becomes real and the illogical assumes its justified logic. All the collections have an original idea, wit, and magic with words. He builds his game on the basis of humour, and confronts it with pairs of opposites: logical and illogical, natural and unnatural. This well blended mixture is nonsense, satire, and irony for the world of adults lacking poetry. The *Swallow in Tails* is a valuable and impressively crafted little book.

Lucia Blažeková

Július Balco *Diablova trofej* (*Devil's Trophy*)

Bratislava, Regent 2006

The prose writer Július Balco has been present in the literature since the 70's of the twentieth century. In the recent years he has been writing for children, but most recently came up with a collection of stories, *Devil's Trophy*. Balco did not fundamentally change his manner of writing; he just developed further his own way of writing. He did not succumb to the temptation to adjust himself to the fashionable trend of postmodern textual games, as he is only too aware of his strong points. He is inventive in creating longer or shorter stories that seem inspired by reality, or personal experience, and at other times, they are pure fiction. But they are always original, surprising and thus interesting. Among the stories that seem to be based on personal experience of the author belongs the story *A Drop of Red Wine*. Its narrator and protagonist in one person is the writer. The first person narrative and some other realia allow the reader to assume the author of the text is the protagonist. Strange peregrination of the writer in the state of mild alcoholic intoxication to Pezinok, during which time he



meets a young and attractive Gypsy woman twice, can be understood as a metaphor of the eternal unfulfillment of human desire. In the story *Cat*, the author takes the reader to the social periphery, to the place where the homeless, the alcoholics, and the losers live in a world of strange, difficult to understand relationships determined by their own rules. The evocation of this environment and the speech mannerisms of the characters are very persuasive, in Balco's rendering. Two most extensive stories, *Yellow Roses*, and *Devil's Trophy*, are connected with the character of clairvoyant, a "failed student of psychology," but otherwise we are dealing with two separate narratives. However, both stories are trying to suggest the idea of the impossibility of entering into the mysterious world of human soul. There is a great deal of mystery in both texts. There is no weaker or unsuccessful short story in this collection. The author knows exactly when his epic form needs an open ending and when he has to conclude with an expressive point. His dialogues are alive and persuasive. The few erotic scenes are presented here really seductively, but they are written tastefully and the sexuality here is within the logic of the story. No matter where we open the book, we always encounter a well-written text, and occasionally even passages that are excellent. Balco really knows how to create a good quality text. His book of short stories belongs among the best in the Slovak prose of 2006.

Igor Hochel

Gabriela Futová *Rozruch v škole* *na Kavuličovej ulici* (*Disturbance at the School* *on Kavulič Street*)

Illustrated by Viktor Csiba
Bratislava, Regent 2006

The title of Gabriela Futová's work suggests that the narrative will be about adventures from school, comical and serious ones, including thrilling and horrifying, that concern a first-year pupil Monika. On her first day in school, her two faithful friends – Andy and Amor – two big, black Great Danes, accompany her. The simple, humorous story captures the first day of school that is so significant in the life of the pupil. Many minor characters – pupils, parents, the school janitor, and cooks – pepper the story. On that small stage, the author manages to bring to life brilliant episodes that are full of tension and humour. The theme, composition, and the choice of stylistic means make it truly a model book that might help a child to adapt to the life in school, as well as to help start its emotional, aesthetic, and intellectual development with its playful approach. A child might spontaneously identify with the behaviour of the characters of the book and that might later support the child's effort to learn how to read independently as soon as possible. The lovely illustrations of Viktor Csiba stress the dominant situations of the literary work and enhance its value and attractiveness for the beginning readers. Masterly work by the graphic designer Pavel Blažo, the choice of the fonts and their size complement the harmoniousness of the book.

Eva Hornišová



Veronika Šikulová *To mlieko má horúčku* (*Feverish Milk*)

Bratislava, Slovart 2006

Veronika Šikulová has shown in the previous works for the adults that she can continue in the narrative style established by Vincent Šíkula, but in her case, it is based mostly on a female experience and comes from a female perspective.

Her texts are full of ideas, unexpected associations that—at first sight humorously—reach eventually to less joyful, difficult parts of human existence. These are, at the same time, texts where the author performs an original, fresh play with language, revealing new possibilities of such a playful approach to the word without lessening poetic strictures. In her newest book, *Feverish Milk*, Veronika Šikulová turns to the child reader while her characteristic prose narrative developed for the adults finds its niche also in the work for children in a specific way, allowing for the perceptual possibilities of the target audience. Šikulová's child characters, whether it is Dorotka, her best friend Shermen, Vecanko, Jurko, and others are endowed with lively imagination and thanks to it, they see the world completely differently than the adults. There are no differences among the human beings, animals, flowers, or even things: they all understand each other, can wonderfully communicate with each other, create alliances and find joy in their common life. Šikulová's heroines, for example, can catch fog in their hats, make themselves invisible, talk to stray dogs, trees and vegetation. In her stories, things come alive, the windows know how to be sad and joyful and express that by squeaking, the envelopes and postage stamps can be cheerful, and milk can become sick and even get a fever! Texts with the illustrations by Saša Švolíková, besides showing a playful imagination, also evoke something very important: an atmosphere of family warmth, friendliness and rare kinship. Šikulová's world is a world where people trust in human beings, believe in family, it is a world of silent joy and beauty of everyday life experienced, for example, in a kitchen of an ordinary apartment. It is a world where a person is close to nature, to other people and to inanimate things. It is a world where one wants to live.

Etela Farkašová

Ján Juríček**Milan Rastislav Štefánik**

Bratislava, Vydavateľstvo Q111 2006

An old Latin saying, *Habent sua fata libelli*, or “Books, too, have their fate,” is fully applicable to Ján Juríček’s book *Milan Rastislav Štefánik*. During some forty years since its publication, the book has experienced highs and deep lows. It appeared on the book market in 1968 and created a sensation. After many years of calumny against one of the greatest personalities of our history, an honest biography of Milan Rastislav Štefánik has appeared as an answer to silence or suspicious pamphlets denigrating his role and significance. It was quite symbolic that the book was authored by Juríček who was born in Brezová pod Bradlom, a few kilometers from Štefánik’s birthplace, Košariská. At the time, the work has attracted attention for good reason. It was destined for a young reader who had distorted information about this great personality of our modern history. A modest dedication in the introduction to the book spoke more eloquently than would long articles and studies: “To Jana, my daughter, who never learned at school about Milan Rastislav Štefánik.” After a moment of glory, the book, together with its author, experienced a period of fall. The third edition was destroyed, pulled out of libraries, as it was found to be in disagreement with the official interpretation of history pushed by the communist regime. After the fall of the regime, the book experienced a glorious comeback in 1990 and brought complete satisfaction to its author at least for the short time he had left to live (he died in 1992). It is praiseworthy that Vydavateľstvo Q111 again reached for this title and published thus a fourth (not counting the destroyed one) edition of this work. It is not only that the book represents a significant breakthrough in the Slovak biographical literature, but it belongs among the most valuable ones ever written in the genre of artistic biographies. The author has gathered an incredible amount of documentary material that he processed in an attractive and accessible manner. The book is a unique look at the figure of Milan Rastislav Štefánik and offers witness to his manifold activities—as a scholar, soldier, and politician, but also as a human being and a tireless fighter for the rights of the Slovak nation.

Ján Bábik

Peter Bilý**Posledná siesta milencov
(Lovers’ Last Siesta)**

Bratislava, Slovenský spisovateľ 2006

The release of Bilý’s collection of poems is always an invitation to a fiesta. It is a celebration of poetry, different and celebrated differently each time. The young poet toasts to its fame with his own wine, his sort of lyricism, from which the reader has not yet had the time to sober up, in order to savor the riper verses of the next one.

Lovers’ Last Siesta took a longer time to ripen. Bilý wrote it while writing two novels, which he published following his two books of poems. This was not damaging for this work, though,

just the opposite. The collection breathes the early works of Válek, later works of Urban and the more observant readers can sense the more exotic breeze of Borges. Any doubts are gone with the first taste.

It is Bilý. Undiluted and without additives. You can easily recognize his four essences: literary playfulness, light eroticism, broad intellectual view and precise form. He is far more authentic, though. Eroticism is present much more in his new texts, pulsating in every poem. The entire free verse cycle has the rhythm of love-making, each metaphor revealing lovers’ moans full of pleasure. The first sonnets are just a foreplay, so that after the repeated sexual act, which climaxes in a mastered tanka (and there are several), everything can quiet down into a siesta, which by no chance is the last one. After the third reading, the poetry’s alcohol takes its effect. It is also due to the fact that one cannot get enough of playfulness and lightness of the words pouring one after another, in just one sitting.

Enjambments in the verses are innovative, rhyme is often replaced by assonance, the expected cliché by an unexpected paradox. The verse is not forced, it is as if the author rhymed about not rhyming. Just the opposite is the case with free verse. You have to pour a glass of the same poem over and over again in order to get the true taste of its purity. While in his last collection he (though with rough cheekiness) repeatedly only tried how much the poems would let him do, this time he dictates how far he wants to and can go. Never before in Bilý’s work has the content form fit so closely and a sonnet in Slovak contemporary poetry has never sounded so modern.

Delusional visions of the author’s images circle the blood stream after the last gulp. From these images the distance between pain and pleasure, between god and the devil, can be estimated. The author can be found somewhere there, making an occasional mistake but never with pathos and false sight. He gets us drunk with the best he has up until the fiesta ends. Then it is time to sober up. To put the book away on the shelf. But not for long. Because Bilý, year 2006, is really good.

Tomáš Hudák

Peter Glocko**Kliatba čierneho anjela
alebo Diablov testament
(The Curse of the Black Angel
or the Devil’s Testament)**

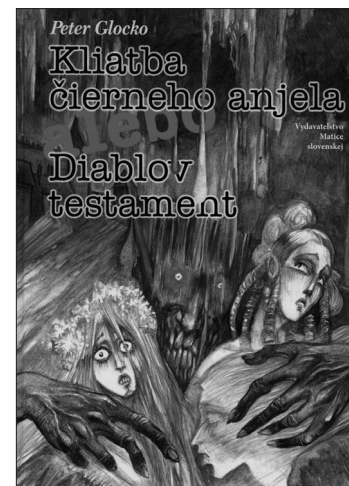
Martin, Vydavateľstvo Matica slovenskej 2006

Peter Glocko has been focusing on historical themes in his prose for some time now, be it following the footprints of Jules Verne and Hans Christian Andersen or retelling Dobšinský’s folk tales. He uses source literature and source research which influence his fabulation, resulting in books where facts meet the fullness of the epic word.

The theme, which Glocko uses in this book, years ago interested the writer Terézia Vansová. Vansová wrote the novel *The Curse* (Kliatba) for which she was condemned but at the same time received a state award (1927). Both authors were drawn to the character of the maniacal seducer, killer and offender Ľudovít Fekete and his relationship with his beautiful, young and

innocent wife Faninka. The stories of both writers are supported by the testimonies from archives and other documents, only their frames differ. While Vansová’s story is told at a spinning party presenting all the evil, mystery and horror so natural for the setting of the Slovak village, Glocko presents the story as a narrative of a town physicist by the name of Fontani, who despite having a serious occupation likes to drink. But even an imagination strengthened by alcohol cannot be enough for all the described atrocities. Ľudovít Fekete is returning from abroad shrouded by myths of wealth, influential acquaintances and good social standing. His arrival is accompanied by talk about a serial killer of young women, whom he tickles before murdering (and it is revealed that during childhood Fekete liked to tickle his girl classmates and cut off their braids). The wealthy Veselovský family want him for a groom for their daughter. Glocko’s (as well as Vansová’s) Faninka is an innocent girl, with many nice things yet to experience. She has shy feelings for a student named Mikuláš, who too becomes the killer’s victim. Faninka is under complete control of her authoritative mother, who is blinded by Fekete’s lordly manners; the interaction between the dame and the killer is full of (barely) hidden eroticism and lust. Glocko elaborates on what the chaste Vansová only suggested – thus the relationship between the mother-in-law and her son-in-law is full of obscene implications, expressed mostly in gestures rather than words. The most interesting among the characters is Zuzka the little cripple – a legless girl about Faninka’s age, who comments and points out things with unique humor and at the appropriate moment picks songs which in short characterize and give details about the whole tragic situation. The main plot line of Fekete’s fury-driven action in his marriage is complemented by a court hearing with the seduced Madlena Skubíková and it is clear that in this case as well as the others Fekete is guilty. Glocko’s story of the devil from Zvolen is a gripping prose. He adds to and polishes its historical frame along with its specific language. The author handles language very delicately, as it can be seen in the scene where Faninka is found dead – “a young woman, a mother-to-be... had her life slashed apart” (p 263). Glocko’s book is for the fans of leisure books (that is also how Vansová’s novel was categorized by critics) as well as anyone who is interested in good historical prose.

Viera Prokešová





Viera Žilinčanová:
An Explosion of Autumn (1990)